

# to be a servant:

# The Diaconate

by The Very Rev Dr. Dan Alger

In February, Bishop Steve and Bishop Alan ordained three members of our Redeemer family (Buddy Hocutt, Melissa Lewkowicz, and Leah Wall) as new deacons to serve the church, bringing our total number of deacons to six (including Ashley Davis, Steven Hebbard, and Ryan Kildoo). It was a wonderful evening of worship and fellowship! Different Christian denominations use the term deacon in a variety of ways, so perhaps you are wondering how the Anglican Church understands this order, and how these new deacons will serve at our pro-cathedral.

Anglicans understand Scripture to define three orders of ordained ministry, each with different callings and responsibilities: deacons, priests, and bishops. Every priest is first a deacon and every bishop is first a priest. When Bishop Alan was consecrated at our church a few months ago, we presented him with a bishop's ring on which was inscribed, "Always a deacon." No matter the amount of responsibility or position bestowed upon them through ordination, every Christian is a servant. For this reason, the diaconate is an amazingly important order. Deacon comes from the Greek *diakonos*, which means "servant." Deacons are the embodiment of servanthood—service to Christ, service to the church, service to the poor, service at the Communion Table, service to the world. Deacons represent who we should all be in character, in devotion, and in function. We never move above or beyond our status as servants, for as Jesus said, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:34).

Although not explicitly called deacons, many believe that the first deacons were ordained in Acts 6. The Apostles were

overwhelmed with their preaching ministry while simultaneously overseeing the mercy efforts of the church. Eventually they came to the conclusion that they needed help: "It is unacceptable for us to neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, brothers, select from among you seven men confirmed to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will appoint this responsibility to them and will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (vs 2-4). The Apostles were not saying that waiting on tables was below them or of lesser importance—just the opposite is true. They had a particular ministry to preach and pray and lead, and they did not want the essential role of physical service to be overlooked, so they asked the church to name some of their best to official roles of service. These people, including Stephen and six others, were presented to the Apostles who laid hands on them to commission them for this special role. Paul would later define the character requirements of deacons in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Today, candidates go through a multi-year process of training, prayer, examination, and discernment in order to be vetted for the role of deacon. These men and women are to be icons of the Christian servant.

The Ordinal (the section of the Book of Common Prayer containing the liturgy for the ordination of a deacon) outlines some specific areas where deacons are charged to serve. They are to humbly serve to strengthen the church by reading the Gospel, catechizing, assisting the priest in the worship services, attending to the setting of the Communion Table, guiding the prayers of the church, and being active in mission by helping the church interpret the needs of the world.

I find this line of the Ordinal particularly moving: "It is the deacon's office to encourage and equip the household of God to care for the stranger, to embrace the poor and helpless, and to seek them out, so that they may be relieved." Through the example and effect of their service, deacons reveal the person and work of Jesus, as he said of himself, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28).

The order of the diaconate is different from that of priest or bishop in that it is not a role of headship. In other words, they are specifically set aside to serve, not to bring spiritual oversight to a church. Deacons do not lead churches, except in temporary situations as deemed appropriate by the bishop. Deacons do not focus on the ministry of preaching as one of their primary roles, although they do preach from time to time as asked. Deacons also do not preside over the Eucharist, for which the authority is given only to the priest or bishop. Christ was an example of both authority and submission and the three orders of ordained ministry in the church seek to be examples of both. Of course, deacons have significant influence and have all the authority that every Christian has in Christ as a part of the priesthood of all believers, but in order to give them space for focusing on the work of physical service, they are not tasked with the deep responsibility of shepherding a church. This does not make them lesser. In the economy of God's Kingdom, it is the servants who are to be

celebrated. Deacons are a full and equal order and profoundly important to the life of the church.

Here at Redeemer, some of our deacons are volunteers with jobs outside of the church and some have specific areas of ministry responsibility on our staff, but their role is not confined to any one area. When a person is ordained to the diaconate, they are a gift to the entire church. You will see our deacons serving liturgically in various ways, such as setting the Communion Table, guiding our acolytes, and reading the Gospel. They will assist in the pastoral care of our church and will bring prayer and healing to those in need. When you need special attention from your church, don't be surprised to see one of our faithful deacons show up at your door. From time to time, you will hear them preach, especially at our monthly weekday Feast Day services here at the pro-cathedral. They will also assist in teaching some of our catechesis classes, serving on our prayer teams, leading specific initiatives, and simply loving the church and the world we are called to reach.

The men and women who are called to be deacons in the church and serve here at Redeemer are gifts to us. They love Jesus and they love you. You can trust them, call upon them, and receive their service. They have taken vows as servants of Jesus Christ and servants to you. May we love them well as we are well-loved by them.

