

Common Vows and Common Mission

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This essay explores the type of leadership found among deacons today, as well as the relationship of diaconal leaders to others, within the context of the whole people of God. It establishes an understanding of the diaconate as set forth by the 1979 Book of Common Prayer and its relationship with the Baptismal Covenant. The essay also explains that with this Prayer Book understanding comes the charge from the church not only to lead through serving, but to lead through exercising an interpretive and prophetic voice. It further provides examples of diaconal leadership in today's church.

To understand diaconal leadership it is important to understand something about the most recent renewal of an historic order. And when we examine the renewal of the diaconate, it is critical to consider its role in the context of the whole *laos*. For I believe that even though ordained, our primary identity remains baptismal, and our ordination vows and charges only serve to expand, enhance, and urge us on in animating and exemplifying the *diakonia* to which all of us are called.

It is for these reasons that both the promises in the Baptismal Covenant and the charges in the Ordination Rite for deacons will be woven together as we reflect on diaconal leadership. That these two are related, necessarily so, reminds us that as a part of the *laos* we can never set ourselves apart in leadership, and that others can count on us to lead with that in mind.

Over the years, I have shared, countless times, a bit of wisdom offered to me by the late George Harris, who had served as the bishop in Alaska, and who was also a mentor and friend. One day in an informal

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conversation, Bishop Harris told a small group of deacons and others interested in diaconal ministry that it was very significant that, with the Prayer Book revision of 1979, both the importance of a theology of ministry rooted in baptism and the renewal of the historic diaconate occurred at the same time. We all nodded and made a few connections, particularly with the idea that we all make diaconal promises when we recite the Baptismal Covenant and that, while deacons are called by the church to live this out in primary and focused ways, it is also incumbent on them to be developers of diaconal ministry in others.

It is now some fifteen years later and I have found myself returning to Bishop Harris's observation over and over in every one of those years. I return to his words most often in the context of *lex orandi, lex credendi*—the law of prayer is the law of belief, or interpreted simply as how we pray is how we believe—and I marvel at where we have come in the thirty years since our Prayer Book revision. Just as the words of the Sunday liturgies are engraved on our hearts through the rhythms and seasons, not only of the church year, but of life, so are the words of the Baptismal Covenant, the reminder of our initiation into Christ's body and the "first call" to ministry. We renew those promises at least four times a year—enough to have them also engraved on our hearts, sometimes haunting, sometimes daunting, but always a reminder of those who live the covenant with us, and a reminder that we hold a common rule of life. This is not new information. But what is new, at least in some corners, is the observation as to how this has had an impact on our life together as the body of Christ. We are often better at acting than at reflecting, or paying attention to those who have. While I am still looking for a study on the impact of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, there is at least one venue where reflection has taken place. In a three-year review of theological education in the Episcopal Church (2005–2008), authorized by the church's Executive Council and called Proclaiming Education for All (PEALL), the History Document produced by a small committee both traced and reflected on that topic.

While the document includes much more than the impact of the Prayer Book, there was no denying that, since that revision, theological education has centered on the Eucharist, on baptism, and on ministry—for all ages. The study suggests that alternative education programs were established in many dioceses because they did not exist elsewhere—programs that would prepare people for ministry locally.

In addition, new adult formation programs like Education for Ministry and LifeCycles became increasingly popular. Newly developed programs for children centered around baptism and the lectionary cycle. The bar was raised for all the ministers of the church to be educated, equipped, affirmed, blessed, sent.

At the same time these programs were being offered to strengthen and equip all of God's people, new deacon formation programs were springing up in most parts of our church. The type and quantity and quality of deacon formation programs have recently been documented by research sponsored by the former Office for Ministry Development at the Church Center and the North American Association for the Diaconate.¹ But what is of primary relevance here is the environment and the atmosphere in the church as deacons were being educated and ordained according to a new rite and new canons. Just as the church was transitioning into the Eucharist as the primary Sunday liturgy, the centrality of baptism, and the ministry of all the baptized, the church was also transitioning from the third wave of deacons in the Episcopal Church (those ordained primarily for pastoral work post-World War II) to a new kind of deacon. New in an old way—more like those of the early church who served to extend the bishop's office, who served the poor, who brought the needs of the community before the bishop and the larger church, who aided in distribution—of money, of food, of other goods, and even of communion, as well as proclaiming, witnessing, and interpreting.

With the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* came new language in a new Ordination Rite, new charges and new vows. Now, thirty years later, has come a deeper understanding of those charges and vows, both in the context of the world and in the church; a renewed understanding of the place of the deacon in the midst of the larger body of Christ, as leader but companion, as ordained to an order and not a rank; new ways of educating and broader ways of thinking about the ministry of deacons that the church has set forth. Any deacon who has been ordained since 1979 has been so ordained in a new environment, with new understandings of ministry, and this article is an opportunity to reflect, not only on where we have been together in the church, but where we might be headed. How our leadership has

¹ These studies, both in summary and in their entirety, are available to read at www.diaconoi.org.

evolved and is evolving. And if Bishop Harris were here, I'd love to be talking with him about how the diaconate has provided an entry point to reevaluate many things in the church: how we think about orders; how we think about collaboration; how we design formation experiences; what it means to be a developer of diaconal ministry; how baptism serves as an equalizer in a church that takes the Baptismal Covenant seriously; what amazing and wonderful initiatives deacons are involved in; how disappointing it is when the church is more concerned about maintenance than mission; how exciting and enriching it is to have partners in ministry from every order; and how frustrating it is to have leadership that remains in a hierarchical model, not so much to order, but to control. I can imagine that he would listen intently and agree, reminding us in both his words and actions how much he trusted God's people to be God's people, and entering each encounter as an equal, and without a purple glow.

But for now it is my hope that this reflection will provide insights about the kind of leadership many deacons can and do provide and that every deacon should be trained to provide, particularly in relation to God's mission. And while it goes without saying that anyone would say that our Prayer Book is a fundamental resource, I encourage readers to consider that *this* particular revision of the Prayer Book has called us to new forms of leadership.

Diaconal Leadership and Mission

It would be my suspicion that were many in church leadership to consider deacons and leadership in mission, the first thing in their minds would be that, because deacons are to serve the poor and the needy, they could help identify where the church might be engaged in mission. True enough. Clearly the charge at ordination is that "At all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself."²

However, it would also be my suspicion that were many deacons to consider deacons and leadership in mission, they might also add that it is important to consider just what we mean by "serving."

Here is another pearl of wisdom from a mentor long ago. I still have a note, more than twenty years old now, from a priest in the

² From the Examination in the rite for the Ordination of a Deacon, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1979), 543.

diocese that encouraged me as I was an aspiring deacon. What he said in that note of encouragement set the diaconate in the context of the “wholesome humility of Christ,” and he pointed out that the church is fairly good “at reaching down, but not out.” The direction of that reaching is something that connects both with the vows and charges in the Ordination Rite for deacons, as well as with the Baptismal Covenant. Here we begin to lean into a taste of radical equality.

Earlier in this article, I mentioned that in the thirty years since the Prayer Book was revised, we have grown into a greater understanding of both baptismal ministry as well as of the diaconate. A short, but hopefully pertinent, digression:

I have said many times that bishops, standing committees, and commissions on ministry sometimes get caught in the “What-is-your-diaconal-ministry Syndrome.” In those early years of the renewal of the historic diaconate, the service aspect of that ministry was the easiest for people to grasp. It was helpful, but not enough. It was a place to start, especially to move things along, but it was incomplete. Clearly people wanted to hear where we were serving: homeless shelters, feeding programs, medical clinics, street ministries. But the emphasis was (and still sometimes remains) on the individual deacon’s service. So much so that I often use this illustration to give us a window into how people think of service.

Most deacons are unable to count the number of times when someone has seen them cleaning up after a meeting, or offering to help in some other way and has said, “Ah, after all, that’s a deacon’s work!” Or, “She’s being a good deacon!” While that is most often said with a smile, as if it were a little joke, the likely reality is that this provides an indication of what many of us think about serving. Or helping. Or giving. Or reaching.

Out? Or down? Like the difference between giving away what we don’t want and buying something new for someone who has a need. Or the difference between handing out a plate of food and sitting at the table to learn about life’s joys and sorrows. Or the difference between providing Christmas toys and providing Christmas hospitality and companionship. Or the difference between taking communion to the nursing home by ourselves, or bringing others from the community with us.

Indeed we are called to serve. But as Gordon Cosby from the ecumenical Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., has written: “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

In other words, we ordain deacons not to a particular form of diaconal ministry. We ordain deacons because we believe it is important to acknowledge the servant nature of Christ’s church, and we believe it is important for people to come from within our midst, animators to remind us of that and to affirm the diaconal ministry in which others are engaged. Indeed, it is the community of believers that affirms the call for living reminders that we are all called to Christ-like service at baptism. It is the community that affirms the desire for living reminders that the church itself is called, not only to provide nurture, sacramental sustenance, and fellowship to its members, but to be the church outside its walls in mission, witness, and service.

At the very first meeting of the group that constituted the 20/20 Initiative, I remember hearing from Katharine Jefferts Schori, before she was Presiding Bishop, that, in considering where to start new churches, we should consult with deacons. The crowd was unclear why that would be. She responded simply that deacons know where the church is needed.

Diaconal leadership urges us to venture forth to be the church where she is needed, to reach, not down, but out, in the wholesome humility of Christ.

Diaconal Leadership and Radical Equality

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”⁴ Once again as Christ’s body we are asked to make a diaconal promise. So as animators and leaders, how do deacons provide leadership in living this part of the covenant?

While previously I suggested we be cautious about how we consider the meaning of serving, there is no question about that call to Christ-like service for all of us, and clearly as a primary lens for deacons. In fact, deacons stand at the intersection between service and spirituality. The message we would hope to articulate, through both word and action, is about the connection between being in love with

³ Quoted in Elizabeth O’Connor, *Servant Leaders, Servant Structures* (Washington, D.C.: Servant Leadership School, 1991), 86.

⁴ The Baptismal Covenant, BCP 1979, 305.

God and sharing that love in concrete ways. Not as the proverbial good works that so often stand over and against grace, but rather the work, shared with Christ, that is a part of the very nature of grace. We have heard it said that “God’s church doesn’t have a mission. God’s mission has a church!” It is God’s mission on which we embark, as a loving response. “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”

In an essay on “Post-Baptismal Catechesis,” Robert Brooks has written:

Seeking Christ presumes there is a Christ to be found in all people. We aren’t told, “Wait for the Christ to jump out of the other person, grab you, throw you down and pin you and say, here I am.” The baptismal covenant calls upon us to commit *ourselves* to seek the Christ in that person, which is an *action*, and when we have found the Christ, knowing that the Christ is in all people, to serve that person. That’s why we can strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being, because the dignity does not depend on their credit rating, or where they live, or their job; it depends on the fact that God has put within them eternal life.⁵

Here is a story of a deacon’s leadership.

I first learned of Carole’s hope to bring the poor to the church’s agenda when I was facilitating an online course on “The Prophetic Voice of the Deacon.” Carole shared that she had read about a “decree” issued by Roman Catholic bishop Kenneth E. Untener of Saginaw, Michigan, in 1991 that all meetings under church auspices, at the parish or diocesan level, no matter what their purpose, must begin with the following agenda item: How shall what we are doing here affect or involve the poor?⁶

Carole asked if any of us had heard of this or had experience with anything similar. While everyone in the class thought it was an amazing possibility, no one had done anything similar. So Carole set about the process.

⁵ Michael Merriman, ed., *The Baptismal Ministry and the Catechumenate* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1990), 145.

⁶ Kenneth E. Untener, “How Should We Think About the Poor? A Bishop Reflects,” www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac0792.asp.

First she discovered that deacons are not allowed to introduce resolutions in her diocese. Deacons could sign on to support a resolution, but not introduce one. She then sent word to every presbyter she knew who might be interested. She explained the situation (several were surprised that deacons were not members of the Council) and asked if anyone would be willing to introduce the resolution. She sent copies of the resolution and gave a brief description of where it came from. She also invited all the deacons in the diocese, for whom she had e-mail contact information, and offered them the opportunity to sign on. Many of them did. In the end two presbyters were willing to introduce the resolution. Carole was able to shepherd it through the committee process. The resolution passed—barely. Carole reports: “It was the most controversial of all the resolutions . . . and there were two resolutions about same-sex unions. There has been some interesting feedback from parishes, though, that it has really changed their outlook.”⁷

The process is an interesting study in: (1) how we see the importance of the poor and their relationship with the church; and (2) how complicated (at least) and difficult (at worst) it can be to be a voice for those concerns.

In Bishop Untener’s reflections, he states,

The decree was in effect for 97 days. Never in my life had I talked about and listened to so much about the poor. On some days I had four or five meetings, and each began with: the poor. I learned a lot, not only about the poor, but also about us, and how we think about (or don’t think about) the poor. Believe me, I am no expert on the poor. But I learned eight things in particular during those 97 days.⁸

He continues his reflections with a list of those things. It will be interesting to hear what a diocese of our own church learns during the time. The resolution that was passed is as follows.

Resolved that, following the example of Kenneth Untener, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Saginaw (1980–2004), all meetings held

⁷ E-mail correspondence with the author from Deacon Carole Maddux, Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta.

⁸ Untener, “How Should We Think About the Poor?”

under Church auspices, at the parish or diocesan level, no matter what their purpose, begin with the agenda item: How shall what we are doing here affect or involve the poor?; and be it further

Resolved, that this item shall remain on the Church's agenda throughout the upcoming Christian year beginning on Advent I (November 30, 2008) and ending on the feast day of Kamehameha and Emma (November 28, 2009), and will be followed by a call for reflection on what we have learned, and for prayer to live what we have learned.

It is my fervent hope that the Diocese of Atlanta will share what it has learned with the larger church and that Deacon Carole Maddux will urge the community of deacons in our church to move forward with similar actions.

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” Indeed we will, with God's help and with deacons like Carole Maddux who continue to live faithfully in fulfilling the charge that “at all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.”⁹

Standing at the intersection between service and spirituality means making the connections between being in love with God and sharing that love in concrete ways. Making those connections requires a deep and abiding love for God and for all of God's people. Deacons have no corner on this, but without this love it is impossible to fulfill the vows and charges set before us by the church. There are no better words than those of Henri Nouwen to close this section and to urge us toward meaningful action.

Before Jesus commissioned Peter to be a shepherd he asked him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others do?” . . . He whose only concern had been to announce the unconditional love of God had only one question to ask, “Do you love me?”

The question is not: How many people take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus? Perhaps another way of putting

⁹ The Examination, Ordination of a Deacon, BCP 1979, 543.

the question would be: Do you know the incarnate God? In our world there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, cares, reaches out and wants to heal. In that heart there is no suspicion, no vindictiveness, no resentment, and not a tinge of hatred. It is a heart that wants only to give and receive love in response. It is a heart that suffers immensely because it sees the magnitude of human pain and the great resistance to trusting the heart of God who wants to offer consolation and hope.

The Christian leader of the future is the one who truly knows the heart of God as it has become flesh . . . in Jesus. Knowing God's heart means consistently, radically, and very concretely to announce and reveal that God is love and only love, and that every time fear, isolation, or despair begin to invade the human soul this is not something that comes from God.¹⁰

Diaconal leadership urges us to see the Christ in all persons, and takes us to persons, both literally and figuratively, where perhaps we have not looked for Christ before.

Diaconal Leadership and Prophetic Voice

“You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.”¹¹

I often observe that this is, quite likely, the charge for which many deacons were not prepared in their educational programs, and the one the church has the most trouble remembering. Just as “serving” is about more than reaching down, so interpreting is about more than providing a list of the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. But even for those deacons who had minimal background in the meaning of this charge and the skills needed in fulfilling it, it is my belief that, at some fundamental and instinctual level, those who befriend the poor long to explain (and often do quite effectively) the context of those needs, concerns, and hopes, as well as the gifts and resources God's people share in meeting them.

¹⁰ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 23–24.

¹¹ The Examination, Ordination of a Deacon, BCP 1979, 543.

In facilitating the online course on prophetic voice and in speaking with deacons around the church, I share what I learned from research on a translating agency.

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.”¹² 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. 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, to render that material into the target language.

An interpreter, on the other hand, “has to be able to translate in both directions, without the use of any dictionaries, on the spot,” and RIC International goes on to talk about the skills required in simultaneous interpreting and consecutive interpreting. But 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”; rather, 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 as you cannot explain to someone a thought that you did not fully understand, so you cannot translate or interpret something without mastering the subject matter. RIC International goes on to list the qualifications of a good interpreter, including:

- 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)

¹² This quotation and those that follow are taken or paraphrased from the RIC International website: http://world.std.com/~ric/what_is_int.html.

- Extensive vocabulary in both languages
- Ability to express thoughts clearly and concisely in both languages.

I have shared this information again and again because I believe it gives meaning to the diaconal charge to interpret and, perhaps more importantly, it encourages us to examine the place of relationship and context as we do that interpreting. This is not unlike the prophets of old—interpreting both God’s world and God’s vision. And as it was with the prophets, so diaconal interpretation is grounded in a love of God and of God’s people. We have lived now, for thirty years, with this charge.

It may be that the strengthening of this prophetic and interpretive role of the deacon may well be an unanticipated result of the most recent renewal of the diaconate. And for all the strength and clarity that this charge presents, it is sometimes a point of tension. For while deacons can and do point the way toward mission and the witness of the church, sometimes it is the deacon’s role (shared with others) to ask the church to look at the structures and systems around it that get in the way of mission and care for others and that need to be changed or dismantled, thus inviting the church constantly to recreate itself as a servant structure. The use of the word “dismantle” here does not mean a thoughtless tearing down. Nor does it mean that we should emphasize the negative. It does mean that, at the very least, we need to name the things that get in the way of God’s requirement “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). Further, it is important to know what assets, what positive attributes, both individually and collectively, we can bring to address those challenges. This is part of a cycle that Walter Brueggemann, in his book *Prophetic Imagination*, explains as prophetic criticizing and prophetic energizing. Speaking the truth, but energizing with hope.

Over the years we know that deacons have sometimes been described as thorns in the church’s side, or as troublemakers, or as nags. We have even used those terms for ourselves (with the help of others!), but I think this is not helpful. What I think we are trying to describe is the fact that asking the church to look at and engage in the world around us is not always easy. Inviting the church to enter life’s wounds and to befriend those affected by those wounds is invariably

challenging. Asking the church to tend to the things in its own life that get in the way of that is also difficult—and lonely. But for deacons to use these negative descriptions about their ministries may lead to an unintended, self-imposed exile. And for others to use them demeans a role that is grounded in the church's prophetic tradition. It makes it easier to push deacons aside, rather than to see them standing alongside. Likewise, it may serve to discourage or isolate other prophetic voices in the congregation.

“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?”¹³ We answer that we will, with God's help, and we give that answer in the company of God's people. Striving for justice and peace, not unlike interpreting needs, concerns, and hopes, demands intentionality, critical thinking, a love for God and God's people, and a set of skills in how to see the world and how to change it.

Over the last few years those who have responsibility for deacon formation programs, as well as deacons themselves, have recognized that in order to be prepared to interpret and to offer an alternative vision, it is possible and necessary to define and strengthen skills for that responsibility. A monograph on the prophetic voice of the deacon (written for a gathering of those engaged in diaconal ministry in our full communion partner churches) is available from the North American Association for the Diaconate.¹⁴ In it some of those skill sets are listed, and I reiterate them here.

Knowing our language and culture: What are the resolutions our own churches and conventions have already made and the actions they have taken around the particular issues that are facing us in the church and in the world? Often it's helpful to go to our Episcopal Archives website as a starting point.¹⁵ In that way the issue is not just about “us” as the presenter or interpreter, but about the whole body.

Facilitating dialogue: Clearly there are issues that are sometimes extremely difficult. The ability to facilitate dialogue is something like helping others listen and interpret to and with each other.

¹³ The Baptismal Covenant, BCP 1979, 305.

¹⁴ Susanne Watson Epting, *Prophetic Voice of the Deacon*, NAAD Monograph Series, no. 219 (2008). http://www.diakonoi.org/shop/index.php?rec=10&shop=1&cart=31267&cat=3&keywords=&match_criteria=all&searchCat

¹⁵ See the Episcopal Church Archives at: <http://www.episcopalarchives.org>.

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

Service learning/theological reflection: Theological reflection is key in effective interpretation of the world to the church. Connecting issues of justice with our faith is what makes the difference between good works and mission. Many resources exist for both teaching and learning about theological reflection. Service learning has been instituted in public schools, colleges, and universities that are not simply volunteer opportunities, but opportunities to engage in meaningful experiences in the community and then to reflect on them. This reflection leads to action around systemic causes, effects, changes. It is what we call praxis. Engaging in God's mission requires regular reflection on our actions. Mission trips are important experiences in our congregational lives and with our young adults, but it is imperative, if we hope to effect change, that we take time to reflect on what we've seen, what we've learned, what we've discovered about the root causes of the needs we've seen, and what assets can be brought to bear.

Asset-Based Community Development: This tool was devised by John McKnight and John Kretzman when they were at the Urban Affairs Institute at Northwestern University. They observed that in every community they visited that successfully addressed many of the challenges it faced, it was because the gifts, or *assets*, of the whole community were employed—individuals, associations, institutions. When we seek to do justice together, it is critical that we not only understand the roots of the problems we see, but that we recognize what assets exist in the community to address those challenges. Harkening back to Bishop Untener and the resolution on how our actions affect the poor, one of the things he learned was that the poor help the poor. Indeed. Asset-Based Community Development is a secular tool that reminds us that *everyone* has something to bring. It is compatible with what we learn in Scripture, especially about the ways in which Jesus looked on each person as loved, blessed, gifted. Not just needy.

Re-grounding in the prophetic tradition: We would do well to regularly revisit the prophets, both scriptural and contemporary. What can we learn from their criticizing and their energizing, as Brueggemann calls it? What can we learn about their personal

experience of God and how that informed what they were called to do? And when we ask hard questions, how are we prepared to offer a hopeful alternative—not necessarily *the* solution, but the hopeful vision and an invitation to others to walk along as we journey there?

In 2005 I had the privilege of spending a weekend with the deacons in the Diocese of Mississippi. It was the first time they had been together since Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. And we were to work during the weekend on the meaning of the interpretive role and prophetic voice of the deacon! Amid stories about what they had witnessed, the work in which they were currently engaged, gratitude for the camaraderie with deacon colleagues, laughter and exhaustion, they reflected on the meaning of their own interpretive and prophetic roles. We discussed prophetic criticizing and prophetic energizing. We rested in St. Augustine's wisdom that "hope has two beautiful daughters, anger and courage; anger at the way things are and courage to make things other than they are." Before we ended our time together, I asked them what they would say to the church. This is some of what they replied:

- There seems to be no place for the poor in the rebuilding plans for the Coast. It is our hope that others will join with us in making that happen and that the poor will be engaged in the conversation.
- Thirty percent of children lived in poverty before the storm; there is the potential for even greater poverty now—or for things to be better as we rebuild.
- Christ spent as much time with those in power as those who had no power. If we expect to effect change we must dwell with and have compassion for the powerful, in order to bring them to a place of willingness to share that power.
- It may be that our nation no longer represents hope and generosity, but rather bullying and self-interest.
- If everyone who works a job in Mississippi were employed at the average wage rate of Mississippi, the state would still have the lowest per capita income in the nation. People survive by sharing. And yet Mississippi has one of the highest rates of proportional giving.
- We have an opportunity to share a different vision of how things should be, to redefine both our church and our communities.

- We may be about transforming our theology—moving beyond understanding the storm as “an act of God,” to understanding it as an unfortunate disaster in which God is present.
- We hope that the deacon community and those in our congregations who speak with similar voices will support those on the Coast in speaking with authority. The church must sit in places of power and decision-making.

Diaconal leadership asks hard questions, speaks from a position of strength, and energizes with hope.

Summing Up and Looking Forward

Seeking a glimpse of radical equality in Christ—in our world—is a challenge. But those glimpses are at least offered regularly in our Baptismal Covenant, and in the rite of Ordination of a Deacon. Diaconal leadership is about relationship with those we serve; it is about rolling up our sleeves, but it is also about opening our hearts. Engaging in mission has to do with conversion as much as it does with action. Diaconal leadership is willing to know the world deeply enough to be able to interpret it. It is willing to invite the church to dismantle what gets in the way of mission—whether sacred cow or inertia, whether a challenge to the latest greatest idea for mission in order to engage it more deeply or an invitation to let go of survival techniques long enough to engage the world. Diaconal leadership provides Isaiah-like hope in its vision of an alternative to injustice, to greed, to the abuse of power. And diaconal leadership is not just reserved for deacons.

Our church has added to its emphasis on the Millennium Development Goals a focus on Domestic Poverty. As we move forward, here are some thoughts on diaconal leadership in addressing that issue.

1. As a friend of mine often reminds me, “There is no simple important issue.”¹⁶ That is, let us not succumb to the temptation to “keep it simple.” Of course, there are simple things we can suggest that people do. But if we do not address the very

¹⁶ I am grateful to Deacon John Willets of the Diocese of Chicago for this insight.

heart of *“why”* the poor are among us 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 who are willing to engage the complexity of the issues, and develop our teaching resources accordingly.

2. There are nearly three thousand deacons in the Episcopal Church. Can we put our strategies and resources directly into their hands? The North American Association for the Diaconate stands willing to encourage a major effort in mobilizing deacons in our church to address this issue together, should the church so desire.
3. Implement Bishop Untener’s resolution. Let us ask ourselves, at least for a season, how our official acts and actions influence the poor. And let us learn to know the poor well enough to understand how to move forward.
4. And lastly, let us consider where the church is needed. Who waits for us? Who might long for a glimpse of radical equality in Christ? Friendship with those of us who are in love with God? Let us venture forth—because God’s church doesn’t have a mission, God’s mission has a church!

