

# The Challenge of Diaconal Interchangeability: Full Communion with the Moravian Church

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At the Episcopal Church's 2009 General Convention, a resolution will be presented asking the Convention to approve full communion with the Northern and Southern Provinces of the Moravian Church in America. In the proposal, despite the fact that the Moravian Church maintains a three-fold office of bishop, presbyter and deacon, deacons are expressly stated to be not interchangeable.

These words may fall harshly on the ear of Episcopal deacons. As a deacon who participated in the proposal's formulation, I write to explain the complex issues involved. My intent is to assure you that the Episcopal diaconate was fully honored in the lengthy discussion, and to share with you my conviction that in the end, the diaconate was best honored by being held non-interchangeable.

The Episcopal Church (TEC) engages in ecumenical dialog in two ways: The Presiding Bishop appoints a Deputy to represent her in ecumenical affairs.<sup>1</sup> Other ecumenical affairs are attended to by our Standing Commission on Ecumenical and Inter-religious Relations (SCEIR). The Deputy works closely with SCEIR members in preparing proposals for full communion, in conjunction with their ecumenical counterparts.

I believe I am the first deacon to serve on SCEIR. I take seriously the need to bring my deacon's voice to the ecumenical table. TEC's last full communion agreement was with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), summarized in the document *Called to Common Mission* (CCM). In this agreement, certain issues were left for future discussion, among them the interchangeability of Episcopal deacons with ELCA deaconesses and diaconal ministers. A Lutheran-Episcopal Coordinating Committee was set up to oversee the implementation of CCM, which of necessity left a number of other issues unresolved.

Some Episcopal deacons expressed concern about this action. The question arose, since priests and bishops were interchangeable in CCM, whether leaving diaconal issues unresolved meant TEC regarded our diaconate as somehow less than a full and equal order.<sup>2</sup> Thoughtful people in Episcopal ecumenical circles felt inclusion

of a deacon on SCEIR might be helpful, and I was appointed. I am not alone in bringing diaconal issues to our ecumenical table.

Dr. Rod Dugliss, the Dean of the Deacons School at Church Divinity School of the Pacific, also serves on SCEIR. Rod was a member of SCEIR's Moravian Dialog Team, and a co-drafter of the full communion proposal.

SCEIR works under certain assumptions, clearly stated in the Prayer Book.<sup>3</sup> Simply put, TEC requires nothing of its potential full communion partners but that they accept the scriptures as containing all things necessary to salvation, accept the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds, administer the two central sacraments of baptism and eucharist, and accept the historic episcopate, locally adapted. While the episcopate is considered necessary to an agreement of full communion, deacons and priests are not. The way a church organizes its pastoral caregiving has never been deemed an essential matter of faith.

This is particularly fortunate today. Ecumenical dialog has become more urgent, since I joined SCEIR five years ago. More and more time is spent on interfaith issues. More and more attention is drawn to vast problems addressable only by unifying all people. When the body of Christ meets the rest of God's people in dialog across interfaith tables, Christian denominationalism is perplexing to them. When the body of Christ is too fragmented to address issues of global survival, realization of the dream of God is impeded. Today, full communion is sought not out of sentiment, but because mission urgently demands our gifts be united.

Episcopal deacons, with an historical understanding of vocation as rooted in service, and a growing understanding of their vocation as agents, interpreters and prophetic energizers, understand that issues of their status as a full and equal order cannot impede mission. Because of my confidence in us, and in the value of our order as an icon for Christian service, I strongly believed that if our understandings differed, the Episcopal diaconate should be presented to the Moravians as a gift, not a problem. In the same manner that TEC was receiving the Moravians' gifts of deep piety, regard for the bishop as chief pastor,<sup>4</sup> and lyrical musical

heritage,<sup>5</sup> they were offered our unique understanding of the diaconate.

Our theology was eagerly received in informal discussion. It had no parallel in Moravian experience. Moravians ordain deacons, who remain deacons for a period of several years. But deacon as change agent, prophet, and energizer for mission is not part of their tradition. It was welcome, and thought-provoking. So what was the impediment to diaconal interchangeability?

In the ELCA dialog, the issue resulting in deacons being deemed non-interchangeable was the fact that ELCA diaconal ministers are not ordained. The ELCA understood that deacons could be ordained; some within the ELCA diaconal community advocate for it, and various Scandinavian Lutherans believe their deacons are ordained. But current ELCA thought (following much Reformation theology which negatively assessed the ordained diaconate) holds that diaconal ministry. Thus, in CCM, the issue seemed best left for future resolution.

The theological issues in the Moravian dialog are different. Moravians do ordain their deacons. The impediment, for Episcopalians, lies in the Moravian theology of the diaconate. At first glance, Moravian deacons look like Episcopal transitional deacons with a long term. But at second glance, a critical issue with Moravian deacons becomes clear. They run churches as deacons for several years, and before they are ordained presbyters, they regularly consecrate the eucharist as part of their normal duties. A large percentage of the clergy we would be exchanging with the Moravians would be deacons.

Complex practical, ecumenical, and theological considerations immediately became clear in SCEIR discussions. On the practical level, how would an Episcopal deacon and a Moravian deacon standing side by side at an alter function? In a remote area, where Episcopal deacons are available but no Moravians, how would the deacons function? Would a Moravian deacon consecrate, in the opposite situation? Management of supervision would be exacerbated in the most useful setting for interchangeability of clergy: the remote geographical area, where clergy supply is limited and supervision challenging.

Ecumenical considerations also arose. Ecumenical progress can be eroded by unilateral action. In pre-global communication days, other dialog partners might not hear about what TEC does. This is no longer, most emphatically, the case. If the Episcopal Church made an agreement in which Moravian deacons are interchangeable with priests in the consecration of the eucharist, it could be viewed unfavorably by our other dialog partners and indeed, by other members of the Anglican Communion.

However, the best argument for non-interchangeability is a theological one. This argument springs directly from my own strong commitment to achieve theological clarity for TEC's diaconate. I have grave concern that the Episcopal diaconate is being impeded in its full fruition by a patchwork of diaconal theologies which sometimes obscures our value to the church. Allowing diaconal interchangeability in the Moravian context would import further theological confusion.

Episcopal deacons are at the forefront of a new theological movement. We are the largest group of deacons in the world who largely have been ordained for a specific reason other than to be pastoral care-givers in a time of priestly shortage. This new vision, informed by John Collins' studies of deacon as agent of change and energizer for mission in the early church, is now coming to maturity. It is being best developed in our church. For the first time, we are actually beginning to live out the description of the diaconate so desperately needed for our times: the deacon as dedicated icon and energizer of all for service in Christ's name.

Many of today's Episcopal deacons live out their ministries unaware of the broad sweep of theological change TEC's current manifestation of our order represents. Historically in the modern era, and across many denominations even today, deacons have been people from whom, because of need, the church has accepted pastoral service without fully admitting them, for whatever reason, to positions of church leadership. The ordained diaconate, in our denomination and many others worldwide, has been where quickly- or informally-educated people, people of color, women, or (most recently) married men were utilized in a limited pastoral role before the church could fully accept their gifts.<sup>6</sup>

This tendency for the diaconate to "morph into mini-priesthood" in response to the pastoral staffing needs of the modern-era church leaves us mired today in great theological confusion. When the tendency is considered in juxtaposition with the 19<sup>th</sup>

century Lutheran view of the deacon as lay person called to social service, the resultant theological confusion became a source of resistance to the renewal and support of the diaconate in TEC. This resistance often takes the form of perceiving the diaconate as undercutting lay ministry or diluting educational standards for clergy. The confusion also engenders considerable stress and conflict among Episcopal deacons themselves, as they attempt to steer their way through contrasting theological interpretations of the diaconate in their various ministry environments,<sup>7</sup> or become exhausted being the servant of all instead of the energizer of all for service.

No one can blame the church for being tempted to use deacons as mini-priests; it is responsible for the pastoral care of its people and naturally adapts for use those means apparently readily available to serve them.<sup>8</sup> No one should judge the deacons as they live out their lives with greater or lesser degrees of grace in a time of significant theological confusion, sometimes without adequate theological education to understand the complex issues involved. Indeed, I would argue that no one should criticize bishops as they tread warily to institute a diocesan diaconate, or license deacons formed elsewhere, when what deacons will do, or how they should be formed, is still not yet wholly consistent.<sup>9</sup> And certainly, no criticism of Moravian pastoral practice in its own context should be inferred.<sup>10</sup>

But while I do not judge any of us as we clarify our theology, I want to refrain from further muddying the theological waters as we move into a post-modern diaconate. I support this ecumenical proposal, with deacons baldly stated as not interchangeable, precisely because I respect TEC deacons as a distinctive order in a unique time and place, historically faithful to the original biblical vision of deacons as icons of and energizers for service, and coming to theological fruition in the recent period of ample priestly vocations throughout much of TEC. Taking any step in which diaconal presidency at the Eucharist might become an accepted practice in an Episcopal church could prove a distraction to this clarity of vision. While previous generations of deacons might not have had the leisure to make the theological distinctions we have made, and certainly did not have the Collins scholarship to support them, this generation finds the question "When are you going on to the priesthood?" profoundly tiresome. Post-modern era deacons see ourselves, I hope, as protected from the responsibility of providing the Eucharist to the people within the building, to focus on equipping them to serve the people outside of the building.

The Moravians stand ready, in the long-term coordinating committee which will be created by this resolution, to learn more about our deacons' unique ministry vision. An order of persons specifically anointed by the church to inspire all Christians to their baptismal call to service intrigues them, and with good reason. But we must be faithful to that vision if we are to gift them with it.

Sixty years ago, Episcopal "vocational" deacons were drafted to manage the pastoral needs of the Baby Boomer influx in our churches. Thirty years ago, the original renewal of the diaconate led deacons to become, for a season, the official servants of the church, running the soup kitchens and shelters by ourselves. Today, Episcopal deacons are making rapid progress to genuine acceptance as a full and equal order, icons of prophetic change, and energizers in mission for all our people.

This is the gift of the diaconate I believe the Episcopal Church has been uniquely called to shape in recent history. This is the vision of the diaconate the Moravians found most compelling in discussion. This is the gift we will share with them, without formal permission being granted by either body, simply by living together with them in full communion and demonstrating its profound value.

So let's get to it. Have faith in our vision of the diaconate as a gift to the broader church. Have faith in the call of TEC to share it with the church universal. Support our proposal for full communion with the Moravian church at General Convention, and call for those whose votes you influence to do the same.

#### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> The current Deputy is the Rt. Rev. Christopher Epting, spouse of NAAD president Suzanne Watson-Epting.

<sup>2</sup> The issue as yet remains unresolved, but is actively being addressed in the Episcopal-Lutheran Coordinating Committee.

<sup>3</sup> P. 877-878. The Lambeth Conference of 1888 adopted this standard for the worldwide Anglican Communion, originally formulated by the American Episcopal House of Bishops in Chicago in 1886. The four points are often referred to as "the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral."

<sup>4</sup> Moravian bishops have little administrative responsibility and spend most of their time on clergy pastoral care.

<sup>5</sup> The name of the full communion proposal is *Finding Our Delight in the Lord*, the title of a classic Moravian hymn.

<sup>6</sup> The Episcopal "vocational" deacons of the booming Episcopal churches of mid-20<sup>th</sup>

century exemplify the first category: those who were accepted into limited pastoral roles, with limited training. Black and Native American pastors in TEC who were regularly refused priestly orders exemplify the second category. An excellent recent example pertaining to women is the Church of England diaconate, which went from a vibrant order of thousands to perhaps one hundred dispirited deacons nationwide, after women were admitted to the priesthood. This tendency to staff an era's or area's emergency pastoral needs with deacons is not confined to Anglican circles: German Roman Catholic scholars note deacons (and their wives) are now living in rectories and running parishes, indistinguishable from their Lutheran pastoral counterparts in all but name.

<sup>7</sup> I believe that many of the seemingly trivial debates between deacons themselves, and their conflicts with supervisors or dioceses (about dress, titles, convention voting rights, educational standards, compensation, and the liturgical "disrespect" that is a common feature of much diaconal experience) can be traced to these lingering theological ambiguities.

<sup>8</sup> This analysis assumes, in sincere hope rather than full conviction, that racist or sexist concerns no longer govern a candidate's discernment of vocation.

<sup>9</sup> Bishops are perhaps the greatest sufferers from our lack of theological clarity. They pay significant costs when they, all unknowing, offend deacons by articulating assumptions about the appropriate contours of diaconal ministry which differ from published literature or the norms previously articulated in a given diocese. Today, bishops have ample resources (in well-functioning diaconal programs and the new diaconal canons) to assist in clarifying their own theologies of the diaconate; but they sometimes fail to perceive that it is necessary.

<sup>10</sup> Study of Moravian church history reveals violent persecution which humbles the Episcopalian, and immediately silences any notion that their practice or theology is "incorrect." Moravians in part lack the historic episcopate (in our formally accepted sense) because, after extensive persecution, their last bishop was believed to have died in prison before he could consecrate a successor. This tragic history influenced SCEIR's ~~determination to see this bilateral dialog effort come to fruition.~~ (*Finding Our Delight in the Lord* provides a process by which this potential impediment to full communion will be overcome.)

