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Florida-Bahamas Synod Deacon 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…* *[[1]](#endnote-1)*

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.[[2]](#endnote-2)* 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, *episcope`, presbyter, and diakonos[[3]](#endnote-3)* expressed three *functions* in serving the office of Word and Sacrament and service to the community.[[4]](#endnote-4) Recognizing that in modern Christendom, ministry is expressed in different ways, the statement acknowledged that the three functions still 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*, the ELCA, in 1998, adopted G*uidelines Related to Synodically Authorized or Licensed Ministries*. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America recognized the need for synodical ministriesproviding 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 diaconal ministry, a lay ministry 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 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 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 lay ministries in their particular and complimentary functions.[[5]](#endnote-5) This synod 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. Neither, according to Lutheran theology, do they constitute a separate order in and of themselves.

**The Heart of the Synod Deacon Program:** The deacons are lay people *inwardly compelled* to further express their faith and commitment to service and use their unique gifts in a more focused way. They are *publically affirmed* by the local pastor and the Bishop’s Office in a rite of blessing or consecration. The 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 deacon* in the congregation is determined by the pastor. For this reason the deacon serves at the pleasure of the pastor while that pastor remains in his/her call in the local congregation. The deacon’s ministry is not a congregational ministry. Therefore the congregation neither approves deacons in the congregation nor does the deacon report to the congregation or the council.The line of responsibility and accountability runs solely to the pastor. This last point is of paramount importance. First, it maintains the relationship of the deacon to the pastor as one of “attendance to the episcope`, the traditional functional relationship. Second, the line of responsibility solely to the pastor prevents a fracture in the relationship between the ordained and lay ministries thus putting the deacon in the middle. (More on this below).

**About the WordDiakonia**

The word, *diakonia,* is regularly translated in English as ministry, deacon, service, among other service related meanings. The Florida – Bahamas Synod 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 seen as representing the role of “humble servant,” as in a table waiter[[6]](#endnote-6). However, in 1990 this fundamental understanding was challenged by John Collins.[[7]](#endnote-7) 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 in reference to 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 and deacons, 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 ordained ministry serving the “Office” of Word and Sacrament!

Therefore, the ministry of the deacon serves a specific function of attendance to the one occupying the Office of Word and Sacrament i.e. the ordained minister, and at the same time also renders service to the community, i.e. lay ministry. Thus, the diaconal function *bridges* the lay ministry (to the community) and the ordained ministry (to the congregation). As a ministry of attendance to the Office of Word and Sacrament, the deacon shares the ministry of the Word as his/her gifts allow and as the pastor assigns. Yet, as a layperson, the deacon is also of the priesthood of all believers and serves the needs of the community, modeling the ministry of the laity. In truth, when the ordained minister is not functioning in the Office of Word and Sacrament he or she is also a part of the priesthood of all believers. Ordination does not, according to 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.

**Diaconal Ministers-** are professional *rostered* leaders of the ELCA, trained and certified by the ELCA, and called to serve in the synod and/or congregational expressions of the church. As such, Diaconal Ministers are compensated for their service.

**Synod Deacons-** a program specific to the Florida-Bahamas Synod (and perhaps other synod program as well) as described in this handbook. 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. 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 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; that is automatically leads to consecration into the synod deacon program. One only becomes a synod deacon through the process outlined below.

**Administration**

Overall, the Florida-Bahamas Synod Deacon Program is a synod ministry entirely overseen (episcope`) by the office of the bishop! Yet, it is pastorally and congregationally based. A listing of consecrated and active and inactive deacons is maintained by the bishop. Because of their unique public function and role 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 deacon 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 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. 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 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 Deacons Program under the authority of the ELCA’s G*uidelines Related to Synodically Authorized or Licensed Ministries* and according to the 1998 Synod Council’s mandate the bishop appoints the oversight committee. The Oversight Committee consists of three clergy, three deacons, serving staggered three year terms each. Members may serve two consecutive terms. In addition, one 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 consecrated, 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 Deacons Program. If a pastor ends participation in the program, or a 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.

**Responsibilities of the Oversight Committee**

The Oversight Committee is not a policy making board. Policy for the Oversight Committee and the Synod Deacons Program is established by the bishop. The Oversight Committee serves as *ambassador* for the synod 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 deacon programs information on the synod website. Also it serves to inform, implement and communicate to pastors and 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 deacons currently serving, as well as a list of persons who have been synod deacons but are currently not serving in congregations as deacons. 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 deacons informed of changes in the “Handbook for Pastors and Deacons.”

3. receives and reviews applications (submitted by applicants and signed by pastors) to the synod 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 consecrations of deacons by the bishop’s office.

5. plans the annual Synod 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 deacons regarding the program, the changed status of deacons, or any situations that may arise from the program.

The Oversight Committee meeting agenda and tasks will consist of the above mentioned items.

**Procedure for Becoming a Synod Deacon**

The journey to becoming a synod 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 deacons. It is important to show that the deacon does not further the distance between pastor and laity, but actually 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 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 a number of 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 deacons program in the congregation.

**AIMS and Diaconal Ministers-** Associates in Ministry and Diaconal Ministers are considered to have completed all requirements for the synod deacon program if they desire and their congregational pastor approves participation.

**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, deacon, oversight committee, and other 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 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.

**Consecration –**Once the documents are approved, the pastor and Oversight Committee may coordinate a date for consecration. The Bishop, or the Bishop’s designee, will officiate at each consecration. Normally, consecrations take place in the deacon’s home congregation, either within the worship service or in a special ceremony of consecration. An order of consecration can be downloaded at the synod website. Each deacon will receive a deacon’s pin from the bishop’s office.

**Consecration Participation** – For consecrations the pastor may wish to invite other deacons to participate in the ceremony. Deacons may vest in the approved alb and deacon’s stole, process, and participate in the laying on of hands upon the new deacon.

Note: There are times when deacons may also be invited to attend pastors’ ordinations and installations. Deacons are not to participate in the laying on of hands of rostered leaders.

**Vestments** - Previously, 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 ordained ministry.

**Terms of Service**

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

**Interims-**When an interim pastor arrives, deacons in the congregation have already ceased to function as deacons. It may be that an interim may wish for deacons to resume functioning under his or her oversight. The interim may make such a request to the bishop’s office. In the event that the bishop consents, in a particular situation, the deacon would once again cease his/her functions at the conclusion of the interim pastor’s service.

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

**Pastoral Vacancy –** Where there is a pastoral vacancy, synod deacon candidates, even if they have completed all the requirements for consecration, may not be consecrated until the vacancy is filled and the pastor approves of the candidate. Such a consecration would sever the pastoral/deacon relationship and accountability, giving the false impression that the deacon is a congregational appointee, independent of the pastor.

**Mobility-A.** As a cadre` of lay leaders within the synod one of the hopes of the program was that deacons who move from one congregation to another to serve as soon as possible. He/She may serve again as a deacon under the new pastor’s oversight, if the new pastor so desires. The pastor may then request a *consecration* date for the deacon to begin service in the new congregation. **B.** When a deacon moves to another synod the deacon may consult with the congregation’s pastor concerning that synod’s ministries and rules of authorized lay service. The oversight committee can provide proof of instruction and service in the Florida-Bahamas Synod if requested. **C.** Persons moving to Florida congregations from other synods who have served in authorized lay ministries may ask their pastor to apply and will be evaluated for the synod deacons program on a case by case basis.

**Functions of Deacons**

A pastor may desire from one to several deacons within the congregation. Functions are determined by the pastor in his/her specific setting and the varied gifts of the particular deacon. Under the general guidance of the “Word and Service” theme the various roles of the deacon should be public and outward oriented as well as in congregational positions such as teaching, administration parish nurse, etc. Care should be taken, however, not to limit to deacons functions that are appropriate to all lay persons. Deacons are models of lay ministry as well. However, because of their specialized training deacons may represent the pastoral office in certain situations such as visiting the sick and homebound.

**Role of the deacon in the Liturgy**

Generally, the function of the deacon will be determined by the pastor according to the needs of the congregation and the specific gifts of the person. Yet, the symbol of the deacon’s “place” within the whole ministry of the congregation is best expressed in the Sunday liturgy. The liturgical role of 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 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 deacon. Care should be taken that the deacon shares the Pastor duties and does *not* replace the duties normally delegated to laity (lector, communion assistant, etc.). In this way the liturgy *literally* reflects the roles of priest, deacon, and lay ministerial functions within the one ministry of the church. Deacons may also be trained to lead other offices which are not Eucharistic worship liturgies. They may also lead or assist in funerals. A deacon may not officiate at church weddings.

**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 communion is not celebrated. It is the teaching and policy of the ELCA that presiding at Eucharist is properly the function of the ordained ministry.[[8]](#endnote-8) It is the ordained minister 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 the ordained ministry.

**Counseling**-Unless the person is a licensed therapist in the state of Florida deacons should not enter into a counseling relationship with other persons. Even when licensed, the deacon is then functioning as a therapist and not a deacon! The two roles should not be confused in a congregational setting. In the synod deacons program there is no confidentiality between members and a deacon. The deacon always serves under the oversight of the pastor.

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” deacons to another congregation creates the misunderstanding that there exists an “order” of deacons in the synod and succumbs to the notion of the deacon as “super-laity” or “minor clergy.” Therefore, the practice of “loaning” deacons to another congregation is precluded.

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

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

1. Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and its Confessional Writings,* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976) p.122 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Robert Schultz, ed., *Luther’s Works,* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-), p.129 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *episcope`*- office of oversight (bishop), *presbyter*-office of Word & Sacrament (ordained ministry), and *diakonos*-local congregational servants (deacons). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See BEM commentaries, 13, 21, 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *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. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Diakonia: A Reinterpretation of the Ancient Sources,* Oxford Press, 1990. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *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. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)