

Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada

Elsie Anne McKee in *Diakonia in the Classical Reformed Tradition* suggests "...diaconal ministers can and should challenge church members to reach beyond what they can presently see or are doing and support them in that broadening vision. [pg112]... others are involved in non traditional diaconal activities [such as] lawyers who defend poor clients, people who serve in non profit organizations which arouse public conscience about militarism or racism or economic injustice or stewardship of the natural world..."[pg 116] ... In the late twentieth century church the diaconate and diaconal ministries may and should differ in notable ways from the classical Reformed tradition, but the later still serves as one useful touchstone . No change of time or space can alter the crucial importance of having a special permanent ecclesiastical office charged with leading the congregation in the corporate [or collective] expression of love for the neighbour, provided that church members do not assume everything can be left to the official diaconate... [pg119]

The above quote, while not exactly where we hope to go in this proposed recommendation, does open the door to look at the work of diaconal ministry as more that work within the congregation. It combines nicely the education, pastoral and service aspects of diaconal ministry to recognition that it belongs to the work on the church in the community, wherever that community may be, whether local or global.

For too long the United Church of Canada has paid too little attention to the need for the work of social action and service to be given the priority it deserves either formally or informally. In fact it seems as if, this work, the primary work of diakonia, is getting less profile each year. Sometimes we call it 'mission' and often limits the work to the contribution of financial resources so that others can do the work. Not to suggest that such is not important, it does not truly engage us in the life of the world where abuse, injustice, and economic and control power continue to dominate.

For example in the United Church of Zambia, diaconal workers are, for the most part appointed [settled or stationed] to local consistories or Presbytery, where their work is to do social action and service within the local communities and within the local churches, trusting that for the most part these are not two different tasks , but one. The diaconal workers are paid by the church to do the real work of diaconal ministry.

It is time for the United Church of Canada to begin recognizing the gifts and training of people in diaconal ministry and to provide space and opportunity for 'non conventional' ministries like working in community ministries such as chaplaincies, work that relates Presbyteries and local congregations to social action and service work that is happening in the community to be recognized and affirmed by the United Church of Canada with [i] a formal acceptance of the position as a valid ministry recognized as years of service in the church [ii] salary and benefits as required paid by the church

Some examples of what might be possible following the suggested format below:

1. A person who works for an NGO in areas to which the church is committed. Such NGOs might include programmes which works with women in abusive situations, programmes which work with prostitutes, programmes which work with street people, programmes which work with people in half way houses. The person may or may not be paid by the NGO. If not paid by the NGO , the church might recognize person as in a valid ministry and might pay the person. If paid by the NGO then the church recognizes ministry and maintains the person on the role of Presbytery, Conference and the pension plan.

2. A person who works in a social agency for another denomination which if recognized by the church maintains the person on the pension plan.

3. A person who free lances with a particular gift or skill and works primarily within the church or within in a recognized social agency. Such a person remain on the role of Presbytery in a recognized ministry.

A possible process for such acceptance would be :

1. Recognition of the position as a valid ministry by either a pastoral charge or a Presbytery and then affirmed by the other courts of the church, with the person being a recognized member of Presbytery, recognizing that this step much be accepted and developed by diaconal workers within the church to find and or develop such ministries and then to assist the church - local to national - to recognize such as a valid ministry. It is not a 'one person' task. Rather it is the task of the whole of Diakonia of the United Church to develop and work on together.

2. Salary and benefits paid by the National Church as one of the important aspects of the church's mission both within Canada and beyond as we follow Susan George to "think globally and act locally as well as to think locally and act globally".

3. Persons employed in such ministries would be bound to engage where ever possible local congregations in the work in which they are engaged. In other words the work of social action and service continues to be both in the community and in the church, encouraging individuals within the congregation or congregations and/or congregations as a whole to be involved in this work.