

## On Engaging the *Diakonia* of all Believers<sup>i</sup>

*Diakonia* is central to fulfilling the church's mission as servant leaders. *Diakonia* is not optional in the Gospel of Jesus Christ; rather it is an essential part of discipleship. *Diakonia* reaches out to all persons created in God's image, and all of God's creation. While *diakonia* begins in unconditional service to neighbor in need, it leads inevitably through advocacy and prophetic proclamation to bear witness in word and deed to God's presence in the midst of our lives.

We are shaped to serve others through worship, where we celebrate God's gift of grace in the Word, water, bread and wine, through which we glimpse the fulfillment of God's promise. In this broken world where sin and injustice abound, God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit shapes us as a gathered community. Thus, we become the voice, hands and feet of Christ and agents of grace for the healing of the world.

All Christians are called through the baptismal covenant to live out *diakonia* through what they do and how they live their daily life in the world. This is the first and most fundamental expression of *diakonia*. Organized expressions of *diakonia* occur at the congregational level, as well as through those who are set apart as ordained deacons. Deacons are to model and lead, by inspiring, empowering, and engaging every baptized person in living out the *diakonia* of all believers in everyday life. Deacons do not – cannot – “do” *diakonia* on behalf of the baptized, but they help to lead all people, including the ordained, into the servant ministry of all believers which is the essence of our baptismal covenant.

Because of the holistic mission of God, *diakonia* is deeply interrelated with *kerygma* (proclamation of the Word) and *koinonia* (sharing at the Table). *Diakonia* is witnessing through deeds. It is rooted in the sharing of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. The mutual sharing inherent in the communion of the Church bears witness in word and deed to the unjust power relations that often are present in some diaconal work, such as between “wealthy givers” and “poor recipients.” In *diakonia* those serving and those served are both transformed; the purpose of *diakonia* is to make Christ's redemptive love known by word and example not to proselytize.

*Diakonia* is not the strong serving the weak, which can lead to paternalism by assuming that some churches are unable to engage in *diakonia* because of their lack of resources or expertise. As Episcopalians, we envision that *diakonia* is part of the calling of all churches, regardless of size and all Christians, regardless of wealth, because we believe that all of God's people, individually, and as communities, are blessed with gifts to share.

We must challenge all theological interpretations that do not take seriously the suffering in the world, a world afflicted with poverty, violence and injustice, and environmental degradation. We must also challenge all theological interpretations that do not take seriously the systems, structures, and powers that foster, or even benefit from, poverty, violence, and injustice, and environmental degradation. As Episcopalians, we are shaped by both an incarnational theology and a theology of the cross. In the incarnation, God's identification with all of humanity, indeed with all of creation, compels us to identify with all of our sisters and brothers, and the environment in which we live. Christ's suffering on the cross compels us to identify especially with those of our sisters and brothers who suffer today, moving beyond politeness and pretense, breaking the silence and risking speaking truth to power, even when this threatens the established order and results in hardship or persecution. This is the heart of the prophetic diaconal calling.

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<sup>i</sup> The board of the Association of Episcopal Deacons and the directors of diaconal formation church-wide are profoundly grateful to the Lutheran World Federation for their statement, *Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World*. This prayerful and profound work has both inspired us and served as the foundation for our statement on behalf of deacons and all who engage in the *diakonia* of all believers, both in The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada. We are especially grateful for the permission of the Lutheran World Federation to adapt their words.