

KEYNOTE ADDRESS DOTAC CONFERENCE
CANADIAN MENNONITE UNIVERSITY WINNIPEG, MANITOBA
JUNE 21-26, 2002
DIAKONIA: RECLAIMING THE MINISTRY OF ALL GOD'S PEOPLE
Louise Williams

June 23 Theme for the Day:

The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me Luke 4:16-18a

Claiming Authority

How good it feel when we are all together like this. For these few days we likely won't have to answer the question, "Well, what exactly is a deacon, a deaconess, a diaconal minister?" It does feel good to be together. And so many of us! More than at any other DOTAC conference in history, and more than the planning team counted on.

We are from different countries. We speak different languages. We come from a variety of religious traditions. We live out diaconal ministry in many ways. Still in the midst of all those differences, already after this short time together, we sense that we are, at heart, the same. Perhaps you notice that your heartbeat resonates with others here.

They tell me that in physics there is a principle called attunement. You can see it, for example, when you bring two pendula close together. They might be swinging in different ways, but as they come close together and spend time there, they become attuned and swing together. Or two electrical currents running close together side-by-side will become attuned to the same rhythm and wave length. It's not surprising if the heartbeat of your neighbor sounds a lot like your own because we are here as people who have drawn close to and become attuned to the heartbeat of that One whose public ministry was inaugurated with those theme verses from Luke: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because JHVH has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. JHVH has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19)

It's so clear to us that the focus of Christ's ministry is on those who have the greatest need. You know those people, the ones the prophet Isaiah described as oppressed, brokenhearted, captives, prisoners, mourners. I suspect that when I say those words, specific people come



to your mind. Hear them again: oppressed, brokenhearted, captives, prisoners, mourners. We know that Christ's ministry, and so the ministry of the Body of Christ, the church, is about bringing good news, comfort, liberty, release to precisely those people.

We are kindred spirits. The same spirit that blew on and in Jesus, the Christ, is also on and in us. Maybe you have noticed it already and have begun to realize how good it feels when we are together like this.

It feels so good here together. But why does it so often feel so lonely out there in diaconal ministry? Sometimes it seems that we are always having to explain ourselves, always having to make a case for the ministry we do. And when we try to talk about *diakonia* as we have come to understand it, people look at us like we are speaking Greek or some other foreign language. It's as if somewhere along the way the church has lost the conviction that *diakonia* is central to the ministry of all God's people. There is serious reclamation work to be done. To reclaim is really to call back--to take something that is damaged or lost or headed in the wrong direction or in an unusable state or unacknowledged and to call it back--to restore it to its rightful place and identity.

Let's take a few moments to recall together what has been lost, what needs to be reclaimed. I invite you to think with me for a bit about *diakonia*, to picture it using five images of traditional and liturgical roles of the diaconate suggested by Antonia Lynn in an article in the book *The Deacon's Ministry*.¹ As I describe these images, I invite you to recall what you already know by heart and to think about the ministry you do, about the potential for the ministry of all God's people, about how or why this aspect of *diakonia* needs reclaiming, and about how we nurture a diaconal spirituality for ourselves and for the whole church.

I pray that the spirit, the same one who was upon and in the ancient prophet Isaiah, the same one who was upon and in Jesus, the Christ will also be upon and among and in us these moments in memory, in imagination, and in hope.

1. Servant.

Ah, the basin and the towel. The symbols we know so well. The servanthood modeled by Jesus, doing the humble, slavely work of washing feet. That action of Jesus, though, was itself symbol of what Jesus' whole life and ministry was showing compassion to those in need, embracing the outcasts and those on the fringes, ministering to the lost, the least, and the little ones, becoming one of them.

From earliest times deacons and deaconesses were the focus of the church's care for its most vulnerable members: the widows and orphans, the imprisoned, the poor; those ones you recalled just now when I read those descriptions from Isaiah.

You may know the story often told among us, perhaps legendary, of Deacon Lawrence of Rome who took care of the offerings for the poor. In the year 258, Lawrence was arrested with the bishop and the other deacons, but he was not immediately martyred as they were. Rather he was given a stay of execution and instructed to produce the church's treasury. Lawrence is said to have gathered the poor, the lame, the blind who had been in his care. He presented them to his persecutors. "These," he said, "are the treasures of the church."

Liturgically from early times, the deacon/deaconess was the symbol of the servant Christ in the midst of the people. The members of the diaconate were dressed with diagonal stole--to symbolize being girded for service, having whatever would encumber tied out of the way to make for easy movement and flexibility.

Some think that the etymology of the Greek word *diakonia* comes from *dia*--through and *koni*--dust.² Those who do diakonia are those who go through the dust to where the lowly are whom God would raise up. Those who do diakonia are those who work close to the ground, among the grass roots to be servant and advocate.

This kind of servanthood is hard work. It's humble, service, responding to real personal needs. It takes us often where we would rather not go, to touch parts of humanity that we would rather not see, to feel compassion and kinship even with those who are hardest to love.

It's ministry sorely needed in our world where the poor are increasing in proportionate numbers every day. Jesus wasn't kidding; the poor we always have with us. Perhaps you see it where you work; that increasing gap between rich and poor with the rich hoarding or misdirecting resources. There are still plenty of feet to be washed.

It's not the kind of ministry, though, that lots of people are eager to sign up for. At least in the United States and perhaps in other places in this region, there is a cultural bias to avoid pain and discomfort, our own and anyone else's. It's not very cost-effective to do this kind of ministry. It doesn't seem to be the kind of ministry that will "grow churches" successfully if successful church growth means increasing numbers of people who can support a ministry financially.

Perhaps you can imagine what the church might be like if this ministry of servanthood were reclaimed for all God's people. Perhaps you can imagine the difference it might make in your

neighborhood, in your town or city, in your country, in the whole world if all God's people took up basin and towel.

There are, of course, dangers in recalling people to a ministry of servanthood. This servanthood might easily be confused with the servant role to which many people in our world are relegated not of their own choosing. This ministry might be attractive to those who believe or who have been told that this is what they must do because they can do nothing else, because they are worth no more than this. Another danger is that this servant ministry become a kind of hobby that those who have plenty of resources take up when they feel like it. The dangers, the possibilities for misunderstanding cause some among us to think that we should abandon this language, this approach to diaconal ministry. I believe, rather, that it needs to be reclaimed.

The diaconal spirituality that helps us to reclaim it is twofold. First, it comes from a strong sense of identity. It's there in the story in John. Jesus knowing that he came from God and was returning to God, took up basin and towel. Jesus, teacher and master, became a slave. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me!" In baptism, St. Paul would remind us, Jesus Christ's identity becomes ours. Diaconal spiritual begins by remembering who we are; God's daughter, God's son, and even God's friend, Jesus tells us in John.

Secondly, the diaconal spirituality that helps us reclaim servanthood leads us to those very people who were the focus of Jesus' ministry not just because they need what we have to offer, but because there we will find Jesus, right with them, among them, one of them; the hungry, the thirsty, the ill-clothed, the imprisoned, the sick. We need to be there to meet Jesus. And when once we glimpse Jesus there, we will be drawn there again and again.

2. Table Server.

There is probably no one in the room who hasn't learned along the way that the Greek word *diakonia* was often used in New Testament times for serving at table. Some have suggested that Jesus' words "I have come among you as one who serves" imply that Jesus himself waited table for the disciples. Whether or not that is true, Jesus surely cared about the nurturing and feeding of people in body and in spirit. Jesus surely understood the meaning of community gathered at table. To do *diakonia* is to follow the example of this table server.

We know the image well. This *diakonia*, too, can involve personal service, giving to people what they need to sustain their lives. This table service can involve not just the care of individuals, but also the service of one who caters the feast; the one who has a care for the

whole, the one who makes sure that there is enough food and wine to go around, the one who helps everyone have a good time.

As you know, the members of the diaconate were actively involved in the early church's *agape* meals--gathering the gifts, preparing the table, serving the food. From as early as the second century, we have evidence that they served at the table of the Eucharist.³ They laid the table and served sometimes both the bread and wine and sometimes only the wine. The members of the diaconate carried the gifts, the food, the bread and wine, to those who could not participate in person at the meal. And they gathered the needs of those they served and brought them back as the prayers they bid when the community gathered again.

One does not need to work very hard to begin to picture such table serving *diakonia*--responding to the hungers in our world today--for bread, for meaning, for spiritual nourishment, for community, for the Bread of Life. In responding to those hungers with the gifts of the people of God, we have opportunity not only to bring "bread" but also to become "bread" for those we seek to serve.

In the part of the world where I live healthy attitudes toward food, a sense of community, and the practice of corporate meals are all endangered. Perhaps it is not so in other places in this region, and that is one of the reasons why our exchange especially south to north is so important. At least in the US, many have an overabundance of food, all kinds of food, all the time. We have lost our sense of feasting because we can overeat every day. And then, of course, we need to diet. And all the while, even in that rich country, many go hungry. Our food, packaged, perfect, convenient is detached from those who grow and harvest it, many of whom are paid poorly for their labor, and also detached from the land polluted by pesticides and fertilizers. Fast food and convenience food may assuage a certain hunger but they don't even nourish our bodies well much less nurture other deep human needs of companionship, conversation, and community.

Whether it knows it or not, the world is hungry for the ministry of table service. That kind of *diakonia* is nourished by a spirituality of table in the community gathered around the meal that Jesus gave us. It's a meal to which everyone is invited, including those the prophet called the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, the imprisoned, the mourners. It's a meal where we are always challenged to ask, "Who else could be here? Who is missing at this table?" Henri Nouwen has said⁴ that when we gather we eat a little bread, but it is not enough to take our hunger away. We drink a little wine, but it is not enough to take our thirst away. I would add, "We experience a little community, but it is not enough to take our loneliness away." And so, Nouwen says, we are reminded that we have not yet arrived, we are still on the way. There is still more work to do. And we are nourished and encouraged in

that work by the glimpse we have of what the people of God's might look like at the table and by the foretaste we have of the feast to come.

These first two images are ones traditionally pictured as *diakonia*. John Collins in his interesting book *Diakonia--Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*⁵ challenges those traditional pictures. He contends that these pictures come not from the authentic meanings of the Greek word. Rather, he argues, these are misconceptions coming from misinterpretations of the words by German scholars in the first quarter of this century, interpretations which were colored by those scholars' experience with and appreciation for the German deaconesses and deacons. Those German diaconates, you may recall, were given at that time primarily to institutional work with the ill, the aged, the disabled, the poor. Those misinterpretations, Collins states, found their way in the authoritative Bible dictionaries and theological wordbooks. While I do not have the linguistic and historical skills necessary to evaluate Collins' formidable work, I must confess to some suspicion of this Australian Roman Catholic whose agenda seems to be to challenge the growing ecumenical consensus regarding the ministry of all the baptized. And I am suspicious of his total discounting of the more menial and personal aspects of *diakonia* for images that would give a more status-oriented picture of the role. Regardless of what the cognates of the Greek words meant in the centuries around the time of Jesus, it seems to me that Jesus' own example of service and the care that the church from the earliest times gave to those Jesus called "the least of these" would keep the servant image of *diakonia* alive for us. I do think, however, that Collins is right in encouraging us to expand those images to include a few that have not been so common in the popular understanding of *diakonia* in the church.

3. Storyteller

"Tell me how you talk about God, and I will tell you what your *diakonia* is like." So wrote Ulrich Bach nearly twenty-five years ago.⁶ Marcus Borg states the same thing a little differently in his provocative book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. He writes that "there is a strong connection between images of Jesus and images of the Christian life. . . . Our image of Jesus affects our perception of the Christian life in two ways: it gives shape to the Christian life; and it can make Christianity credible or incredible." ⁷ The church has taken its image of Jesus primarily from the Gospels, from the stories gathered and told and written and read about the crucified and resurrected one. These are the stories that give shape and credibility to the Christian life, to our *diakonia*.

The reading of the Gospel has had a privileged place in the worship of the church for it has been seen as "a powerful means of encounter with Christ."⁸ From the fourth century, reading the gospel was seen as a diaconal task. Sometimes the deacon also preached, and

almost always the reading of the gospel was associated with the diaconal role of teacher. The members of the diaconate were entrusted with preparing the candidates for baptism, a education/formation process that was linked to those wonderful gospel stories that are in the Revised Common Lectionary for the Sundays in Lent. And the deaconesses and deacons provided on-going instruction and nurture for the newly baptized, to help them give expression to their discipleship and shape to their Christian life. When the member of the diaconate read the gospel, it was a reminder, a symbol, of that close connection between what we say we believe and how we act.

In the gospels we have stories about Jesus. We also have stories that Jesus told. There we meet Jesus the storyteller who gives us an example to follow and one to whom our diaconal storytelling points. Diaconal storytelling is more than adding a story for comic relief or using one to illustrate a point. Rather diaconal storytelling seeks to touch the hearer more deeply, to give space in the story for the hearers to find themselves, to unleash imagination and memory, to open the possibility for healing, for challenge, for transformation. Such storytelling is powerful. Reading the gospel is one such opportunity for story telling. And when it works the hearers become the tellers and the gospel stories become intertwined with their stories.

And part of the diaconal task of storytelling is not just to tell the Jesus stories--to help the biblical stories come alive in the hearts of people. It is also to help people tell their own stories of their pain and suffering, of their joys and triumphs, of deaths and resurrections, of God at work among them--to bring those stories back to the community for witness, celebration, instruction, and prayer.

In many places in our world, there is no lack of information, but the truth is harder to come by. Whether it is corrupt or oppressive governments that control the news or "Aspin doctors" who interpret all information for political expediency or economic and national self-interests that distort the stories by telling only one side, the effect is the same. The truth of the story is obscured.

All the stories are not "feel good stories" like those found in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. There is also the story that is hard to hear or hard to tell, the truth that is difficult to bear so people try to block it out retreating into some fantasy or to mask it with drugs, alcohol or some other addictions.

It takes time to tell a story and patience to listen to it. It can't be done in ten second sound bites or short video segments, and it can't always be done in English.

Recovering the *diakonia* of storytelling is nurtured by a spirituality that begins in listening. Listening to the biblical story. Luci Shaw writes: “Often as I meditate on the words on the pages of the book in my lap [the Bible] I see pictures in my head or I hear a new meaning in the familiar phrases. I may notice a link between them and the events, circumstances, and relationships that swim every day into my awareness. Waiting there to be recognized are patterns of cause and effect, of comparison and contrast, in which my mind interacts with the thoughts of another human mind; the biblical writer, long dead; and through him (can I believe it?) with the mind of God.”⁹

It seems to me that that mysterious interaction with the mind of God can happen also when we listen to our own lives and when we listen to the stories of our sisters and brothers. The “spirit of the Lord” is upon them and us, too.

4. Doorkeeper/Go-Between.

When the early church was under persecution, the deaconesses and deacons stood at the door when the community gathered. They checked the credentials of those who wanted to come in. They welcomed the worshippers and arranged for hospitable and orderly space for the community to gather. We might say that they were the first greeters and ushers.

Liturgically the deacon announced the movement of the liturgy. Members of the diaconate received the offerings from the people. They served a reconciling role by giving attention to lawsuits or quarrels in the community and by inviting the people to exchange the kiss of peace.¹⁰ They dismissed the congregation after the benediction at the end of the liturgy. The deaconesses and deacons assisted (and sometimes performed) baptism, the rite of initiation into the community.

They stood, as it were, at the boundaries between the church and the world. They were positioned at the edges, some would say the cutting edge. They moved across those boundaries as go-between, as agent, as emissary--from bishop to the community, from God to creation, from church to world. Members of the diaconate carried messages, ran errands, acted on behalf of the one who sent them. They were responsive and mobile and accessible--leading the church more and more into *diakonia* in the world and inviting the world with it longing and pain ever more into the church. It is a beautiful dance.

Here, too, Jesus has shown us the way, taught us the dance. Jesus who was on the boundary between heaven and earth, between God and humanity. Jesus who moved among the people so that they could cry out to him or reach out to touch him. Jesus who ushered the Reign of

God into the fallen creation. Jesus who winsomely welcomed all kinds of people into the circle of God's love.

We might call such *diakonia* today ministries of outreach and hospitality and interpretation and mediation and reconciliation, bringing distant parties together, arranging welcome spaces, making the word come alive in languages that people can understand. It's both taking a stand, on the boundaries, and moving, back and forth.

It's not an easy place to be, on the boundaries, pulled in opposite directions, perhaps seeing the point of view of people on both sides. Most people would rather avoid than mediate in a conflict. To be in the middle is a vulnerable spot.

Many in our world today would rather construct barriers than cross them. In the United States following September 11, I think for many people, all of the flag-waving and patriotism was about establishing a claim a giving a "no trespassing" notice. In the US after September 11, many people stopped traveling and started "nesting," that is, making their homes cozy, safe places. They spent money on bigger TVs and home theater systems, overstuffed furniture, and, of course burgler alarm systems and protective devices for their person and their homes. In such a world, there is no real hospitality; at least not to strangers, only the safe, like-minded folk are welcomed.

The spirituality of this *diakonia* is a spirituality of compassion and detachment. As you may know, in the Hebrew language, the word of compassion comes from the same root as the word for womb. To have compassion is to know that the other person and I were born from the same womb. We come from the same gene pool. It is to know, as Henri Nouwen once said, that nothing human is alien to me. Compassion is to long for the unity, the wholeness, the *shalom* of all humanity, of the whole creation. And it is to keep working from all sides crossing back and forth, wearing the barriers down.

And to be on the move that way requires that we be as unencumbered as possible. Just as Jesus girded himself before he washed feet, tying out of the way whatever would interfere with what he need to do. So we will do well to gird ourselves for the journey and rid ourselves of excess baggage. To travel light, to be responsive, mobile, accessible. Like Hildegard of Bingen, we will seek to be "A feather on the breath of God," ready to go wherever the spirit blows us.

5. Keeper of the Light.

When night fell, it was the task of the servant to light the household lamps. It seems natural that a member of the diaconate should have the task then of blessing and lighting the Pascal

candle at the Easter vigil. That diaconal role goes back to the third or fourth century.¹¹ If you are not familiar with the Easter Vigil, let me give a brief explanation. The service on the eve of Easter begins in darkness. A new fire is lighted. From that the great Pascal candle, a brand new one is lighted. A member of the diaconate carried the candle, light into the darkness in which the people waited, proclaiming, "Christ our light," and then chanting the *Exultet*, the ancient hymn inviting the whole creation to rejoice at Christ's resurrection. The stories of God's work among God's holy people are retold, and then the catechumens are baptized. It is a diaconal role to take the flame from the Pascal candle to light the baptismal candle to be given to the newly baptized. The movement is from the light of the risen Christ to "Let your light shine...."

This kind of *diakonia* is about having the light, bearing the light, being the light and shedding light. This kind of *diakonia* is about hope. It is about knowing that what we see is not what we get. The night does not have the last word. The light shines in the darkness and is not overcome by it. This kind of *diakonia* is about having vision. It keeps the vision alive. And it exposes those places where the vision is distorted or obscured. It calls God's people again and again to return to the life of that vision.

The one who bears the light can sometimes be vulnerable; right out there where people can take pot-shots at you. And of course, some would say that some things are just better kept under cover of darkness. It's okay to expose some other country's human rights violations, but not ours. It's okay to shed light over there but not on my dirty laundry. And for ones light-bearing to have any meaning, it is necessary to risk going into the darkness. It's not always the most popular of ministries.

The spirituality that undergirds this ministry is a prophetic spirituality. It is one that seeks to see with the eyes of God and to speak with the voice of God. It is to see the *shalom*, the wholeness of creation restored. It is to live from that vision, and it is to live toward that vision. It is to take the risk of exposing and calling into question anything that is contrary to that vision. And it is acting to make that vision in the eye of God more and more visible in the realities of human life.

And part of the vision that we in the diaconate see is that this ministry belongs to all the people of God not just to us. Yes, sometimes we do the *diakonia* in the name of the people of God. Sometimes we teach, equip, empower, liberate others for doing this ministry in the world. Always we are sign, living reminders that God calls us all, all the people of God, to *diakonia*.

This *diakonia* spans the whole spectrum from washing feet on bended knee to standing on tip toes and prophetically challenging the principalities and powers. And the spirit, the one spirit that is upon us all, gives us differing gifts for this rich variety of ministry.

Our authority for this ministry comes as we discover and own the charisms, the gifts that the spirit gives. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us! And oh, how good it feels when we are together.

Lutheran Deaconess, E. Louise William, President DOTAC
Valparaiso, Indiana, USA

¹ "Finding Images," pp. 103ff. Edited by Christine Hall. Gracewing Books, Herefordshire UK. 1992. I presented similar material to the Institute of Liturgical Studies at Valparaiso University in 1996. It has been published by the Institute in their Occasional Papers #9, *Grace Upon Grace: Living Bread, Living Water, Living Word*. Valparaiso, Indiana. 2002. pp. 211-221.

² Jaap Van Klinken, *Diakonia--Mutual Helping with Justice and Compassion*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids. 1989. p. 22.

³ Ormond Plater, *Many Servants: An Introduction to Deacons*. Cowley, 1991. p. 38.

⁴ *The Living Reminder*

⁵ John N. Collins. Diakonia--Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources. Oxford, 1990.

⁶ In "Room for all of us to be Free," in Partners in Life: The Handicapped and the Church, Geiko Mueller-Fahrenholz, ed. Geneva, 1979, p. 30, quoted by Jaap Van Klinken, p. 16.

⁷ pp. 1 & 2.

⁸ Lynn, p. 111.

⁹ "The Need to Pay Attention: Darkness, Light, and the Visionary Eye." *Weavings*. Volume XVI, Number 4. July/August 2001. p. 17.

¹⁰ Plater, p. 38, and Jeannine E. Olsen. *One Ministry Many Roles: Deacons and Deaconesses through the Centuries*. Concordia Publishing House, 1992. p. 33.

¹¹ James M. Barnett, The Diaconate--A Full and Equal Order. Seabury, New York. 1981. pp.76-78.