

THE DIACONATE, THE CALL, AND THE SYNOD

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In 1999 Lutheran Church – Canada established the office of deacon, or, more precisely, established the title of “deacon” as an umbrella term to cover those people who have been certified by the synod and who engage in public work in the church; who do not occupy the office of public ministry, but who engage in public work within the congregation that is auxiliary to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. The office of deacon is created by the synod in Christian freedom. While not of the essence (*esse*) of the Church, as the office of the public ministry is, it certainly exists for the well-being (*bene esse*) of the Church, and provides assistance and benefit to those congregations that see fit to make use of the office.

Our forebears in the Missouri Synod recognized both the reality that there is but one office of public ministry created by God, which is derived from the apostolate, and that the church has the right to create other offices which are auxiliary to the one office and which assist the pastor/presbyter/bishop in carrying out the work of his office, apart from the public preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. Walther, in his discussion of Thesis XVIII on the ministry, makes this distinction.

With this in mind, there are several practical points that need to be made:

- While the term “call” is the term that is used to refer to that which is given to those who are called to the office of public ministry, it is not a term which is used in Scripture to refer to this act, nor is it exclusively used to refer to those brought into the office of public ministry. It may be used to refer to the “calling” that all Christians have in their baptisms, and to other “calls” as well. Therefore there is no problem using the term to refer to those called to the position of deacon. On the other hand, those who have been prepared for public service in the church and have been appointed by a congregation for that service should never be understood merely as “hired” in the way secular employees are hired by companies. To be set aside, consecrated, appointed, called, etc., recognizes that God has been involved in this appointment. Thus, they should not be summarily dismissed from their positions.
- While Paul’s words in 1 Cor. 9:14, “In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel,” refer specifically and immediately to those who hold the divinely appointed office, and are derived from the fact that those in temple service got their food from the temple (v. 13), if in Christian freedom a congregation chooses to appoint someone as a deacon in their congregation, they do take on the obligation of support of that person. Since the office of deacon is not mandated by Scripture, one cannot speak of a permanent call of a deacon in the way one speaks of the permanent call of the pastor, the congregation that desires the service of a deacon does take on the obligation to pay that person for their work, since “the laborer deserves his wages” (1 Tim 5:18; cf. Matt. 10:10), and courtesy at the very least demands that congregations fulfill the expectations placed upon all Christian employers (Jas. 5:4). Yet, though the mandate of an “open-ended” call of a deacon cannot be found in Scripture, such types of calls are rarely beneficial for the church.
- With that in mind, congregations who consider calling a deacon need to consider the cost of doing so, so that they will not put themselves in the embarrassing position of being unable to pay the one whom they have appointed, and so that the one who accepted the appointment will not be left without the promised (and divinely expected) compensation.

- Since the office of deacon is an office created in Christian freedom, procedures for certification and initial placement certainly stand in the realm of Christian freedom, subject to the apostolic mandate that all things be done decently and in order (1 Cor.14:40). Considerations for placement should of course include evidence of a congregations commitment to the person and respect to the office.
- Since deacons are those who hold a public office, albeit one which is auxiliary to the one divinely mandated office, it is not appropriate that they hold positions in the church that are explicitly reserved for members of the laity. Thus they should not serve as “lay” voting delegates at conventions, nor should they serve on boards and commissions in slots that are reserved for the laity of the synod. The synod of course in its freedom may designates slots on boards and commissions for members of the diaconate, but deacons should not deprive the laity of their rightful places by taking slots reserved for the laity. At conventions, deacons are represented by advisory delegates from the diaconate, and they should express their concerns about voting matters to the pastoral and lay delegates from the congregations which they serve. Since they occupy a public office, the votes of those holding the full office of public ministry are to represent them.