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Prophetic Voice  
of the Deacon

by

Susanne Watson Epting



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271 North Main Street  
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## Prophetic voice of the deacon

by Susanne Watson Epting

*Susanne Watson Epting is Executive Director of the North American Association for the Diaconate (NAAD). This paper was delivered at the 2007 meeting of the Ecumenical Network for the Diaconate (TEND), October 19, 2007 in Rosemont, Illinois.*

In the fall of 2005, I facilitated a weekend for deacons in the Diocese of Mississippi on “Realizing the Prophetic Voice.” In the spring of 2006 when our Association hosted its annual formation directors’ and archdeacons’ conference, the subject participants most wanted to address was “prophetic voice.” The thoughts that I share here have been reworked from the gathering in Mississippi, and from two ecumenical conferences on prophetic voice.<sup>1</sup> In fact, I believe that this is something to which we share a call, cross-denominationally, particularly with deacons and deaconesses in the United Methodist Church (UMC) and diaconal ministers and deaconesses in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

Recent interest in this topic signifies something very important about who we are becoming. In part it may be a sign of the times. Not unlike the prophets of old, we face times of tumult, division, uncertainty — times similar to those in which God invited prophetic voices to articulate clear alternatives — to articulate God’s vision in the midst of a groaning creation.

But I also think the reality of “prophetic voice” is a result of expressions of the diaconate that not only provide direct service, but that invite others to diaconal ministry, invite friendship with the poor and look for the *roots* of injustice. In fact, I believe that this interpretive role and prophetic voice can be one of our greatest gifts to the church. It’s also a role that I’m not sure the church always remembers is part of our call.

For example, we know that if we say the words “deacon, or deaconess or diaconal minister,” we — and others around us think of people who serve, primarily on the margins of the church and the world, and particularly with those we perceive to be in some “need.” For me, over lots of years, those margins included special education, legislative advocacy, and HIV and AIDS related ministry. So several years ago when I was invited to become an assistant to the bishop and, at the same time, to assume some significant national leadership roles, I found myself sent right into the heart of the “institution.” I wondered about that and struggled with it.

In fact, it was difficult enough that I called together a discernment group to help me see whether and how I was still being true to my ordination vows. I no longer knew who

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<sup>1</sup> The first of these ecumenical conferences was held in Minnesota in October of 2006 with the sponsorship of the ELCA Diaconal Minister Community, the Community of ELCA Deaconesses, the Lutheran Deaconess Association, the United Methodist Church’s Division on Ordained Ministry, the North American Association for the Diaconate and the Office of the Deputy for Ecumenical and Inter-religious relations at the Episcopal Church. The second was The Ecumenical Network for the Diaconate (TEND) held in Rosemount, IL on October 19, 2007.

was sleeping under the bridge, or whether needs were being met among those with HIV and AIDS. However, the group helped me understand that, having the diaconate as my primary lens, I didn't leave those concerns behind. Rather they were always in my mind as I looked at how the church conducted her business and approached her mission and ministry in the big picture.

### **Prophetic Call**

Indeed in tracing back over the years, I've come to understand that part of the call for me, consistently, has been to be present as God transforms the *church*, and to serve as a willing *agent* in that transformation. I've come to understand that no matter what form the tangible expressions of diaconal ministry take — the tangible expressions like feeding and housing programs, or other specialized ministries — there is an important charge that we hear at ordination as Episcopal deacons — a charge that I believe is the very grounding of our call to realize and exercise a prophetic voice. That is, "you are to interpret to the church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world."<sup>2</sup>

In preparing for ecumenical gatherings I've done a little research on the United Methodist ordination service and the ELCA service of consecration for deaconesses and diaconal ministers. Indeed this is something we share.

Among other things in the United Methodist Church, a deacon is called "to interpret to the church the world's hurts and hopes." And in the ELCA the Church calls diaconal ministers and deaconesses "to speak for the needs of God's world to the church." Our charge to interpretive and prophetic voice cuts across denominational lines and offers the gift of shared call.

There is something else we share in common. All of those rites are placed in the context of the assembly, and remind us that we are to be leaders in the midst of the whole laos. It reminds all the gathered that just as we believe in the priesthood of all believers, we believe in the diakonia, or Christ-like service to which we are called at baptism.

For those of us in the Episcopal Church the timing of this most recent renewal of the diaconate has coincided with the renewal of our understanding of the centrality of baptism. I think that may well be similar between our denominations. We all have baptismal covenants and we all have reminders in our ordination and consecration services that, while called to be leaders, we all share in Christ's ministry. I think that's very significant when we talk about diaconal ministry along with what we've come to talk about so much in the church – the ministry of all the baptized. The late Bishop George Harris (who before he retired was bishop in Alaska), was a mentor and friend who encouraged me to consider the implications of this. He often pointed out that he suspected that the most recent renewal of the diaconate and the concurrent strengthening of a theology of ministry rooted in baptism might well have made deacons more aware, from the time of discernment forward, of the gifts of all of God's people and of the need to be developers of diaconal ministry in others.

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<sup>2</sup> Book of Common Prayer, page 543

While the Episcopal Church began its renewal of this historic order a little earlier than did the UMC and the ELCA, our three denominations were part of many shared conversations in the 1980's about the renewal of the order, and our churches were dealing with many of the same issues around baptismal ministry.

As I think back over the years since I began my journey toward being a deacon, it is clear to me that, as one of my deacon colleagues has suggested, "We have seen far more than a beginning of the restoration of the historic diaconate; we have seen the beginning and development of various concepts of ministry; many thinkers are beginning to come to grips with the fact that we are going to have to come up with new ways of being church if we are to continue to grow and capture the minds [and hearts] of 21<sup>st</sup> Century people." And then he asked, "If deacons are truly the bridge between the church and the world, are we also the bridge between a church that is somewhat stuck in the old ways of doing things and a world that has journeyed light years away from the mindset of Thomas Cranmer's time?"<sup>3</sup> We might well substitute that name with Wesley or Luther.

I think we are. I even think we're asked to be a bridge between a church that is stuck, and a church that is moving forward; a church that is anxious about her survival, and a church into which the Spirit's breath is blowing vibrant new life.

### **A Changing Church**

More than thirty years ago, early in that time of renewal, there were some patterns that I suspect we might have shared in each of our denominations. Early on we frequently concentrated on the question, "What is your diaconal ministry?" We thought about the diaconate primarily as ministry in the soup kitchen or the clinic or the homeless shelter or the prison. We defined ourselves over and over again as servants. Indeed that is a part of who we are, the ones on the margins, and the ones who seek to serve. But for all of those things we do, and all of those things we invite others to do, that is not our only definition. We do not promise, when we stand before the assembly, only to visit shut-ins or to cook meals or to sit with those addicted to drugs.

We promise to *interpret* to the church, the needs, concerns and hopes of the world. We ask the church to enter life's wounds. We ask God's people to join with us as we look to be the church outside its walls. And as our most beloved colleague Deacon Ormonde Plater has said, "We stir up the dust of a musty old church. We break down the hegemony between two monochrome parties called lay and clerical. Our role is not only to make holy trouble. We are ordained to be leaders in a laos of great vitality and variety." Ormonde goes on to say, "This is why I don't like the word 'servant' as a definition of a deacon. In our culture it suggests an inferiority that is unscriptural and untraditional."<sup>4</sup>

Think about it. I'd be very surprised if this is not a universal experience: Someone sees a deacon or a deaconess, or a diaconal minister cleaning up after a meeting, or offering to be helpful in some other way and has said, "After all, that's a deacon's work!" That is

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<sup>3</sup> Deacon Dutton Morehouse is the editor of *Diakoneo*, the newsletter of the North American Association for the Diaconate.

<sup>4</sup> From personal correspondence.

very nearly always said with a smile. But I sometimes wonder if that's not really what they, and we, let ourselves think. When we talk about the servant nature of Christ, or the servant nature of Christ's church, we are not talking about a mere cleanup detail.

One of the symbols common to the diaconate between our denominations is the basin and the towel. They are more prominent in the ordination and consecration services in the UMC and the ELCA. But we do talk about them in the Episcopal Church as symbols that deacons claim. But what kind of service do they point to? Surely not a mere cleanup detail.

Jesus told Peter, as he knelt to wash his feet, "Peter, I know you don't understand. But unless I do this, you have no part in me." Jesus proceeded to wash Peter's feet — not only Peter's, but all the disciples — and perhaps the most powerful image for me is that of Jesus washing the feet of Judas, of the very person who would betray him. I think we often forget about the *authority* of the basin and the towel. Jesus gave them to us as new symbols of power, of love, of mutuality. This foot washing was not a sentimental farewell. It was a final act that was loaded, literally loaded, with new meaning about where God's power really lies. It is a power, grounded in God's love, that engages with the enemy, engages with those who disagree. It does not enter into servitude, but offers mutuality and engagement.

And that is what we seek to claim as deacons, and deaconesses and diaconal ministers. That is what we seek to hold before the people of God as we invite them to exercise their own diakonia, to kneel before friends and strangers *and* betrayers in daily life, and to claim the power of the basin and the towel. To encourage engagement with those who disagree, rather than finding a way to exercise power over them. If this is at the heart of who we are, it would seem a constant call to question the meaning and use of power — not an automatic or thoughtless challenge, but a constant question about how power is used in our church and our world.

### **Where is the Power?**

Early in the days of talking about the ministry of the baptized and sometimes even recently, I have heard clergy describe how theirs is to give the power away, to give the ministry away. Theirs, they say, is to get out of the way and let ministry happen. But the deacon in me always wants to say, "It is not our power to give away. It is not our ministry to give away. It is Christ's ministry. It is not up to anyone to hand it out or to get out of the way." It is, I believe, about being present in a new way.

It is about being willing to recognize and honor the gifts in each person. Rather than handing out prescribed forms of ministry, I think God asks us, as leaders in the church, to be companions who affirm and bless ministry that is already happening, as well as to call forth new ministry and help match gifts and call. I think God asks us, as leaders in the church, never to tell people what they ought to be doing...never...without caring enough to find out how people walk with God *daily*, how the faithful who make up our congregations and ministering communities exercise ministry *daily*; only after that can we hope, without presumption or pretense, to strengthen and build on those gifts.

### **Gifts for Ministry**

Too often the temptation for clergy and lay people alike is to allow the needs of the institutional church to be primary in defining what it means to be a minister, so being proactive about recognizing the ministry of others in daily life is sometimes itself a prophetic action. If the diaconate is about servant ministry and leadership, I believe it is the kind of leadership that calls for rethinking how we exercise power on every level in every circle. It means examining ourselves and being open to the power that waits for our sisters and brothers to claim, the power that lies in weakness, in Christ's death and resurrection.

Honoring those gifts means looking for, expecting to find, and celebrating our discoveries in the stranger, in those on the margins we would ask to be our companions. And it means honoring the gifts, interpreting the hopes to a vital and vibrant and diverse people of God. That is what the community asks us to do on its behalf. That is the part of who we are that is interpretive and prophetic. And at this point in the church's history I think we are called, not only to invite others into ministry beyond the church's walls, but to ask the church to look at her very structure and to create, as Gordon Cosby has suggested, "a structure which does not isolate the poor<sup>5</sup> while serving them, but recognizes that the poor are true leaders and works alongside them in their struggle for a just world. A structure that provides the opportunity for the privileged and deprived, rich and poor to be together." And then he adds,

*"A structure which serves the poor is one thing; a structure which serves the poor while evoking their gifts and leadership and nourishing genuine friendships is quite different."*<sup>6</sup>

"You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world."

"You are to speak for the needs of God's world to the church."

"You are to interpret to the church the world's hurts and hopes."

Over the years many of us have described ourselves as a bridge between the church and the world, interpreting between the two, linking them. That is true. But the focus in this charge is very clear. You are to interpret *to the Church* the needs, concerns and hopes of *the world*. Clear. Directive. One way. And yet despite this clarity, I suspect that this may be the one charge for which many of us were least prepared in our formation programs. I also suspect that this charge may be the one the larger church tends to. Nor are those in the congregation, who naturally do this kind of interpreting, often affirmed or strengthened through adult learning programs or celebrations of ministry.

Rather I suspect that many of us may have been caught in the what-is-your-diaconal-ministry syndrome. As mentioned earlier, we've heard that question so often from commissions on ministry, vestries, councils, bishops and members of the congregation that our call to be interpreters and prophetic voices may have been eclipsed. You see, what they wanted to hear were answers like, "Prison ministry," or "Anti-racism education," or some other identifiable social ministry. What they did not, and perhaps still do not expect to hear, however, is "To serve as interpreter and prophetic voice to

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<sup>5</sup> [or, I would add, anyone who has been marginalized]

<sup>6</sup> Servant Leaders, Servant Structures, by Elizabeth O'Connor, p. 86. Published by the Servant Leadership School, Washington DC, 1991.

the church,” or “To expand the meaning of our baptismal covenant together, especially in striving for justice and peace and respecting the dignity of every human being.” (BCP 305) I may be wrong, but I suspect that this may be the thing that is least understood (or appreciated) about who we are, and therefore sometimes the thing we give the least attention ourselves.

It is my understanding that we consecrate diaconal ministers and deaconesses and we ordain deacons not just to a particular form of diaconal ministry (or a specific social or specialized ministry) that will last throughout their vocation in the church, but because we believe it is important to acknowledge the servant nature of Christ’s church, and we believe it is important for people to come, from within our midst, to remind us of that and to affirm the diaconal ministry in which others are engaged. And the setting for these ordinations and consecrations, the places where these charges and promises are made, (by both deacons and the congregation) is in the midst of community.

These rites serve not only to define and affirm our roles, but also the expectations from and support by the community. It is the *community* that affirms the call for living reminders that we are all called to Christ-like service at baptism. It is the *community* that affirms the desire for living reminders that the Church herself is called, not only to provide instruction, nurture, sacramental sustenance and fellowship to her members, but is to be the church outside her walls in mission, witness and service, to be the church engaged in seeking justice and respecting the dignity of every human being.

The reminders we offer come in various forms at various times: they may come in the form of active social ministry; through invitations to others to take part in that ministry; through preaching; teaching (particularly about advocacy and how to recognize the gifts of all people). Those reminders may come through the affirmation and recognition of those engaged in diaconal ministry (lay and ordained) both inside and outside the church’s walls, through the training and debriefing of Eucharistic Visitors, through creating and teaching about the Prayers of the People, and by being present in the liturgy as the very reminder of Christ’s foundational call to service.

We stand at the intersection between service, or diaconal ministry, and spirituality. The message we articulate, through both word and action, is about the connection between being in love with God and sharing that love in concrete ways. Not as the proverbial good works that so often stand over and against grace. Rather it is the work, shared with Christ that is a part of the very nature of grace.

### **The Prophetic Role**

Indeed this prophetic and interpretive role of the deacon may well be an unanticipated result of the restoration of the order in today’s world. In fact this ordination charge, for all its strength, is sometimes a point of tension. For while we can point the way toward mission and the witness of the church, we are also the ones who sometimes must ask the church to *dismantle* those things that get in the way of mission and care for others, inviting her to recreate herself as a servant structure. The use of the term “dismantle” here does not mean a thoughtless tearing down. Nor does it mean that we should emphasize the negative. It does mean that, at the very least, we need to name the things get in the way of “doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God.”

(*Micah 6:8*) In that way, we know what assets, what positive attributes both individually and collectively we can bring to address those challenges.<sup>7</sup>

A caution. Over the years, many of us have described ourselves as thorns in the church's side, or as troublemakers. What I think we're trying to describe is the fact that asking the church to look at and engage in the world around it is not always easy. Asking the church to tend to the things in its own life that get in the way of that can also be difficult. This can be a very lonely place to be. But I've begun to wonder whether calling ourselves by these names can lead to a sometimes unintended, self-imposed isolation. Likewise it may serve to discourage or isolate other prophetic voices in the congregation. While these descriptions are often meant to be just that — descriptions — we might do well to think of descriptions that remind us that, while sometimes challenging, interpretation and prophetic voice are part of the church's tradition. And when we do need to reckon with that role of saying difficult things, or inviting difficult actions it's important to remember that the prophet also energizes with hope. Maybe rather than being 'thorns in the church's side,' we simply need to claim the words, 'interpreter,' and 'prophetic voice.' Now I don't mean we should go around saying to people, 'oh, I'm a prophetic voice,' but that we claim the interpretive and prophetic roles the community has asked us to play.

### **What is Interpretation?**

Recently I've had the privilege of facilitating two online courses, one on engaging our congregations in the issues and challenges of the world around us – the other on the prophetic voice of the deacon. Both in their own way centered the charge to interpret to the church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world. As part of my preparation, I did some research about interpreters. Here is something of what I found:

RIC International, a large translation and interpreting agency, says that, "To explain what interpreters do it is worthwhile to start by discussing the differences between interpreting and translation. They state that the differences in training, skills and talents for each job are vast. The key skill for a translator, they say, is the ability to write well and express oneself clearly in the target language. They tell us that professional translators almost always work in only one direction, translating *only into* their native language. And many excellent translators are far from being bilingual. The key skills of the translator are the ability to understand the source language and culture of the country where the text *originated*, and, using a good library of dictionaries and reference materials, render that material into the target language."<sup>8</sup>

'An interpreter, on the other hand, has to be able to translate in both directions, without the use of any dictionaries, on the spot....(and they go on to talk about the skills required in simultaneous interpreting and consecutive interpreting. But they conclude by saying that...*In spite of the vast differences in the skills of translators and interpreters, there*

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<sup>7</sup> Much of what is written here is adapted from various papers and speeches, including a keynote to Province VII in January of 2002, thoughts on ecumenical work shared with the NAAD Board that same year, and a paper written jointly with C. Christopher Epting for presentation in Stuttgart, Germany in 2003. Susanne Watson Epting

<sup>8</sup> All information taken from the RIC International website and paraphrased.  
[http://world.std.com/~ric/what\\_is\\_int.html](http://world.std.com/~ric/what_is_int.html)

*is one thing that they must share, besides deep knowledge of both languages: they must understand the subject matter of the text or speech they are translating.* Translation is not a matter of substituting words in one language for words in another. It is a matter of understanding the *thought* expressed in one language and then explaining it using the resources of another language. In other words, what an interpreter does is change words into meaning, and then change meaning back into words – of a different language. And just like you can't explain to someone a thought if you didn't fully understand that thought, nor can you translate or interpret something without mastery of the subject matter being relayed.

They go on to list the qualifications of a good interpreter as:

- Knowledge of the general subject of what is being interpreted (in our case, needs, hopes and concerns)
- Familiarity with both cultures (church and world, or issues in the church, for example)
- Extensive vocabulary in both languages
- Ability to express thoughts clearly and concisely in both languages<sup>9</sup>

How I wish I'd had more of an opportunity to process this information. But how grateful I am that, as lifelong learners, we have the opportunity to revisit our vows and our charges and think about what skills they demand, what gifts they tap, and how to strengthen our ministry in these areas from time to time.

As I've reflected through these courses, it does seem possible to identify some skill sets for interpreters and prophetic voices. That we continue in the Apostle's teaching and the prayers, that we continue to study scripture, these too are part of our vows and our interpretive role. But I'd like to suggest that there are some other things that we can identify, not only for ourselves, but that we can offer to others in our congregations and in the wider church that will invite their interpretive and prophetic voices as well.

- *Knowing our language and culture:* What are the resolutions our own denominations has made and the actions they have taken around the particular issues that are facing us in the church and the world? Often it's helpful to be able to go to our national websites and archives as a starting point. In that way the issue is not just about "us" as the presenter or interpreter, but about the whole body.<sup>i</sup>
- *Facilitating dialogue:* Clearly there are issues that cut across our denominations that are sometimes extremely difficult. The ability to facilitate dialogue is something like helping others listen and interpret to and with each other.<sup>ii</sup>
- *Advocacy:* While many times we think about advocacy as political, professionals do have ways of presenting their material that is effective, and they are careful to think about important people to talk to. Identifying potential companions in our work, and being as clear as possible in our presentations and solutions can be very important.<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid

- *Service Learning/Theological Reflection*: Many public schools, colleges and universities have instituted service learning programs that are not simply volunteer opportunities, but opportunities to engage in meaningful experiences in the community and then reflect on them. This has led to reflection and action around systemic causes, effects, changes. I think there's much to be learned here. Likewise, if we think about engaging in God's mission (and particularly mission trips) how often do we really reflect theologically and maybe even sociologically together after we share those experiences?<sup>iv</sup>
- *Re-grounding in the prophetic tradition*. Perhaps we would do well to look again at the prophets. I have found Walter Bruggemann's *Prophetic Imagination* extremely helpful, along with the sixth chapter of Marcus Borg's *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. In both of those works we are reminded that the prophet both criticizes and energizes, not simply for the sake of criticism, but out of love for God and God's people. I find some of the most helpful material on hope in the writings of people who have known oppression, those from whom there is so incredibly much to learn about what really matters, and then to grapple with how to move forward effectively. As St. Augustine of Hippo said, "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are."

I have offered these in only the most cursory way. Indeed we could spend much more time expanding our knowledge about interpreters, about facilitating dialogue, about leading reflections on the root causes of the dis-ease facing our country, our world – even, at times, our church. In fact, I continue to learn more about this each time I facilitate an online course on prophetic voice. It is my hope that there will be further papers and reflections based on these learnings. But for now I simply offer this for reflection, with love in the Christ whose courage, whose authority, and whose hope led him to kneel even before his betrayer. I give thanks that our vows and charges are shared by many others, both inside and outside our own denomination, and I pray that our faithfulness together will truly strengthen our life in common mission and witness.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://world.std.com/~ric/what\\_is\\_int.html](http://world.std.com/~ric/what_is_int.html) is a web site with an introduction to what interpreting is about. <http://episcopalchurch.org> is also a good reference. I often have students spend as much as a week locating resources they have not known about previously, including the church's digital archives. Click on the "Church Center" link.

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.publicconversations.org/pcp/index.asp?page\\_id=172&catid=1](http://www.publicconversations.org/pcp/index.asp?page_id=172&catid=1) a sample resource on the web that might help us modify our voices and offer ways for others to talk about difficult issues.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.advocacy.org> shows us what some professionals think about their role.

<sup>iv</sup> Here are three interesting web sites on service learning. I'd also encourage reading and practice in various kinds of theological reflection methods.

[http://www.servicelearning.org/welcome\\_to\\_service-learning/service-learning\\_is/index.php](http://www.servicelearning.org/welcome_to_service-learning/service-learning_is/index.php)

[http://service.csUMB.edu/programs/sl\\_requirement.html#](http://service.csUMB.edu/programs/sl_requirement.html#)

<http://www.fiu.edu/~time4chg/Library/bigdummy.html>

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