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Diakonia in Anglicanism – missionary imperative, ecclesiological conundrum

Jeremy Morris

Offering a short paper on ‘*Diakonia* in Anglicanism’ raises some difficulties, which I have characterised by the word ‘conundrum’.¹ What is the problem? Why do I use the word conundrum here? There is partly the simple problem of language. Outside ecumenical circles in England, Anglicans do not use the word *diakonia* much, if at all. As soon as they do use it, in most church contexts the assumption will be that what is being talked about is the diaconate, an order of ministry which Anglicans have preserved from the pre-Reformation church. Anglicans have no one word to capture the meaning of *diakonia* as it is commonly used in European (and especially Lutheran) churches, so that when, for example, the Church of Norway – to take a convenient example – says “*Diakonia* is the caring ministry of the Church. It is the Gospel in action”, there is really no single word, nor even a formula, a cluster of commonly used but distinctive terms in this context, in *British* English, which expresses that idea.²

The history of language is important as a point of access to broader concerns, inseparable as it is from the wider cultural, social, political, and religious contexts from which a language emerges and into which it is spoken. However, there is not space here to go very far down that road. Instead, I want to point out the conundrum to which I am referring. If Anglicans do not have a word to correspond exactly to *diakonia*, we do nonetheless have the reality of a “caring ministry of the Church”. Could we, then, if we chose to do so, simply adopt the term *diakonia*? No, because, again, the history of language reflects the particular channels down which church history in England has flowed over the centuries. *Diakonia* has an active, distinct, willed and organised field of reference lacking from the “caring ministry of the Church” in England. We have what *diakonia* appears to stand for; but we do not have *diakonia*. Moreover, there is no

¹ I am grateful to Charlotte Methuen for her comments on a draft of this paper.

² This is a quotation from the National Council of the Church of Norway, cited in Dag Thorkildsen, ‘The Role of the Church in contemporary Norway: Changed Relations between State and Church’, *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 25 (2012) No. 2, 285.

simple separation between diaconate and *diakonia* for us: think of these terms instead as like overlapping circles in a Venn diagram.

1. Deacons and deaconesses

I begin with a few words on the history of the diaconate, because I will eventually argue that what the diaconate points to and subserves is a ministry of service that is itself an integral part of the Gospel. The diaconate is at the same time both an order of ministry, and a lens through which the whole ministry of the people of God can be viewed. The first ever English ordinal, published by Thomas Cranmer in 1550, included in its preface the statement that “from the Apostles’ time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ’s Church: Bishops, Priests, and Deacons.”³ This bare assertion, carried through into the preface to the 1662 ordinal and therefore up to the present, masked a complex historical evolution. In the unreformed English Church, the order of deacon had become largely a transitional ministry, a step towards the priesthood. It remained so in the reformed Church of England, although by the 18th century practice varied in the extent to which there was a gap between ordination as deacon and ordination as priest. Some bishops definitely treated the diaconate as a way of assessing a candidate, and testing them, for a priestly ministry. This was so in the diocese of Lincoln in the early 18th century, for example, where one clergyman endured a twelve-year diaconate because Bishop Reynolds was unwilling to priest him on the basis of his lack of learning.⁴ Equally, there are accounts of deacons being priested within weeks or even days of their ordination as deacon. One John Smith was ordained deacon in Norwich on 1 May 1793 and priest three weeks later in Exeter.⁵ Since he moved dioceses, there was surely a story here now lost in the mists of time. Most clergy underwent a period as deacon somewhere between a year and three years in length. The diaconate was like an apprenticeship, its termination (or rather, its supersession by priesting) dependent on patronage, the availability of a suitable living (a curacy or incumbency), the approval of

³ Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Anglican Ordinal: Its History and Development from the Reformation to the Present Day* (London: SPCK, 1971), 19; cf. http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1549/Deacons_1549.htm (accessed 11.8.2023).

⁴ William M. Jacob, *The Clerical Profession in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 35.

⁵ Cf. The Clergy of the Church of England Database: http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1549/Deacons_1549.htm (accessed 11.8.2023).

the bishop, and so on. There is little sign in the historical evidence, until the 19th century, that a distinctive theology of the diaconate was in play. When there was a revival of interest in the diaconate as such, as a result of the High Church revival, it was, however, mostly in the liturgical role of the deacon. This should not be underestimated, particularly since, in well-staffed urban parishes, the deacon's role in the liturgy would almost certainly be filled by a priest acting as deacon. The Tractarians scarcely wrote about the diaconate at all as a distinct order; their focus was almost entirely on the priesthood, given the connection in Anglicanism between the priesthood, the celebration of the eucharist, and the canonical role of the bishop as chief pastor and agent of ordination. Henry Liddon's popular and influential sermons on *Clerical Life and Work* (1895), for example, had an important chapter on "The Priest in his Inner Life", but said nothing about deacons; even his ordination sermons did not single out deacons, but rather mostly spoke generically of ministry and ministerial order. The institution of deaconesses in the 19th century – covered briefly below – certainly presented the Church of England with a series of questions which began to open up implications for the ordained diaconate. But arguably it was only in the 20th century, and quite late even then, that the Church of England at last began to think much more carefully about the diaconate, and here a key influence was the impact of women's ordination, first as deacons in 1987, and then as priests in 1992. For if – and this much is obvious – you adhere to 'Catholic' arguments that women cannot be ordained priests, but can be ordained deacons, then what were they supposed to do? What was their ministry really about?

The history of the deaconess movement, going back well into the 19th century, and loosely influenced by the Fliedners' Kaiserwerth initiative, provides an interesting illustration of the complexity of the Anglican position.⁶ The Anglican order of deaconesses began in the 1860s; other local and diocesan initiatives soon led to the emergence of a variety of models, and by the mid-twentieth century deaconesses were a common feature of parish ministry in the Church of England.⁷ Arguments about whether they were actually ordained (in the same sense as male deacons)

⁶ Brian Heeney, *The Women's Movement in the Church of England 1850–1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 67–74.

⁷ Cf. Henrietta Blackmore (ed.), *The Beginning of Women's Ministry: The Revival of the Deaconess in the Nineteenth-Century Church of England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007).

or not, and so whether they were part of the threefold order of ministry or not, became especially intense as the pressure of modern feminism built.⁸ This has, arguably, blinded historians to the blindingly obvious, which is that, even if – from a 21st century perspective – the deaconess movement now looks like a cul-de-sac in history (there are scarcely any deaconesses now), nonetheless, they were the means through which a more rounded theology of the diaconate could begin to emerge once again in Anglicanism. The role of the deaconess in Anglicanism (as in Lutheranism) particularly fitted 19th-century ideas of women as sympathetic and pastorally sensitive, and the dissolution of these essentialist arguments about women's character in the late 20th century allowed the recovery of the sense of pastoral service for the diaconate as a whole. As we shall see, that element was always present, if somewhat downplayed in practice, in the Ordinal itself.

2. *Diakonia and service*

But what about *diakonia*? So far, I have only discussed ordained or quasi-ordained (deaconess) ministry. What about the general sense of pastoral service in the Church? And what about the connection to mission? If the Church of England, and most elements of Anglicanism more broadly, does not have an exact equivalent to the concept and practice of *diakonia*, it certainly has a tradition of social theology, and of philanthropic, voluntary, charitable work. In practical terms, this never disappeared from the Church. Until the reorganisation of the Poor Law in the 19th century, the parish was the main authority through which poor relief was distributed in England and Wales. Various church-led agencies attempted to tackle a host of social problems. Before the late 19th century, it was almost meaningless to position voluntary activity in any other context than a religious one. Churches maintained schools, hostels for young men and women, clubs for youth, benefit societies for the poor, homes for the destitute and elderly, and so on. The churches in Britain played a key role in the emergence of modern ideas of social work and social service.⁹ More than this, though, a particular group of Anglican theologians and clergy began to

⁸ Cf. Sean Gill, *Women and the Church of England. From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (London: SPCK, 1994).

⁹ Cf. Frank Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: the Disinherited Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

articulate a theology of social welfare, and indeed a social understanding of the Church's mission and work. From the "Christian Socialists" of the mid-19th century, such as F. D. Maurice, through to great figures such as Charles Gore and William Temple in the late-19th and 20th centuries, Anglicans evolved a particular way of looking at the Church's relationship with its wider society, conceiving of its responsibility as one encompassing the whole of society, encouraging social integration, and even egalitarianism, and eventually placing more and more emphasis on the role of the State itself as an essential source of social support. In this, of course, in England, the Church-State link was both an advantage and, sometimes, a hindrance. *Diakonia* in the Church of England cannot be located in any one set of activities, but rather has its equivalent in an idea of the Church as existing not only in and for itself, and for the identifiable group of its members and attenders, but for the whole of society, and for all, irrespective of their belief.

These two words, diaconate and *diakonia*, appear then to have quite distinct histories in the Church of England. But they are, nonetheless, related. The role of the deaconess gives us a clue. The Ordinal provides another. In the 1662 ordinal, the Bishop, addressing the candidates for deaconing, after outlining the liturgical and homiletic tasks of deacons, goes on to say that it is the deacon's office "to search for the sick, poor, and impotent people of the Parish, to intimate their estates, names, and places where they dwell, unto the Curate [i.e. the minister in charge of the parish], that by his exhortation they may be relieved with the alms of the Parishioners."¹⁰ In practice this was scarcely ever conceived as a distinct diaconal task; it was essentially subsumed into the general ministerial responsibilities of the parish priest. Deacons functioned largely as assistant clergy, and in most cases were desperate to leave that position behind, and become priests with charge of parish. In contrast, the role of the deaconess could point to a way in which this stratum of the diaconate could be expanded and extended, so that it was articulated as a distinct form of ministry, which nonetheless encapsulated something of the mission of the Church as a whole; this provided a conduit through which these two streams of Anglican history could begin to speak to each other. That is, in effect, what has happened increasingly. With a variety of ecumenical agreements and statements in the background, recent work on a renewed

¹⁰ Charlotte Methuen has pointed out to me the resemblance here to Calvin's understanding of a deacon: see the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.4.5.

diaconate, partly stimulated by the question of a distinctive order of ministry, has seen the ministry of deacons as “that of a go-between, a bridge, an envoy, whose special ministry is to take the message, meaning, and values of the liturgy, as a key expression of the gospel, into the heart of the world and, by the same token, to bring the needs and cares of the world into the heart of the Church’s worship and fellowship.”¹¹ Something of the work of the Catholic Biblical scholar, John Collins, on *diakonia* as a distinct ministry of service underlies this development.¹² The Church of England has not done more substantial thinking about diaconate since the report from which I quoted just now, *For Such a Time as This* (2001), but it has done work on the connection between ordained ministry and the wider ministry of the whole people of God, partly in order to emphasise the importance of lay ministry, and partly to recover a sense that all the people of God are necessarily involved in the *missio Dei*.

Kingdom Calling (2020) is, to date, our most thorough consideration of this wider sense of the connection between mission and ministry. It is sub-titled *The vocation, ministry and discipleship of the whole people of God*. Its target is, inevitably, clericalism, the idea that the ordained clergy have a more important ministry in the Church than do the laity, so that the way to strengthen the mission of the Church is to ordain more people. The report combines the idea that every Christian is a minister “because every Christian is commissioned for the service of Christ,” with the equally important acknowledgement that some people are gifted with, and commissioned for, “specific ministerial responsibilities,” so that all Christians share in the ministry and mission of the Church “with a common responsibility for using the gifts given to them for the building up of the one body.”¹³

Finally, then, let me draw out one perhaps rather obvious point from all this. If we follow, as I do, contemporary understandings of mission as not *our* mission to the world, *missio nostra*, but *missio Dei*, as God’s mission in which we all participate as Christians, then it is evident that our participation in mission is thereby our action as ministers of God’s word: the two are completely inseparable. This is a point strongly underlined by the Anglican

¹¹ House of Bishops, *For Such a Time as This: a Renewed Diaconate in the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2001), 22.

¹² Cf. John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹³ Faith and Order Commission [of the Church of England], *Kingdom Calling. The vocation, ministry and discipleship of the whole people of God* (London: Church House Publishing, 2020), 46.

Communion's 'Five marks of Mission', and especially marks three ("to respond to human need by loving service") and four ("to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation").¹⁴ No Christian, however humble, however differently abled, is without a vocation not only to follow Christ, but also to serve Christ and in that capacity to bring Christ to the world. For Anglicans, therefore, *diakonia* inheres in the whole of the Church: deacons concentrate or crystallise, perhaps even distil, that breadth of mission and ministry in one specific form. That, at any rate, is the theological ideal for us: it is for others perhaps to say whether we truly embody that in our ecclesial practice.

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Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag zeigt auf, dass es in der Geschichte der Kirche von England kein genau gleichbedeutendes Wort für *diakonia* gibt, wie es in vielen europäischen Kirchen gebräuchlich ist. Diakone bzw. Diakoninnen sind ordiniert und sind – entsprechend den Kirchen in katholischer Tradition – Teil des dreifachen Amts. Die historische Rolle der Diakonissen (deaconesses) spiegelte diese Sichtweise, wurde jedoch nicht als ein Weiheamt verstanden. Des Weiteren besteht ein klar umrissenes Verständnis der sozialen Berufe der Kirche. *Diakonia* ist eine Eigenschaft der Kirche als Ganzer, auch wenn Aspekte des Dienstes zentral zur Rolle des Diakons bzw. der Diakonin gehören.

Keywords – Schlüsselwörter

Anglican – deacon – deaconess – *diakonia* – mission

¹⁴ <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx> (accessed 23.10.2023).