

Comments re: The Issue of One Rite  
Biennial Meeting of DUCC  
April 16, 2009  
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After twenty plus years as an ordained person  
I switched.  
Officially, I turned coat.  
Publically, I reversed my Word and Sacrament decision,  
and joined your ranks.  
I found a seat in the midst of you.  
Your beloved community,  
your sacred circle  
became  
my beloved community,  
my sacred circle.

Reaction  
was,  
has been,  
is  
mixed.

Beyond the holy confines of  
the fellowship of this sisterhood  
the sistership of this fellowhood  
questions were tentatively brought to birth:  
Are you taking a demotion?  
Are you being opportunistic?

I had to do a special program and get diaconal testamur.  
I had the full monty of learning facilitators and mentors.  
I did field placements and assignments.  
I went through E&S and Interview Board  
But I didn't have to endure a year long discernment.  
I didn't have to be re-settled.

Within this community,  
space has been made,  
another chair happily pulled into the circle.  
And I have felt  
welcomed home.  
Mostly  
I have rested in your embrace

So when on some occasions I have perhaps too sensitively felt the chill of  
    arms folded across chests  
    waiting for me to prove myself,  
I have tried to be philosophical.

In a community that has had to prove itself,  
    after decades of constant explaining and repeated defending,  
    in an atmosphere where the church greets diaconia with disrespect,  
a legacy of vigilance takes root and grows.  
A certain culture of caution remains inevitable and understandable.

But I have never been asked if I was a real minister.  
    I have not had my training maligned.  
    I have not had my work  
        reclassified or  
        downsized or  
        ceased.  
    I have been invited into and afforded wonderful opportunities.  
    I have been comfortably ensconced.  
    White,  
    male,  
    able-bodied,  
    employed,  
    financially comfortable,  
    well educated,  
    positioned as teacher,  
    my middle name is privilege.

I always want to remain conscious of that social location.  
I must try to remember that my understanding of the universe  
    comes from a reality that is so unreal to most of the universe.

So, coming circuitously back to the question,  
I am most tentative about suggesting that we look at the big picture.

I don't live with the pain of being diaconal in the same visceral way,  
    that I sense some of you do.  
I don't carry the sorrow in an embodied fashion,  
    that I hear from some of you.  
I am not as angry and frustrated,  
    as perhaps I should or could be.  
What I am saying is that  
    I don't experience the tenderness with the same intensity that others do.

So I am cautious.

I don't want to judge or question or minimize  
anyone's anguish,  
anyone's feelings,  
anyone's reality.

I understand diaconia to be fundamental, integral, and essential to the gospel.

Jesus' message of loving neighbour

is primarily, quintessentially, characteristically diaconia.

Throughout two thousand years of assorted, and sordid, church history

diaconia has fought, often unsuccessfully, to stay alive.

It has been disappeared and restored  
more times than Cher.

The edgy part of this vision perhaps puts it in this precarious position.

We are not, by nature, in the centre.

It is, then, perhaps foolish to expect the centre

to acknowledge, or

understand or

value us.

Similarly, in The United Church of Canada, diaconal ministry is too often:

- ignored and unacknowledged,
- dismissed and discounted,
- misunderstood and maligned.

Throughout our history in the United Church diaconal ministry has suffered various and sundry indignities, including:

- the fight for presbytery membership,
- exploitative pay scales,
- no job security,
- disjoining.

I "get" that our work entails:

- advocating for rightful compensation,
- upholding just employment practices,
- honouring the contributions of dedicated workers.

I *understand* that we need

- to articulate our vision and our passion,
- to communicate who we are,
- to promote our rightful place in the church.

I want humbly, cautiously, and respectfully to suggest that

we need to be careful not to make our decisions about one rite based on:

- a desire for recognition,
- a need for ego validation or
- a longing to have our status elevated.
-

I for one do not want

- to support clericalism, or
- to undermine lay ministries, or
- to support ministerial pedestals.

I hope we will not be hooked by

- the hierarchy,
- the power-over or
- the patriarchy

that our culture and church marinates in.

We use

the verb commission

the noun ministry

the adjective diaconal and

the controversial functions of education, service and pastoral care.

Different words have been and are employed.

In the past, United Church deaconesses were designated.

Ecumenically, Lutheran deaconesses are consecrated.

Anglican deacons are ordained.

In the Uniting Church of Australia ministers of diaconia are ordained.

Different understandings have been highlighted

- Roman Catholics reserve the diaconate for married men.
- Anglicans have transitional and vocational diaconates.
- Methodists have opened the doors broadly recognizing all kinds of community involvements, including, but beyond, deaconesses and diaconal ministers.
- Lutherans have rostered diaconal ministers, and two deaconess communities.

I like this diversity.

Something in the variety speaks to me about the abundance of life.

Our vocation in many ways defies easy categorization;

the very ambiguity reflects for me the profound mystery

and that delights me.

In my mind, and in many of our minds,

the temptation to accept one rite

carries with it

the danger of homogenization.

I know the importance of administration,

the necessity of structure,

the value of clarity.

The church has to be, and must be, organized, somehow.

However, with all due respect,  
a love for clarity can move toward over-simplification,  
an official uniformity can lead to rigid conformity,  
a bureaucratic preference for order can turn into cement.

And the margins  
the edgy  
the out of ordinary  
can get folded into the norm.

The distinctness of the diaconate,  
and the uniqueness,  
the flavour can be lost.  
I do not want the pungent, spicy, vibrant taste of the diaconate  
to get lost in some ordinary oatmeal (or maybe ordained-ary oatmeal).

The legacy of servanthood  
has had unfortunate and unfair consequences  
of self abasement and subservience.  
Too often we have caved in, out of some unhealthy sense of humility.  
So any action that asks us to hide our talents under bushels of compliance,  
needs to call forth our hermeneutic of suspicion.  
We should not walk away from opportunities to advocate for our vocation.

There is no denying that  
our rights  
our vision  
our hopes  
can be eroded  
by tiny, unrelenting details  
by plodding, policy nuances  
by seemly minor changes like commissioned to ordained.

However, I am also suspicious that this conversation diverts our energy.  
While Rome is burning,  
this matter might be considered fiddling.  
While the Titanic is going down,  
the issue of one rite,  
in the scale of things,  
in my mind, falls in the category of deck chair shuffling.  
Would it be too cynical to imagine that we are being,  
probably unconsciously, distracted?  
Our radical hopes for the church, and the world,  
are at some level threatening.  
How better to get us “off message” than redirecting our energy  
to concerns about our survival?

How do we stand firmly grounded in our priorities for  
building community,  
doing justice and  
empowering others.  
when we are being absorbed in these conversations?

I don't want to be a victim.  
I don't want to have one more conversation about one rite  
suck up my energy and passion.

Walter Wink describes Jesus' approach to conflict  
as a non-violent, non-dominating, creative, often humorous, third way  
between fight and flight.

Jesus found imaginative ways to challenge the powers

- Turn the other cheek
- Go the extra mile
- Throw the first stone if you are sinless.

And the Syro-Phoenician woman found a creative way to challenge Jesus' power

- Even the dogs get the crumbs

What would be that third way in the situation of one rite?

Maybe we would need to address the advocacy/confrontation  
in inventive and resourceful fashion.

Maybe it would be some fun ways of protesting;

- an ecclesial form of street theatre
- a trickster's style of speaking truth
- an artist's way of prophetically revealing the emperor's new clothes.

Above all we would be respectful while being strong.

Walter Bruggemann and others talk about the culture of scarcity.

It is difficult not to get trapped in seeing the world from that perspective,  
when it is the way of the world we live and participate in.

I would love to see us move toward a norm  
of operating from a position of abundance.

Instead the Pharaoh's fear

I want us to embrace Yahweh's freedom  
And escape the chains of empire.

Instead of hunger

I wish us to find the loaves and fishes that can feed the multitudes.

Instead of empty

I yearn for us to throw the nets of on the other side  
and find full nets.

Instead of death

I long for us roll away stones  
and find new life.

What does abundance look like in the issue of the one rite?

I am not sure exactly

But the tone has to be celebratory:

- voices raised in song
- arms dancing with delight
- hearts leaping with gratitude.

Not to undermine the groaning of creation,

but I believe we have to emphasize our joy.

I love being diaconal;

and I want the rest of the church to know about this blessing.

I propose that our attitude has to be confidence:

- feet firmly planted knowing what we are about
- souls deeply grounded in believing our vocation is good
- hearts profoundly assured that God blesses us in this work.

Not to minimize that there is a lot to lament;

but I believe we have to stress

our hopefulness

our sense of blessing

our joy in this incredible vocation.

*(Ted, who is in diaconal ministry as program staff with the Centre for Christian Studies, presented this paper on a panel in one of the theme sessions. Other panelists were: Cheryl Kirk, a diaconal minister working as the only minister with a congregation; Carlton Senior is a lay pastoral minister with the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands; Margaret Robertson was in diaconal ministry in the Presbyterian Church and has since been ordained.)*