

Deacons and Domestic Poverty

(Some thoughts for the Poverty Summit)

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While I am unable to be with you at the Summit [held May 13 – 15, 2008, in Arizona], as Director of the North American Association for the Diaconate, I wanted to take the opportunity to share ideas, about which I've been praying in preparation for this gathering.

Most often we think of deacons as people who minister directly with those who we perceive to be in some need. While that's true, I've shared many times, with many groups that we need to be careful not to fall into the "what-is-your-diaconal-ministry-syndrome." While deacons are very frequently involved in direct service, the church needs a reminder, from time to time, that we're also charged with interpreting to the church. The charge from the church is clear. "You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world." (BCP p.543) I share this because I believe there are specific skill sets that deacons have, can develop, and can share with others, that invite the whole people of God to claim their diaconal ministry.

What is Interpretation?

Recently, I've had the privilege of facilitating two online courses, one on engaging our congregations in the issues and challenges of the world around us – the other on the prophetic voice of the deacon. Both in their own way centered on the charge to interpret to the church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world. As part of my preparation, I did some research about interpreters. Here is something of what I found:

RIC International, a large translation and interpreting agency, says that, "To explain what interpreters do it is worthwhile to start by discussing the differences between interpreting and translation. They state that the differences in training, skills and talents for each job are vast. The key skill for a translator, they say, is the ability to write well and express oneself clearly in the target language. They tell us that professional translators almost always work in only one direction, translating only into their native language. And many excellent translators are far from being bilingual. The key skills of the translator are the ability to understand the source language and culture of the country where the text originated, and, using a good library of dictionaries and reference materials, render that material into the target language.¹

"An interpreter, on the other hand, has to be able to translate in both directions, without the use of any dictionaries, on the spot." They list the qualifications of a good interpreter as someone who has:

- Knowledge of the general subject of what is being interpreted (in our case, needs, hopes and concerns)
- Familiarity with both cultures (church and world, or issues in the church, for example)
- Extensive vocabulary in both languages
- Ability to express thoughts clearly and concisely in both languages²

They conclude by saying that...In spite of the vast differences in the skills of translators and interpreters, there is one thing that they must share, besides deep knowledge of both languages: they must understand the subject matter of the text or speech they are translating. Translation is not a matter of substituting

words in one language for words in another. It is a matter of understanding the thought expressed in one language and then explaining it using the resources of another language. In other words, what an interpreter does is change words into meaning, and then change meaning back into words – of a different language. And just like you can't explain to someone a thought if you didn't fully understand that thought, neither can you translate or interpret something without mastery of the subject matter being relayed.

As I've reflected through these courses, it does seem possible to identify some skill sets for interpreters and prophetic voices. That we continue in the apostle's teaching and fellowship, the breaking of the bread and in the prayers, that we continue to study scripture, these too are part of our vows and our interpretive role. But I'd like to suggest that there are some other things that we can identify, not only for ourselves, but that we can offer to others in our congregations and in the wider church that will invite their interpretive and prophetic voices as well.

- **Knowing our language and culture:** What are the resolutions our own communions have made and the actions they have taken around the particular issues that are facing us in the church and the world? Often it's helpful to be able to go to our national websites and archives as a starting point. In that way the issue is not just about "us" as the presenter or interpreter, but about the whole body.¹

- **Facilitating dialogue:** Clearly there are issues that cut across our communions that are sometimes extremely difficult. The ability to facilitate dialogue is something like helping others listen and interpret to and with each other.²

- **Advocacy:** While many times we think about advocacy as political, professionals do have ways of presenting their material that is effective, and they are careful to think about important people to talk to. Identifying potential companions in our work, and being as clear as possible in our presentations and solutions can be very important.³

- **Service Learning/Theological Reflection:** Many public schools, colleges and universities have instituted service learning programs that are not simply volunteer opportunities, but opportunities to engage in meaningful experiences in the community and then reflect on them. This has led to reflection and action around systemic causes, effects, changes. I think there's much to be learned here. Likewise, if we think about engaging in God's mission (and particularly mission trips) how often do we really reflect theologically and sociologically together after we share those experiences?⁴

- **Re-grounding in the prophetic tradition.** Perhaps we would do well to look again at the prophets. I have found Walter Brueggemann's *Prophetic Imagination* extremely helpful, along with the sixth chapter of Marcus Borg's *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. In both of those works we are reminded that the prophet both criticizes and energizes, not simply for the sake of criticism, but out of love for God and God's people. I find some of the most helpful material on hope in the writings of people who have known oppression, those from whom there is so incredibly much to learn about what really matters, and then to grapple with how to move forward effectively. As St. Augustine of Hippo said, "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are."

Who are the poor?

Often when we think about strategies we, even if unknowingly, fall into our historic pattern of reaching down, rather than reaching out. Gordon Cosby, founder of the ecumenical Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., has suggested that we might think about the church as, “a structure which does not isolate the poor while serving them, but recognizes that the poor are true leaders and works alongside them in their struggle for a just world. A structure that provides the opportunity for the privileged and deprived, rich and poor to be together.” And then he adds,

“A structure which serves the poor is one thing; a structure which serves the poor while evoking their gifts and leadership and nourishing genuine friendships is quite different.”³

While there are proven “service delivery systems” in dealing with addressing community needs, they often define people primarily by those needs. Our human service systems, just like our society in general, are often built on a consumer-provider model. That is, someone with a need goes to an agency and receives something to fill that need. The agency writes its grant proposals based on needs, and increasing needs from year to year. And often the “consumers” are defined only as needy people. As Christians we can invite those around us to see as Jesus saw, to see the value and the very gifts in each.

I believe it is imperative for us to model, in any initiative or resources we develop to address domestic poverty, this call to friendship. While there are many ways to do this, one approach is to consider Asset Based Community Development, a model that assesses the skills and talents of the whole community and uses those assets to address the challenges of the community. This model originated with John McKnight and John Kretzman at the Urban Affairs Institute at Northwestern University. It is deeply compatible with our own language of gifts and call.

What can deacons bring to our desire to address domestic poverty?

As part of our church’s “Jubilee 2000” initiative, a wonderful resource was created for use in congregations and dioceses. I often return to it, and I’ve wondered whether we could all benefit were it to be reissued. I believe that such resources, when they make it into the hands of those who are prepared to address issues of peace and justice, can be very effective. Another resource, recently developed, is the “Beijing Circles Resource Notebook.” As this resource makes it into the hands of women around our church, Circles of action and reflection are springing up everywhere.

What I would propose is that if there is a primary resource developed as part of our strategy to address domestic poverty that we keep three things in mind:

1. As a friend of mine often reminds me, “There is no simple important issue.” That is, let us not succumb to the temptation to “keep it simple.” Of course, there are simple things we can suggest that people can do. But if we do not address the very heart of “why” the poor are among us in the way that they are, we will simply be applying one more patch from our box of holy band-aids. Let us trust that there are people in our pews that are willing to engage the complexity of the issues, and develop our resources accordingly.

2. There are 3,000 deacons in The Episcopal Church. Can we put our strategies and resources directly into their hands? The North American Association stands willing to encourage a major effort in mobilizing deacons in our church to address this issue together.

3. Expand the conversation. We can make deacons available to replicate initiatives regionally, to address poverty issues within those regions, to

hold similar summits, or larger consultations. Let's ask for commitments from bishops to make deacons available to address this together, around the whole church.

Again, the North American Association⁴ stands ready to assist in addressing this very important issue. I look forward to hearing about the results of the Summit, and will be praying with you all as you gather.

(Footnotes)

¹ All information taken from the RIC International website and paraphrased.

http://world.std.com/~ric/what_is_int.html

² Ibid

³ Servant Leaders, Servant Structures, by Elizabeth O'Connor, p. 86. Published by the Servant Leadership School, Washington DC, 1991.

⁴ The Board of the Association is currently engaged in discussion about a new name for our organization – one that will reflect, more accurately, who we are in The Episcopal Church, including Province IX, the American Churches in Europe, and others.

(Endnotes)

¹ http://world.std.com/~ric/what_is_int.html is a web site with an introduction to what interpreting is about.

<http://episcopalchurch.org> is also a good reference. I often have students spend as much as a week locating resources they have not known about previously, including the church's digital archives. Click on the "Church Center" link.

² http://www.publicconversations.org/pcp/index.asp?page_id=172&catid=1 a sample resource on the web that might help us modify our voices and offer ways for others to talk about difficult issues.

³ <http://www.advocacy.org> shows us what some professionals think about their role.

⁴ Here are three interesting web sites on service learning. I'd also encourage reading and practice in various kinds of theological reflection methods.

http://www.servicelearning.org/welcome_to_service-learning/service-learning_is/index.php

http://service.csumb.edu/programs/sl_requirement.html#

<http://www.fiu.edu/~time4chg/Library/bigdummy.html>