

Florida-Bahamas Synod Parish Deacons Program

A ministry of word and service in the congregation flowing from the office of Word and Sacrament, under direction of the Office of the Bishop

Every human community or movement needs...a "leadership cadre," a pool of persons whose circumstances are so arranged that they are available to serve the community's needs in a way most members cannot...ⁱ

Through most of the church's history, groups or orders, including "deacons," have arisen to serve the faith community's needs. These groups have been distinct from the ordained ministry.

Regarding lay and ordained ministry Luther wrote, *there is no true, basic difference between lay [persons] and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the same spiritual estate, are all truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do.*ⁱⁱ The Lutheran reformers took a *functional* rather than a *hierarchical* view of the one ministry of the church: the priesthood of believers and the ordained ministry. While even the ordained are still part of the priesthood of all believers, the ordained ministry is not derived from the priesthood; it has integrity of its own.

In 1982 the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, meeting in Lima, Peru, adopted a statement of unity entitled *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM)*. Among other things in this historic statement the Christian churches agreed that from the 3rd century CE the threefold expression of ministry existed in the church. These forms, *episcopus*, *presbyter*, and *diakonos*ⁱⁱⁱ expressed three *functions* in serving the office of Word and Sacrament and service to the community.^{iv} Recognizing that in modern Christendom, ministry is expressed in different ways, the statement acknowledged that the three functions remain a unifying sign of the one ministry in its varied forms. Therefore, the statement called for each judicatory within Christendom to develop a way to make the threefold ministry more visible, while respecting respective traditions. In response to BEM, and reflecting the evolving church, the ELCA (Assemble, August, 2016) voted to unify the current Word and Service Rosters (Associates in Ministry, Deaconess, and Diaconal Minister) into one roster of "Ministers of Word and Service", known by the term "Deacon." (members of the Deaconess community may still be called, "Sister"). Note: Ordained clergy will henceforth (01/01/2017) be termed "Ministers of Word and Sacrament."

Also in response to *BEM*, the ELCA, in 1998, adopted *Guidelines Related to Synodically Authorized or Licensed Ministries*. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America recognized the need for synodical ministries providing pastoral or diaconal leadership for a congregation, or other ministry of the church, when needs exist which exceed those that can be met by rostered persons. In other words, the synod parish diaconal ministry, a ministry of the baptized in the Lutheran Church, would help achieve the BEM goal of making the *diaconal function* of ministry more visible, thus making the threefold expression of ministry more visible.

Also in 1998 the Florida-Bahamas Synod adopted a proposal establishing a parish deacons' ministry presented by a bishop appointed task force for just that purpose. Complying with *BEM's* intent, and the ELCA's *Guidelines*, the synod parish deacon program seeks to establish the *diaconal function* within the local congregation, under the direct oversight of the pastor (Office of Word and Sacrament), that affirms both the pastoral and ministry of the baptized in their particular and complimentary functions.^v This synod parish deacon program does not constitute a part of the Office of Word and Sacrament. Rather, it is a ministry of *word and service* flowing from, and solely responsible to, the (pastor) Office of Word and Sacrament. Therefore, those who serve as deacons are neither "junior" pastors, nor "super" laypersons. Also, synod parish deacons are NOT rostered. Neither, per Lutheran theology, do they constitute a separate order in and of themselves.

The Heart of the Synod Parish Deacons Program: The synod parish deacons are of the priesthood of all believers *inwardly compelled* to further express their faith and commitment to service and use their unique gifts in a more focused way. They are *publicly affirmed* by the local pastor and the Bishop's Office in a rite of commission. The parish deacon's work, unless called by the bishop to a specific synodical role, is solely within the congregation at the discretion of the local pastor. The extent of the role performed *as a parish deacon* in the congregation is determined by the pastor. For this reason, the parish deacon serves at the discretion of the pastor while that pastor remains in his/her call in the local congregation. The parish deacon's service is not a congregational ministry. Therefore, the congregation neither approves parish deacons in the congregation nor does the parish deacon report to the congregation or the council. The line of responsibility and accountability runs solely to and from the pastor. This last point is of paramount importance. First, it preserves the historical relationship of the parish deacon to the pastor as one of "attendance" to the episcopate, the traditional functional relationship. Second, the line of responsibility solely to the pastor prevents a fracture in the relationship between the pastor and baptized members, thus putting the parish deacon in the middle. (More on this below).

About the Word diakonia

The word, *diakonia*, is regularly translated in English as: ministry, deacon, service, among other service related meanings. The Florida – Bahamas Synod Parish Deacon Program seeks to reflect the latest research concerning these translations. From 1930 – 1990 the singular understanding of the word *diakonia* in New Testament Greek, was in the domain of humble service. Using the 19th century German deacons as a model, the deacon was representing the role of "humble servant," as in a table waiter^{vi}. However, in 1990 this fundamental understanding was challenged by John Collins.^{vii} Collins broke new ground by researching the use of this word in its ancient context in ancient Greece. His discovery was that the word was commonly used about emissaries, messengers, go-betweens or middlemen, and attendants. That is, a *diakonos* was sent from one place to another to deliver a message from the sender. Further, the deacon carried with him the authority and status of the sender (as an ambassador). In other words, rather than simply an example of a humble servant to the world, the deacon is an attendant who delivers a message from another. In this case the service rendered is to God by taking *God's message* to the world! The basic translation of the word *diakonia*, which includes ministers of Word and Sacrament and Word and Service, is in service *to God* and not simply that of modeling humble service to the world. Certainly, delivering this message of the Gospel may in fact include expressions of humble service, but, Collins convincingly shows it is not the fundamental meaning of the words or functions related to *diakonia*! Collin's research provides profound clarity to the notion of the "Office" of Word and Sacrament, and the ministry of Word and Service that flows from it!

Therefore, the ministry of the synod parish deacon serves a specific function of attendance to the one occupying the Office of Word and Sacrament, and at the same time also renders service to the community, i.e. ministry of the baptized. Thus, the diaconal function *bridges* the ministry of the baptized (to the community) and the ministry of Word and Sacrament (to the congregation). As a ministry of attendance to the Office of Word and Sacrament, the synod parish deacon shares the ministry of the Word as his/her gifts allow, as the pastor assigns. Yet, the deacon is also of the priesthood of all believers and serves the needs of the community, modeling that ministry. In truth, when the minister of Word and Service is not functioning in the Office, he or she is still a part of the priesthood of all believers. Ordination does not, per Lutheran theology, confer a special indelible status upon the person.

Meanings and Uses of diakonia in the ELCA

The various uses derived from the word, *diakonia* can lead to confusion. Below are a few ways the word is used in the ELCA.

ELCA Ministers of Word and Service (Deacons) - are professionally trained, and Consecrated *rostered* leaders of the ELCA, and *called* to serve in the ELCA, synod, and/or congregational expressions of the church. As such, ELCA Deacons are compensated for their service.

Synod Parish Deacons - a program specific to the Florida-Bahamas Synod (and perhaps another synod program as well) as described in this handbook. Parish Synod Deacons are neither *rostered* nor *compensated* as deacons. It is possible that they may be serving on a congregational or synodical staff in another capacity. Parish Synod deacons are not recognized as deacons beyond the synod territory.

diakonia – is a national, independently incorporated, lay school of theology for Lutherans. While it is true that many parish synod deacon candidates may satisfy their educational requirements through this program, it is not the only avenue, and it is not directly related to the synod deacons program (for more see below). There can be some confusion regarding participation and graduation from the diakonia lay school. One misconception is that graduation automatically leads to Commissioning into the Synod Parish Deacons program. One only becomes a Synod Parish Deacon through the process outlined below.

Administration

Overall, the Florida-Bahamas Synod Parish Deacon Program is a synod ministry entirely overseen (episcopally) by the office of the bishop! Yet, it is specifically pastorally connected and congregationally based. A listing of commissioned and active and inactive parish deacons is maintained by the bishop. Because of their unique public function and role parish deacons are held to the same standard as rostered leaders outlined in the document, *“Vision and Expectations,”* and *“Expectations of the Bishop’s Office for Pastors of the Florida-Bahamas Synod.”*

Since the entire Synod Parish Deacons Program reflects the ecclesiastical tradition of the deacon as attendant to the bishop (and later, to the presbyter-pastor, the program is directly administered by the sitting synodical bishop. However, while the bishop’s office maintains oversight of the parish deacons listing-for the sake of good order, this is not meant to imply that there is a direct relationship between the bishop’s office and the individual deacons. Parish Deacons serve the local pastor in their congregations only and do not serve the synodical expression itself. The one exception to this is if a parish deacon is called by the bishop to serve in synod in the *capacity of deacon*.

The Bishop’s Oversight Committee

To administer the Florida-Bahamas Synod Parish Deacons Program under the authority of the ELCA’s *Guidelines Related to Synodically Authorized or Licensed Ministries*, and per the 1998 Synod Council’s mandate, the bishop appoints an oversight committee. The Oversight Committee consists of three clergy, three parish deacons, serving staggered three year terms each. Members may serve two consecutive terms. In addition, one parish deacon candidate (an approved applicant in training), with the approval of the candidate’s pastor, may serve a term of up to two years, or until the candidate is commissioned, whichever comes first. The bishop’s appointed liaison, serves as a permanent member of the Committee. The liaison serves as the bishop’s representative to the Committee. All term members of the committee must be active participants in the Synod Parish Deacons Program. If a pastor ends participation in the program, or a parish deacon’s tenure terminates in a congregation, they would cease serving on the Oversight Committee. Term candidates for the Oversight Committee may be suggested by the committee to the bishop’s liaison for the bishop’s approval. From among the Deacon members of the committee the bishop will appoint a chair and a secretary. The bishop may also appoint advisors to the Committee as the bishop deems necessary.

Responsibilities of the Oversight Committee

The Oversight Committee is not a policy making board. Policy for the Oversight Committee and the Synod Parish Deacons Program is established by the bishop. The Oversight Committee serves as *ambassador* for the Synod Parish Deacons Program. To this end the Oversight Committee has a presence displaying the program at synod assemblies and other communication outlets of the synod, including monitoring the program’s information on the

synod website. Also, it serves to inform, implement and communicate to pastors and parish deacons policies set by the bishop regarding the program.

Specific responsibilities of the Oversight Committee include:

1. keeping an updated listing of participating pastors and parish deacons currently serving, as well as a list of persons who have been synod parish deacons but are currently not serving in congregations as such. It also keeps other documents necessary to administer the program. Electronic copies of all documents must be maintained at the synod office.
 2. serves to keep pastors and parish deacons informed of changes in the “Handbook for Pastors and Parish Deacons.”
 3. receives and reviews applications (submitted by applicants and signed by pastors) to the Synod Parish Deacons program as well as reviews the qualifications of the applicant.
 4. verifies the pastor’s certification that all training requirements have been met, and coordinates dates and times for commissioning parish deacons with the bishop’s office.
 5. plans the annual Synod Parish Deacons Retreat
 6. plans and conducts the required “Table Talk” (an initial orientation session) for applicants and pastors in the program.
 7. informs the bishop of any communications from pastors and/or parish deacons regarding the program, the changed status of parish deacons, or any situations that may arise from the program.
1. The Oversight Committee meeting agenda and tasks will consist of the above-mentioned items.

Procedure for Becoming a Synod Parish Deacon

The journey to becoming a synod parish deacon will follow the procedures below, though some steps may be in a different order:

Discernment- a person perceives an inward call seeking an outward expression: a desire to express his/her faith in a focused and committed public way.

Pastoral endorsement - after discussions with the pastor, either before or after the above step, the pastor decides to endorse the person for candidacy. At this point the pastor may want to begin educating the congregation as to the meaning and roles of synod parish deacons. It is important to show that the parish deacon does not further the distance between pastor and the baptized members, but bridges that gap. Application is made and forwarded on to the bishop’s oversight committee for approval and guidance. Upon approval, the person becomes a Synod Parish Deacon *candidate*.

Fulfillment of educational requirements and/or committee recommendations – This may have already begun even before making application for candidacy. It may be accomplished through individual study with the pastor, or it may take place in several other approved settings including, but not restricted to, the Select Program, Diakonia, or other established regional deacon educational clusters throughout the synod, or approved denominational deacon’s schools, i.e. Episcopal centers. Whatever the avenue of instruction documents of completion should be verified by the pastor and forwarded by the pastor to the oversight committee. Throughout this process it is expected that the pastor will be working with the candidate with regards to liturgical instruction and spiritual formation! Also, it is expected that the pastor will educate the congregation as to the benefits and functions of parish deacons in the congregation.

Table Talk - All candidates are required to attend, at some point in the process, the oversight committee’s Table Talk. Table talks are conversations between the pastor, parish deacon candidate, oversight committee, and other parish deacons and candidates concerning the program and program policies. Questions and concerns about the program are discussed, as well as this guide. Normally, Table Talks are held each year at the annual Synod Parish Deacons’ Retreat.

Oversight Committee Approval - Upon completion of instructional requirements the pastor may forward of the candidate's documents to the Oversight Committee for review and approval.

Commissioning – Once the documents are approved, the pastor and Oversight Committee will coordinate a date for commissioning. It is important that the Chair of the Oversight Committee is involved in this conversation so that a representative of the committee may attend the commissioning and for maintaining an accurate roster. The Bishop, or the Bishop's representative, will officiate at each commissioning. Normally, the commissioning takes place in the parish deacon's home congregation, within the worship service. An order for the commissioning can be downloaded at the synod website. Each parish deacon will receive a deacon's pin from the bishop's office.

Commissioning Participation – For the commission ceremony the pastor may wish to invite other parish deacons to participate. Parish Deacons may vest in the approved alb and deacon's stole, process, and participate in the laying on of hands upon the new parish deacon.

Note: There are times when deacons may also be invited to attend pastors' ordinations and installations, or consecrations of ELCA Deacons. Parish deacons do not to participate in the laying on of hands of rostered leaders.

Vestments - Bishops of the Florida-Bahamas Synod have given approval for deacons to vest in albs and *deacons' stoles*, only. Deacons are not to wear clergy shirts, collars, or any other vestments as these are signs of the rostered ministry. Stoles may be worn at certain synod and congregational events when Parish Deacons are participating in worship events. Parish Deacons do not wear stoles at ordinations or consecrations of ministers of Word and Sacrament or Word and Service. If participating, Parish Deacons may wear the traditional alb at these functions. Also, it is inappropriate for parish deacons to wear stole at Diakonia graduations! As stated above, these programs are not connected to each other.

Terms of Service

Since the Synod Parish Deacon serves at the behest of the pastor the term of service is for as long as the pastor and parish deacon desire. The pastor may, without prejudice, decide to terminate the program or a particular parish deacon's service for any reason. Otherwise, parish deacons' terms are co-terminus with the called pastor. (See the order for thanksgiving of a parish deacon's service on the website). The parish deacon's name is removed from the *active* service list at this time. Notification is given to the Oversight Committee.

Interims - When an interim pastor arrives, parish deacons in the congregation have already ceased to function in this particular capacity. It may be that an interim may wish for parish deacons to resume functioning under his or her oversight. The interim may make such a request to the bishop's office. If the bishop consents, in a particular situation, the parish deacon would once again cease his/her functions at the conclusion of the interim pastor's service. Notification is given to the Oversight Committee.

New Pastor - When a new pastor is called and installed as pastor of a congregation he/she may desire that the parish deacons resume service. In such cases the pastor may publically bless the parish deacon's service and the parish deacon(s) may resume their function under the pastor's oversight. Notification is given to the oversight committee.

Mobility

- A. As a "cadre" of lay leaders" within the synod one of the hopes of the program is that parish deacons who move from one congregation to another be able to serve as soon as possible. He/She may serve again as a parish deacon under the new pastor's oversight, if the new pastor so desires. The pastor should request a *commission* date for the parish deacon to begin service in the new congregation. The pastor and the Oversight Committee will coordinate the date for the commissioning. Notification is given to the Oversight Committee.

- B. When a parish deacon ceases to officially serve as a parish deacon in a congregation (for any reason), and later resumes service in that same congregation, re-commissioning is not necessary. The pastor, however, may wish to recognize the resumption of service with a prayer of blessing during a worship service. Notification is given to the Oversight Committee.
- C. When a parish deacon moves to another synod he/she may consult with the congregation's pastor concerning that synod's ministries and rules of ELCA Synodically Authorized Ministry. The oversight committee can provide proof of instruction and service in the Florida-Bahamas Synod if requested. **D.** Persons moving to Florida congregations from other synods who have served in such authorized ministries may ask their pastor to apply and will be evaluated for the Synod Parish Deacons program on a case by case basis. Notification is given to the Oversight Committee.

Functions of Parish Deacons

A pastor may desire from one to several parish deacons within the congregation. Functions are determined by the pastor in his/her specific setting and the varied gifts of the particular parish deacon. Under the general guidance of the "Word and Service" theme the various roles of the parish deacon could be outreach oriented as well as in congregational positions such as teaching, administration parish nurse, etc. Parish deacons are models of the ministry of the baptized, yet, because of their specialized training parish deacons may represent the pastoral office in certain situations such as visiting the sick and homebound.

Role of the Parish Deacon in the Liturgy

Generally, the function of the parish deacon in liturgy will be determined by the pastor per the needs of the congregation and the specific gifts of the person. Yet, the symbol of the parish deacon's "place" within the whole ministry of the congregation is best expressed in the Sunday liturgy. The liturgical role of all deacons is as "attendant to the presiding minister". The pastor may "share" some of the liturgical duties rightfully carried out by the pastor. This may involve setting the table, resetting after the distribution, assisting the pastor by tending to the missal (turning pages, etc.) as the pastor presides at the liturgy. In some cases, the parish deacon may remove the pastor's chasuble (if used) before the post communion. If the pastor normally reads the Gospel this may be delegated to the parish deacon as well. Care should be taken that the parish deacon shares the Pastor's duties and does *not* replace duties normally delegated to the baptized: lector, communion assistant, etc. In this way, the liturgy *literally* reflects the roles of priest, deacon, and the baptized; functions within the one ministry of the church. Parish deacons may also be trained to lead other liturgical offices which are not Eucharistic worship liturgies. They may also lead or assist in funerals. A parish deacon may not officiate at church weddings.

Parish Deacons as Celebrants - In lieu of paying a supply pastor, deacons are often requested to supply in worship for the pastor when the pastor is absent. This is acceptable when an ELCA or full communion partner pastor presides over the Eucharist or when communion is not celebrated. It is the teaching and policy of the ELCA that presiding at Eucharist is properly the function of ministers of Word and Sacrament.^{viii} It is the minister of Word and Sacrament who issues the invitation to those in attendance to come to the table of the Lord. It is proper, however, that communion be carried from the altar to the house for distribution to homebound and hospitalized members immediately as is possible following a worship service. Baptisms, too, are the proper function of Word and Sacrament ministry.

Counseling - Unless the person is a licensed therapist in the state of Florida parish deacons do not enter into counseling relationships with other persons. If licensed, the parish deacon is then functioning as a therapist and not as a parish deacon! The two roles should not be confused in a congregational setting. This form of professional counseling is not done on church property. In the Synod Parish Deacons program, there is no confidentiality between members and a parish deacon. The parish deacon always serves under the oversight of the pastor. Parish deacons serve the diaconal function in their home congregation only, unless specifically called by the bishop to serve in a synodical capacity in another congregation. "Loaning" parish deacons to another congregation creates the misunderstanding that there exists an "order" of parish deacons in the synod and succumbs to the

notion of the parish deacon as “super-laity” or “minor clergy.” Therefore, the practice of “loaning” deacons to another congregation is precluded.

Parish Deacons and the Congregation Council and Call Committee - Obviously, leaders in a congregation are called to serve on council. These leaders may also desire to serve as synod parish deacons. However, the nature of the relationship between pastor and parish deacon is that the parish deacon is totally accountable to the pastor. The nature of the relationship between pastor and council is different than pastor and parish deacon. A potential conflict of interest might arise when a parish deacon also serves on the council. Thus, a person serving as both parish deacon and council member is inappropriate. Likewise, a person serving as both parish deacon and on the Call Committee is inappropriate.

Pastor and Parish Deacon Relationship - In the unlikely event of a conflict between the pastor and parish deacon, it is the pastor’s sole right to dismiss the parish deacon from functioning as a parish deacon immediately. The synod parish deacon serves at the behest of, and under the oversight of, the pastor. The pastor is responsible for the accountability of the parish deacon. It is absolutely inappropriate for the parish deacon to question or challenge the pastor’s decision, or to attempt to take the matter to the congregation council or another committee of the congregation. A parish deacon who inappropriately, or publicly, challenges the pastor will be in jeopardy of reprimand from the Bishop’s Office and could lose his or her privilege to be considered as a parish deacon in another setting in the future. Notification is given to the Oversight Committee.

For complete information and forms please visit <http://www.fbsynod.com/for-leaders/>

ⁱ Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and its Confessional Writings*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976) p.122

ⁱⁱ Robert Schultz, ed., *Luther’s Works*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-), p.129

ⁱⁱⁱ *episcopus* - office of oversight (bishop), *presbyter*-office of Word & Sacrament (ordained ministry), and *diakonos*-local congregational servants (deacons).

^{iv} See BEM commentaries, 13, 21, 31.

^v The theological underpinning for the Florida-Bahamas Synod Deacons Program is based upon the doctoral research of the Rev. Dr. Jon Keiser, (*Developing a Diaconal Ministry in a Particular Theology of Discipleship at Gethsemane Lutheran Church*), ©1993, Drew University, Madison, NJ.

^{vi} *diakonia: A Reinterpretation of the Ancient Sources*, Oxford Press, 1990.

Collin’s research also showed that in Greece the table waiter was a position of honor as the waiter represented the host at table! Thus, the notion of humble waiter is a modern one.

^{vii} *diakonia: A Reinterpretation of the Ancient Sources*, Oxford Press, 1990.

^{viii} *The Use of the Means of Grace, A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament, Principal 40*, p 45. Adopted by Church wide Assembly August 19, 1997.

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