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LEARNING ABOUT SERVANT MINISTRY
THE FORMATION OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES FOR *DIAKONIA*

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How do we form Christian communities for servant ministry? How can one begin to reflect on that question, which involves issues of adult education, and changes in engrained congregational life patterns? Even more deeply, it requires reformation of our deepest understanding of baptismal calling and centuries of tradition, both good and bad, about how that calling receives communal and ecclesial form.

As a trial way in, I propose to look at an early Christian text, Acts 6-8. My working assumptions are the following:

1) The shape of the text itself, as well as its themes are for our reflection and learning;
2) The text in question, a narrative, is a story told for the purpose of shaping a community—that, rather than specific issues of accurate "history" is the primary focus of the church's reflection;
3) These reflections will hopefully stimulate further reflection and dialogue about and with the text, the formation of Christian communities, and the place and work of deacons, and servant ministries.

I will arrange these reflections side by side with the text in the hope of holding it present, and increasing the sense of learning through immersion in and dialogue with narratives which our tradition holds up as formative for our religious community.

THE COMMUNITY AND THE CONTEXT

Acts 6-8 is part of the Lukan narrative of the unfolding of the earliest period of the life of the church—its startling growth, its earliest models of communal life, and the emergence of conflict with the Jewish community over identity. The narratives take as a broad framework the expansion of the community from Jerusalem, through neighbouring regions of Palestine, expanding eventually across the Roman world, and to the heart of the empire.

These three chapters focus on the emergence of differing ministries within the community, the activities of two of those early ministering figures, and aspects of the unique way in which they proclaimed the risen Christ inside and outside the community. It is important to hold as a frame the understanding that in its earliest period (that which this narrative strives to reenact) the church was a sub-group among many within Judaism. The story as it opens envisions this growing sub-group, the Jesus-community, situated in Jerusalem, the centre of a religious culture which was at that time more cosmopolitan, and more diverse, than religious identity known as Judaism which emerged after 70 CE.

PART 1: NEED, DISCERNMENT, CALLING
ROOTED IN NEED

The designation of a new form of ministry arises out of three types of need. First the text makes clear that there is conflict deriving from cultural differences—Hellenist and Hebrews, Greeks and native Palestinians. Secondly the text indicates that basic survival and equitable provision for the whole community was an aspect of the crisis. Finally, the text reports that the apostles, the "twelve", perceived that they could no longer focus on their understood priority and also address all the needs of the community, therefore they must ask the community to designate additional leaders with whom to share responsibility and authority over a part of the work.

I suggest that these three formative forces still shape contemporary Christian communities in the learning process by which

they recognize the need to call forth new ministries of service. Only when the community begins to feel tensions about who is inside and who outside, begins to experience conflict about whether necessities of life are fairly distributed, and when the leaders begin to recognize that they are not super-heroes and sort out their priorities will the learning begin. This whole sequence of narratives concerning these early ministries of service indicate that they were a constant focus of tension inside and outside the community in diverse ways—perhaps because they were born of the deepest tensions within the community around belonging, sharing, and mission.

Discernment and Calling

The text highlights that discernment and calling begins with the leaders of the community—not discerning the calling of someone else, but clarifying and discerning their own calling. Only when they are prepared to state publicly to the community what they have discerned about their own ministry, does their proposed solution in the designation of another aspect of ministry to others become credible to the community.

Secondly, the responsibility for discerning is given over to the community, the criteria for discernment are made very clear, and the commitment to appoint those discerned by the community is stated up front. There are to be seven—likely a symbolic representation of providing the complete number required for the scope of the task. Curiously, they the job description calls for individuals who are "full of the Spirit and of wisdom", criteria which recur throughout these three chapters in reference to the early deacons.

The community responds to clear discernment by the leadership of its calling with its own act of discernment. It brings the chosen seven to the apostolic leadership, who fulfil their commitment by appointing them to the specific ministry through praying, and laying on of hands.

It would be easy to dismiss this as the wonderful early days of the church, but to do so would be missing key aspects of the way the story seeks to instruct us about discernment and calling: these aspects involve self-discernment by leaders, clear requirement to the community that it discern for itself with direction about what it is discerning, and mutual responsibility for completing the discerning and affirming the discernment of the community. Discernment in this narrative is primarily about releasing control, not about maintaining control. Finally the issues involved in communal conflict and inequity require first and foremost individuals "full of the Spirit and of wisdom".

This episode concludes with the interesting note that the result of this action was that priests became believers. Whatever the socio-historical background might be, the attention to the effect on a particular class within the power structure indicates an expansion of credibility in the mission of the church as a result of its mode of discernment and calling.

Part 2: Models of Servant Ministry

The bulk of these three chapters focus on the ministry of two of these proto-deacons, Stephen and Philip, through a series of narratives about their ministry of service. The two figures are strikingly different, and focus our attention in divergent directions. Stephen's ministry is characterized by prophetic confrontation and tension within the community. Philip moves outside the community and models interaction with non-Christian, non-Jewish cultural phenomena and experience. The text presents both a legitimate ministries of service, or perhaps we might even say models them as necessary aspects of all true ministries of service.

A further aspect of the shaping of the narrative as a whole is that it focuses little attention on the specific question of the success of the servant ministries. There are few statistics—we hear no mention of "Thousands of widows served." Instead the whole attention of the text shifts to what the servants become,

and how the community reacts to what they become. There is no reason to suppose that the deacons did not do service, but the text itself focuses on their gifts and their transformation as a result of having received the discernment, calling and affirmation of the entire community for a particular work.

Servant Ministry: Conflict and Confrontation within the Community

In telling us the story the text does not focus on Stephen's wonders and signs (which we might compare with earlier portions of Acts where we have explicit narratives of miracles by the apostles). Instead it takes us directly into the intra-communal effects of his servant ministry—argument, parts of the community agitating with others for action to end perceived disruptive behaviours, accusation of unorthodoxy, bringing of the dominant coalitions into play to exert control, and eventually arrest, confrontation, and trial.

When the issues are formulated by the false witnesses they are: attacks on the sacred place, attacks on the tradition, and calling for change. It's important to hold in place the frame that this is not a confrontation between Jews and Christians, but a confrontation within the Jerusalem Jewish community between a member of a new sect whose activities are increasingly provoking disagreement and a community in reaction to calls for change and transformation.

Almost all ministry which requires transformation of the distribution of goods and power within the community will generate anxiety and conflict about change. The story reminds us as a community that servant ministry will lead to confrontation in many instances, and that the foci will be sacred places ("We don't want a bunch of poor people coming in here and dirtying the building."), sacred traditions ("That's not theology or spirituality, it's just fashionable socialist ideology."), and fear of change ("People will be upset."). It also makes clear to those who are chosen for servant ministry that good works may not of themselves convince communal power brokers of the need for change. Lastly the text assists us by forming us to recognize the behaviours of resistance within the community—empowering the rest of us to name the behaviours by way of self-examination, and by way of support to the servant ministers.

Stephen's face, we are told, looked like the face of an angel, like the visage of a messenger of God—perhaps warning us that when we stand confronting the servant minister in accusation we are in reality refusing the intermediary of God.

The Proclamation of A Deacon

Acts contains a series of "sermons" or proclamations by figures of the early church. Virtually all provide a narrative framework based on the Jewish scriptures, an account of the story of God's work leading to the gracious act of God in Jesus. All select different elements of the ancient narrative, which reflect key themes involved in the moment of proclamation. Stephen's proclamation, or witness, is no exception. Whether or not we wish to believe Stephen uttered these words, the narrative itself calls us to hear them as the words of a servant minister, as a revelation of how meditation on the communal tradition has shaped personal identity and ministry. Stephen's proclamation tells us what Stephen himself had learned from the scriptures he read and reflected on. Secondly, his witness tells us what the meaning of his servant ministry is in the context of that history.

What episodes does Stephen choose to relate?

- A brief summary of the story of Abraham focusing on his call and the revelation that Israel would be enslaved in an alien land.
- The story of Joseph, provider of food in a time of famine
- A lengthy exposition of the life of Moses, who led the Israelites from oppression and slavery into freedom
- A brief summary of 500 years or history

covering Joshua, David, and Solomon who built the temple
- An allusion to the prophets.

Powerless in the Present and Called to Hope

In retelling Abraham's story Stephen focuses on the call, the future promise for which Abraham was willing to live in hope, the prophetic revelation that the people would live in an alien land, and the covenant of circumcision. The servant minister is called to live out of hope in the potential betterment of the future, and to enter into covenant with God and with the community for the sake of that better vision. Here, and again in retelling the story of Moses' life, Stephen alludes to the status of "resident alien". In some way the identity of the servant minister requires living without citizenship, without rights, without power.

Provoker and Provider

Stephen's brief recollection of the career of Joseph touches on his provocation inside the family, which contrasts with his wisdom and credibility outside the family. Chiefly the choice of episodes focuses on Joseph's ability to ensure that the hungry received food in time and famine, and on his hospitality in inviting the Israelites to live in Egypt. The servant minister's wisdom must express itself concretely in effective distribution of necessities and in creating hospitable spaces.

Wisdom across Cultural Divides

The longest of the individual lives Stephen recounts is that of Moses. This is not surprising when we remember that Moses in the scriptures is, among all other individuals, designated by the precise term "the servant of the Lord" or "the servant of God".[1] He begins with the description of the situation of Israelite enslavement, and enforced population control. As he recounts the story, Moses too was abandoned, but Stephen focuses on his adoption and his cross-cultural education which enhanced his ability for wise and effective action. The servant minister is called to describe clearly and vividly the sources and mechanisms of oppression. The servant minister's discovery of identity is rooted in experience of victimhood and deprivation, and in wisdom drawn through experience of times of cultural rerooting.

Misunderstood and Reflective Confronter of Injustice

Significantly Stephen next recounts Moses' first experiences of confrontation with injustice, and his surprised discovery that the oppressed might not leap enthusiastically for deliverance. In doing so he makes of the Moses the model for a servant ministry which reflects on its practice, and on the bewildering responses it provokes among those it seeks to serve. The servant minister is called to confront injustice, and to learn from experience when to act and when to withdraw. Once again Stephen draws attention to the experience of becoming an outsider, living as a non-citizen.

Transformed in the Fire of Experience

The next episode of Moses' life Stephen calls before us is the revelation at the burning bush of God's identity and intention to deliver the people from mistreatment. Focally, this is the moment of Moses' call, but when we take the two previous episodes in connection with this, we can perceive another aspect. Initially Moses is inflamed with a desire to act for justice, and his action is rejected. In the further entry into the experience of rejection and alienation, Moses becomes open to a deeper revelation and encounter which results in a different vocation. Authentic servant ministry struggles with experience toward its meaning, and that struggle creates and clarifies identity and action. Stephen's Moses trembles and is afraid to look at the burning bush, because the

[1] We might note that recent research increasingly points to the fact that in the Greco-Roman world the term *diakonos* could mean not only a servant who waited on table but also was in some contexts a term for an important messenger sent by an authority.

experience of rejection and failure is something which makes us deeply afraid and in pain. God's affirmation that the place in which Moses is standing is holy ground, is the real revelation in which Stephen and Moses discovered their call—the ground beneath Moses is holy because the passion for justice and deliverance of the disempowered which drives Moses is the same passion which drives God. But Moses also has to learn that his passion for justice, which expresses itself in the form of murderous anger, must be replaces by a different fire—a fire for justice like that of God which burns the bush but never destroys it Ultimately, as we learn, Stephen's proclamation and identity are one—what ultimately drives the community over the edge into murderous fury is Stephen's vision, not merely of an angel or a burning bush, but of "the Human One standing at the right hand of God". Stephen's presence creates holy ground, because his passion is the same passion which drives the God of Moses, and drives the Human One to the cross.[2]

Deliverer of Slaves and Prophet to Idolaters

Stephen now summarizes the remainder of Moses career focusing on the repeated rejections of his ministry and leadership by the people once delivered from bondage. In this, and the final section of his proclamation he shifts to the proclamation of the prophets, whom he chooses to portray as confronting idolatry. He emphasizes Moses' willingness, despite rejection, to remain with the people in the wilderness

Margin and Centre

Stephen shifts his attention to a rapid pass over several centuries, contrasting tabernacle and temple as foci of God's presence. Perhaps because of the accusation that he wished to destroy the temple, Stephen chooses to hold up for scrutiny words about the purpose of sacred places, and their relative impermanence before the God who created heaven, earth, and all within them. However this choice of foci also relates to the individuals from history on whom he turns his attention—Moses and Joshua, David and Solomon. These two sets of individuals represent poles of Israelite history around which theological and socio-economic points of view cohere—Moses and Joshua with the settlement and egalitarian distribution of the Land, David and Solomon with the centralization of the state and the introduction of a shift to hierarchy in the distribution of power and wealth. Stephen associates the tabernacle with the first pair, the transition with David, and the establishment of the temple with Solomon. But the tabernacle represents a society in which the revelation of God's will for just relationships stands at the boundary of the community—God's will and presence are known at the margins, and move with the community . The temple represents a society in which the revelation of God's will stands at the centre of the community, stable and unchanging, but also open to co-option as a vehicle of power, control and inequity.

Confronting Prophet

In the final moments of his proclamation Stephen chooses to model himself on the prophets, confronting people with their neglect of the purpose of covenant community, and their rejection of all who would hold them accountable to the law of just and equitable living. Unlike most of the other proclamation/sermons in Acts, Stephen's makes almost no reference to the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. The apostles are proclaimers of the resurrection; the servant minister is one whose who existence embodies

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[2] 'The Human One'. While there is ongoing debate about the meaning of the Greek term *o huios tou anthropou* (traditionally rendered 'the Son of Man'), it is clear that it is a literal rendering of an Aramaic phrase which likely was most commonly used as an oblique form of self-reference. Because *anthropos* in Greek also means 'generically human' as opposed to a male human, the rendering "The Human One" is in my view a more faithful reading of both the Greek and the Aramaic precursor of this phrase which the Gospels and Acts use as a descriptor for Jesus—and makes considerably more sense of it as a theological term in its biblical contexts.

the call to suffering servanthood, whose existence is an integral living out of the mystery of the crucified and risen Christ. And it is to this point that we come immediately following these words.

Proto-Martyr

Stephen's proclamation unfolds an identity shaped by reflection on four scriptural archetypes: Abraham—one called and committed to the transformation of the community's future; Joseph—provoker and provider; Moses—passionate seeker of justice and leader of people out of oppression; and the prophets—confronters of the complacent with the demands of their own community standards for just distribution. His public proclamation of the foundations of his identity provoke uncontrollable fury, people cover their ears.

In the final moments of his life, his one-ness with the Suffering Servant whom he follows is manifested in a coalescence of the visual and verbal—proclamation and presence are identical. The community confronted with identity of proclamation and presence stands in the presence of judgement. The narrative reminds us that confrontation with judgement leads to repentance or to murder. Stephen, the first model of servant ministry, the proto-deacon, becomes also proto-martyr—the first of a long history of witnesses whose communities are unable to respond to authenticity and integrity of identity except with violence and death.

Stephen's last words are intercessory prayer. Can we only know how to pray for our community when we have learned how to confront it?

Persecution and Promise

In seeking to bring us into a deeper understanding of the implications for the Christian community of the presence of servant ministry, the narrative has offered as one archetype the impassioned confronter for justice. In what follows the brief account of Stephen's martyrdom, it also seeks to make clear that such a model of servant ministry will also provoke a confrontation with political and social power which may draw the rest of the community into suffering and persecution.

But the account of Stephen's murder, and this short narrative interlude also introduce for the first time the individual who will come to dominate and shape the future proclamation of the church more than any other early Christian—Saul. Stephen's witness and proclamation bear fruit in a mysterious and unexpected way in the one who first seemed the most unlikely soil, the most violent enemy, the last-born of the apostles—Paul.

If the servant ministry of passionate confrontation for justice can lead to suffering for the whole church, it may also be the very confrontation which releases the conscience to self-examination, and the Holy Spirit to work in transforming those otherwise satisfied to be bystanders. The text in this brief interpolation seems to hold the tension before us of the potential for ill and the potential for good in such a confrontational mode of servant ministry. Without Stephen's witness, perhaps there might have been no persecution. Without Stephen's witness, perhaps there might have been no Paul.

Servant Ministry—Collaboration and Bridging Culture and Community

The story now shifts focus to a second of the proto-deacons, Philip, who as a result of the persecution becomes a displaced person, travelling from place to place. It presents his ministry as a ministry of proclamation and healing. If Stephen as model for servant ministry follows Jesus in confrontation with the community leading to death, Philip follows Jesus in the work of reconcilation and healing through interaction alongside the community. Philip's work also has strong elements involving the bridging of cultures. Stephen's ministry produces conflict and distress; Philip's, great eagerness and joy.

Transparency, Openness, Sharing Space

We then hear three brief narratives about the impact of Philip's form of servant ministry. First we hear about his effect on a magician in Samaria. (This individual, Simon, was likely a recognized expert in the techniques of socio-medical healing, but the text is not interested in specifying much about this.) Simon's work amazed people, and the essential emphasis of the narrative is on the fact that whatever he did to bring about change in situations for people, it worked. He was an effective practitioner of social transformation. The text does not tell that Philip confronted Simon, but rather indicates that Philip allowed Simon to enter into learning and relation with him. Philip's mode of servant ministry is one of transparent operation—he too changes people's lives and situations through serving them in their needs, but he allows his work to be observed. Philip shares expertise and wisdom. As a result Simon enters the community through baptism.

Servant ministry is about creating patterns of transformative work in which there are no secrets, no hidden mechanisms, no concealed levers of technique and power. It is about a mode of service in which others can enter into the ministry by observing, participating, sharing space, and being drawn into the task at hand in new ways.

In Relationship with the Apostolic Work

The narrative of Philip's service in Samaria shifts to the apostles in Jerusalem, who hear of the effects of the work, and send Peter and John. In the narratives about Stephen the apostles fade into the background—we hear neither that they supported him nor that they sought to rein him in. In this case, however, the mode of work calls for collaboration and relationship, and once again we see the community leaders acting to affirm and empower the baptized to live out their baptisms.

Danger and Clarity

Philip now fades from the story momentarily, and we hear of an encounter between Peter, and Philip's admirer, the newly-baptized Simon. He offers to pay for the power of the hands which gifted people with the Holy Spirit. Peter rebukes him, and insists that he clarify and redirect the intent of his heart. Is this a warning about a danger hidden within collaborative servant ministry? The danger of confrontative servant ministry in these texts seems to be the conflictual impact on community relations; the danger of collaborative and culture-bridging servant ministry seems to be the potential for lack of clarity and confusion about intentions.

Formation and Interaction

The final episode in these narratives opens and closes with Philip on the move. Encounters with new places, new people, new cultures constantly shape his work of service. He learns and is formed in his ministry as he interacts with others.

Opener of Doorways to Collaborative Learning

This story about Philip recounts his meeting with an Ethiopian proselyte to Jewish worship, in which, at the prompting of the Spirit, Philip initiates a conversation about the prophet Isaiah. Philip models transformative interaction over scripture which seeks first of all to identify the place of the other. Only by doing so can he truly come to be present to the other's situation, and then only by invitation. By being present to the place of the other, Philip is invited to enter the carriage, to enter further into the reality of the other person's experience.

The servant minister interprets scripture with those on the boundaries of the community, by seeking first for permission to share in the presence and place of the other. The servant minister models for the community collaborative learning, learning rooted in the personal and in the experience, that values the

knowledge of the other, that opens the door to further invitation to dialogue.

Pain and Proclamation

Stephen's proclamation focused on the discovery of identity through meditation on scriptural archetypes of service. Philip's proclamation takes the form not of a confrontation or exhortation, but of a study session on Isaiah 53, one of the Suffering Servant songs. The passage the eunuch is studying speaks of one who bears the sins and burdens of the many, of one who is rejected, on the boundary of society. It speaks of an individual who will have no offspring, whose perpetuity is limited to personal achievement. Where Stephen's identity formed around Abraham called for a future of promise ensured by progeny, the passage Philip and the eunuch study speaks of an identity and hope which can be rooted only in the present transformation of individuals and community. Philip enters into the castrated man's self-identification with the individual in the Isaianic song, opening the pain into proclamation of the good news about Jesus. Stephen's calling was to enter into the sufferings of Jesus, and in doing so to be present to the risen Lord. Philip's calling is to enable others to find the suffering of Jesus in their own pain, and in doing so to bring them into the presence of the risen Lord. Both servant ministries are prophetic for they both participate in the Spirit's witness to the world, of judgement and of hope.

Welcomer into The Covenant of Baptism

In the final episode of this story, Philip completes the process. Having enabled the Ethiopian to discover in his own pain a share in the sufferings of Jesus, Philip responds to his final request by drawing him into the life of the resurrection in baptism. The collaboration bears fruit; the Spirit moves Philip on.

Servant Ministry—Bridge for Change and Transformation in the Christian Community

Both the narrative about Stephen and the narratives about Philip end with the disappearance of the servant minister—Stephen in martyrdom, Philip moving on to another collaboration, to another community seeking transformation and healing. Acts moves on to Saul's conversion and the growth of the early church's understanding of the call to bring outsiders into a new community of inclusion. The narratives of diakonia, of the calling and work of the earliest servant ministries, stand as a bridge from one image of the church (the Jerusalem community) to the other (the Gentile mission church). Perhaps only through the ministry of service, in the work of confrontation and collaboration with the world on behalf of those at the margins of existence, can the church grow spiritually and physically in its understanding and fulfillment of its mission.

Learning About Servant Ministry—The Formation of the Church for Servant Ministry

What might this tentative reflection of these early Christian narratives from scripture suggest about how the church learns about servant ministry and receives formation for that ministry?

- *How can we learn by being attentive to moments of need, conflict and crisis in our corporate life?*
- *What can we learn when our leaders pay attention to discerning and clarifying their own calling?*
- *What can we learn when leadership releases discernment to the community and enters into mutuality by affirming and empowering those the community calls?*
- *How can we learn from reflection on scripture and those who model faithful service.*
- *How can we learn through the experience of service?*
- *How can we learn through the experience of rejection, alienation, pain, exclusion, and uprootedness?*
- *What can we learn through confrontation and through collaboration, when proclamation and presence form an integral unity?*