

## On Elders Becoming Deacons

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During the past several years, I have had conversation and correspondence with three United Methodist elders (each from a different conference) who were feeling called to transition to the Order of Deacon. In none of the cases was escape from the itinerancy a factor. All three were already involved in specialized ministries, in two cases those ministries were "beyond the local church." Because these persons have experienced so much misunderstanding on the part of those who feel the move from elder to deacon is a move "backwards" which makes no sense at all, I asked the last of the three if I might share our correspondence with a wider audience. With her approval, then, here is her letter to me, and mine to her:

*A letter to a former teacher:*

For the last two years at Annual Conference I have been very moved by the ordination service. It has really been put upon my heart that I am called to be a deacon--to a ministry of word and service, not an elder. After last year, I just decided to live with that experience and reflect on it a bit. This year, the same thing happened. Not surprisingly, the few elders and colleagues I have spoken to about this all think it is just a TERRIBLE idea that I should not even consider. One tried to tell me I would sacrifice my voice and vote in the conference! Suffice it to say, it is clear this decision would be misunderstood by many people. In spite of that, it feels so right.

Let me share some of my thoughts. I have been aware for some time how "right" my current ministry is. It seems nearly everything in my life has prepared and brought me to this place, time and particular ministry. But it is not the ministry of an elder. Being recognized as one called to a life long ministry of word and service is not about my appointment. It's about my call. It's about the integrity and balance that comes with having the church recognize and confirm what is in fact my true calling and the real ministry I am involved in.

Someday, the Spirit may move me into another place and ministry. I can't imagine right now what that would be, but that it would be a ministry of service to "the least of these" in our world and probably outside the parish seems quite certain. Today, in my continuing preaching and teaching I help to represent the needs of grieving and traumatized children to the Church. I am doing the same for the needs of the disabled in our local congregation. These things I am passionate about.

I guess one of the most meaningful signs to me that this is really where I am being led is that I still feel this way after the trauma counseling session I had yesterday. (*Confidential details omitted here*) I am working with two children this summer who have had parents murdered. This is a new challenge for me. I know the steps and methods I employ to help these kids. But I don't know HOW I do it. I don't know WHY their time with me helps them when other counselors have not---but then again, I do know. It's not me. It's this awesome, holy, powerful, compassionate, joy-giving, hope-giving God who works in me. I'm just a vessel. I am more humble today as I consider taking vows and committing myself to this type of service for the rest of my life, but I am not dissuaded.

Does this make sense to you? Do you have words of wisdom?

*In response I wrote:*

First, the bottom line: I am an enthusiastic supporter of the United Methodist Church's official understanding that elder and deacon are parallel forms of ministry. Both require gifts and graces for ministry. You have the gifts and graces for being either an elder or a deacon. Therefore, it becomes a matter of the nature of your calling (as you have already discerned). From what you have written, the office of deacon reflects what you are called to do more fully than the office of elder. My spirit bears witness with your spirit in support of that calling.

Now to some related observations: At the present time, deacons cannot preside at the sacraments, although they can "marry and bury." I don't know how often that is part of your ministry now, or if it is at all.

When I was a senior in seminary, one of my professors said to the class: "I know someone who is going to get a doctorate and teach in a church college. He is not going to seek ordination. Dwight is going to do the same thing but he is planning to be ordained. Dwight, what's the difference between his ministry and yours?" Fortunately it was time for the break and I spent it looking out the window at the snow and pondering an answer. When we reconvened I said: "I feel called to a ministry of Word and Sacrament. I can't conceive of my ministry apart from the celebration of the sacraments, wherever I will be in ministry. I gather he must not have that calling. That's the only difference I can discern." The prof confirmed that as the crucial difference. From what you say, service plays the role in your calling that sacrament plays in mine. If so, that would be the difference in your calling to deacon and my calling to elder.

I am frustrated (indeed, quite perturbed to be truthful) by many of my brothers and sister elders who seem unable to understand what the United Methodist order of deacon is all about, and who cannot conceive that it is a parallel order of

ministry. By the way, I wonder if many do not also have difficulty understanding that the “order of all the baptized”—the people of God (what the New Testament calls the “laos Theou”) is also a parallel and equally important form of ministry. In fact, I believe baptism is the basic “ordination” for all of us and until we get that straight, we’re unlikely to understand other forms of ministry. (Oops, I really got on a soapbox there, didn’t I?)

I think I have some clues about why this misunderstanding persists. Of course, a basic element is that I am married to a deacon. Moreover, some of our good friends are also elder/deacon couples and I’ve worked a lot with persons preparing for ordination as deacons at the seminary. And there’s one more: I was ordained in the Evangelical United Brethren Church. We didn’t have a transitional order of deacon, so I was never ordained a deacon before being ordained an elder. I was, of course, a probationary member of the conference. I’ve never felt that impaired my ministry!

But for those who were ordained deacons on their way to becoming elders, it was very different experientially. It was a probationary step, clearly NOT an office parallel to elder but preparatory to it. To move from elder to deacon in that structure would have made little if any sense at all. It would, indeed, be a move “back.” Persons who got “stuck” in that office because they “didn’t measure up” clearly hadn’t “made the grade” and thus there was a stigma attached. If one didn’t make it after a given number of years, one could be “exited from the process.” In light of all this, I’m sure many elders have difficulty comprehending that the “new” office of deacon is not what the old transitional office of deacon was.

Rather, it is much closer to what deacons appear to have been in the early days of the Church as recorded in Acts---not people on their way to something “more important,” but a ministry valued for its own calling—the calling to service.

Maybe some of this will be helpful. In any event, I trust that discerning your calling will enable you to hear and embody the melody of joy through which the Holy Spirit affirms you and your ministry.

With the assurance of our prayers,  
and deep appreciation for your ministry,  
Your brother in Christ,  
Dwight