


Chapter 11

Diaconia in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa: Towards a model for mission and development

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1. Introduction

Aitchison (2024:2) states that since its inception during the Reformation, the Anglican Church - originally the Church of England - has maintained the tradition of ordained ministry comprising bishops, priests, and deacons. This structure is affirmed in Article 36 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, which references *The Book of Consecration of Archbishops and Bishops, and Ordering of Priests and Deacons*. The same principle is reflected in clauses 77 to 82 of the Catechism in the 1989 *Anglican Prayer Book* (hereafter APB). Within this tradition, the threefold order of ordained ministry has been firmly established and continues to be upheld. A key aspect of this tradition is the belief that the diaconate originates from the events described in Acts 6:1–7. This view is reinforced by the South African Anglican lectionary, which commemorates ‘St. Stephen, deacon and martyr’ on December 26. Thus, the roots of the diaconate are traced back to this passage in the New Testament.

Latvus (2010:82-83) notes that the key role of diaconal ministry diminished during the early medieval period. In the Western Church, the ministry of deacons persisted but largely became a transitional stage leading to

priestly ordination. Meanwhile, in the Eastern Church, the role of deacons became increasingly associated with worship and church music (Latvus, 2010:82-83).

An important aspect of ministry, however, is the minister's ability to embed themselves within the community that they are called to serve. Andreassen and Norheim emphasise the importance of the local minister being "tuned in" to place and people, seeking the ideal nexus for collaborative ministry. As they argue, "we are called to love the place where we are, not to save it" (Andreassen & Norheim, 2022:117). Latvus's observations highlight how historical and cultural contexts shaped the evolution of diaconal ministry, leading to its diminished prominence in the Western Church, where it is often regarded as a lesser ministry compared to that of bishops and priests. In contrast, the Eastern Church preserved a more specialised liturgical role for deacons. Building on Andreassen and Norheim's perspective, one can argue that fostering inclusive and sustainable communities requires collaboration amongst various stakeholders, with the church playing a key role as a catalyst for mission and development.

The success of collaborative mission and development hinges on a critical examination of the role and agency of diaconia. Klaasen (2020:128) raises essential questions that highlight the tension between understanding diaconia as service or as a liturgical function - a tension that has contributed to divergences within the church. Key questions include: (i) whether diaconia should be service-oriented or liturgically focused; (ii) whether diaconal ecclesiology should include both deacons and deaconesses; (iii) whether diaconia is a function of the church or an intrinsic aspect of its identity; and (iv) whether diaconia is doctrinally grounded or ecumenical in nature.

Such research offers valuable insights that can help the church to better understand, shape, and enhance its diaconal ministry within specific cultural and contextual settings. The following section will briefly consider some of these questions.

2. A brief exploration of diaconia

At this point, I will examine two key questions: (a) whether diaconia is primarily liturgical or social in nature, and (b) whether diaconia is historically and contextually substantive and/or purposive. This analysis will provide deeper insight into the role of diaconia and its relationship with the community.

2.1 *The two-pronged diaconia of liturgy and social responsibility*

The liturgy and social responsibility reflect the dual role of the church, addressing the spiritual and material needs of people. This approach emphasises the interconnectedness between the spiritual nourishment provided by the liturgy and the motivation that it offers believers to engage in acts of social responsibility - living out the gospel imperative of loving one's neighbour as oneself (Matthew 22:39).

It is important to note that engaging in acts of social responsibility extends beyond humble service and care for those in need. According to Nordstokke (2014), this concept is rooted in the Australian scholar John N. Collins's reinterpretation of social responsibility, offering a broader perspective on its significance and application.

Collins's reinterpretation of diaconia is the designation of an honourable task, with vital information, entrusted to a person, spokesperson, or a go-between - or a person given a commission on behalf of someone in authority and fulfilling a vital task (Nordstokke, 2014:57).

Nordstokke (2014) asserts that diaconia is far more than humble service to people in need, emphasising that "its biblical background presents it as a bold action that announces good news for the poor". He further argues that diaconia cannot be confined to professional work; rather, it is part of the mandate given by the triune God to the church as an integral aspect of its mission. This reinterpretation of diaconia has reaffirmed its ecclesiological and missiological nature. Its practice is modelled on the one who has given the diaconal mandate, as seen in John 20:21: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you..." (Nordstokke, 2014:87–88). This gospel imperative of "sending out" is grounded in the belief that the liturgy is transformative and

that sharing the gospel in word and deed is a privilege and a responsibility for all believers, to all people, everywhere.

The next dimension to consider is whether diaconia is historically and contextually substantive and/or purposive.

2.2 *Is diaconia historically and contextually substantive and or purposive?*

Historically, diaconia held substantive and purposive significance within Christian traditions, particularly in relation to concrete acts of service to others. In the New Testament, the role of deacons was primarily supportive and liturgical, assisting the bishop in ministry. They cared for the poor, sick, orphans, and widows - living out core values of service and care within the religious community and the broader society, embodying the relationship between liturgy and social responsibility. According to Christensen (2019:41), in the early church, diaconia was closely associated with 'service' and 'ministry'. Early Christian congregations were focused on serving the sick and the poor. For the early church, the office of the deacon gained meaning through its function, as the church developed a language that reflected its way of life. Thus, diaconia has also been understood as purposive - a sense of mission or purpose within the Christian faith, guided by the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20,

And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age (New Revised Standard Version [NRSV] 1989).

Christensen argues that there is no clear historical consensus on whether diaconia is the responsibility of a specific office or how it has been taken up and refashioned throughout church history. She observes a shift within the Reformation churches of the 16th century and further noted 20th-century innovations regarding the concept of diaconia, whereby it came to be understood as the responsibility of all church members (Christensen, 2019:41). Whether substantive or purposive, diaconia has evolved over

time, shaped by contextual environments - by people living and acting within specific settings. According to Nordstokke (2009:12), reading the context is never an end in itself for diaconal action. Instead, its purpose is to initiate and ensure that such action is contextual and well-considered for the benefit of those in need. This process helps to set priorities, formulate objectives for collective action, and identify effective work methods rooted in diaconal values. Thus, substantive acts of service are supported and guided by diaconal action, inspired by the sense of purpose and mission shared by all people of the Christian faith.

Christian denominations such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and certain Lutheran churches have retained the diaconate as a ministerial calling within the threefold order of bishops, priests, and deacons. However, denominations like the New Apostolic Church, the Dutch Reformed Church, and many Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions have not maintained this threefold structure. In the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA), diaconia forms part of the ordained order, either as a distinctive deacon or a transitional deacon. Distinctive deacons typically remain in diaconal ministry permanently, whereas transitional deacons serve as deacons for a time before being ordained to the priesthood. In the Church of Norway, professionals and volunteers are invited to participate in diaconia, which is understood as “the gospel in action expressed through loving your neighbour, creating inclusive communities, caring for creation, and struggling for justice” (Korslien, 2014:203). From this perspective, diaconia not only expands the scope of those who benefit from its ministry, but it also invites a broader group of individuals to engage in mission and ministry.

These are crucial questions for consideration that touch upon various aspects such as the nature of diaconia, its theological structure, its role within the church, and its relationship with broader social and developmental issues that are key for mission and development. It is therefore not surprising that there are many variants of the nature and character of the diaconal ministry across the world.

3. Various perspectives on the concept of diaconia

Swart suggests that participants in the broad ecumenical movement have, in recent times, felt the need to reassess and correct the traditional understanding and practice of diaconia within the Christian tradition. This has given rise to a growing movement that no longer views diaconia as simply humble and silent service to the poor and sick. Informed by new theological insights and a renewed reading of the Bible, this movement now sees diaconia as something much deeper - an expression of service capable of becoming a more compelling means of transformation in support of God's transformative mission (Swart, 2021:62). The shift in perspective that Swart refers to is evident in the views of several theologians and practitioners who argue that diaconia should not be limited to simple acts of service. Instead, it should be understood as a profound and dynamic expression of the church's mission. This shift has been driven by new theological insights and a re-reading of Scripture, which together have led to a broader and more transformative understanding of diaconia.

White (2002:n.p.) describes diaconia as the “responsible service of the gospel by deeds and words performed by Christians in response to the needs of people”. She argues that this service is rooted in and modelled after Christ's own service and teachings. This understanding emphasises that diaconia is not merely about charitable actions; rather, it is deeply anchored in the gospel message. It suggests that diaconia is a physical and a spiritual ministry, where Christians, inspired by Christ's example, serve others by meeting their needs in ways that reflect God's love and justice.

International gatherings have increasingly called for greater attention to the diaconal ministry of the church and its relevance in theological training and ministerial formation. The General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), Rev Martin Junge, described the LWF's understanding of mission as holistic, encompassing proclamation, service (diaconia), and advocacy. He emphasised the necessity of adopting a comprehensive approach to theological training (Junge, 2017:4). Rev Junge's focus on a holistic approach to theological education highlights the need for the church to be equipped not only in traditional theological disciplines (such as biblical studies, theology, and pastoral care) but also in the practical and ethical aspects of diaconal ministry. Serving marginalised communities,

advocating for justice, and integrating faith with action reflect the church's holistic mission.

In recent years, the contemporary ecumenical understanding of diaconia has evolved from being seen as insignificant to a position of great importance. In theological academic discussions on the relationship between theory and praxis, diaconia is increasingly recognised as the social ministry of the church and an academic discipline within practical theology. Diaconia must be approached in an interdisciplinary manner, integrating knowledge from theological and social sciences (Dietrich, 2014:1-2). This perspective shifts diaconia from merely a practical activity to a theoretical exploration, where theological insights on justice, service, and human dignity are applied to address social challenges.

Professor Isabel Apawo Phiri, in a plenary presentation at the 11th All Africa Conference of Churches Assembly in Kigali, Rwanda, on 5 July 2018, stated that diaconia is an essential dimension of being the church. Phiri argued that the vision and practice of diaconia, as outlined in scripture passages such as John 10:10, Luke 4:16-21, and Matthew 25:31-46, present diaconia as a model for churches that embody “God’s reign to come”, marked by the promise of life, justice, and peace. These passages highlight God’s preferential option for the poor, which serves as a theological and ethical framework guiding the church’s mission and actions for the future (Phiri, 2018:35-64). The notions and approaches to diaconia presented by White, Junge, and Phiri draw attention to the active, service-driven role that the church must play in embodying and advancing Christ’s mission in the world. Their perspectives complement one another in exploring the theological, theoretical, and ethical importance of diaconia. White focuses on mission expressed through actions and words, addressing human needs, whilst Junge highlights that diaconia is a holistic approach and places emphasis on theological training as a key aspect. Phiri emphasises the importance of diaconia by highlighting it as a core aspect of the church’s identity and mission.

Dietrich and Thiani (2021) assert that from the very beginning, being a member of the Christian church and a follower of Jesus Christ has entailed a commitment to serving one another, the community, and the world. They argue that caring for each other’s well-being, especially in times of hardship,

has always been central to Christian identity and the identity of the church. As a result, the church's diaconal identity and ministry played a crucial role in its growth during the Early Church and has remained integral to its essence ever since.

Although the theological language and terminology may vary across traditions, Dietrich and Thiani (2021) maintain that the Christian church, regardless of denomination, is united by a shared call to live out faith through action - an essential mission that should be collectively articulated. Thus, diaconia, understood as service to one another, the community, and the world, is a God-given mission to serve humanity and creation in accordance with God's will, reflecting the church's participation in God's broader mission (Dietrich & Thiani, 2021:81-82). These understandings position diaconal ministry as a foundational element of the threefold ministerial order - bishops, priests, and deacons - highlighting the essential role of service (diaconia) in the life and mission of the church. Furthermore, diaconia is critically presented as the practical expression of the second commandment in Matthew 22:39, which states, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (NRSV, 1989). This commandment, central to the Christian ethos, finds its lived expression in the practice of diaconal ministry.

When examining a comprehensive understanding of diaconia, Deifelt and Hofmann (2021) argue that its scope has expanded, particularly with the inclusion of themes like mercy and justice. Drawing from various contexts, they assert that mercy and justice are not limited to feeding those in need but also encompasses education and political action. Furthermore, they propose that,

These changes in the concept and scope of diaconia stem from an epistemological shift and entail an ongoing learning process. This process draws from the knowledge and wisdom of individuals and groups who, for too long, were perceived as recipients of charity, such as communities from the Global South, inner-city dwellers, or at-risk populations. It also reveals a more holistic understanding of diaconia from the perspective of development agencies and mission organisations, realising that their best intentions are potentially fraught with toxic dependence. As a result, diaconia expanded its

scope by moving from charity to a theory-praxis that addresses human dignity in a comprehensive manner, including care, transformation, empowerment, advocacy and conviviality (Deifelt & Hofmann, 2021:53).

Furthermore, while extending compassion and care to those suffering from physical, mental, and spiritual afflictions was seen as a way of embodying the teachings of Jesus - there is consensus on the necessity of this act of service and the ways in which it is carried out vary significantly. Since diaconia emerged as a theological discipline reflecting on the church's long-standing tradition of service, it has developed and diversified across different parts of the world. The term is often associated with charitable activities undertaken by individuals linked to the Protestant church, though similar initiatives exist within other Christian traditions, as well as in various world religions and philosophies of life (Deifelt & Hofmann, 2021:53-54).

Aitchison (2024:25) argues that a renewed understanding of diaconia has led many churches to move away from viewing the diaconate as a lesser order focused solely on social welfare, freeing other ministries for more 'spiritual' work. Instead, the diaconate is increasingly recognised as a full, equal, and distinctive order dedicated to the ministry of diaconia under the guidance of bishops and presbyters (priests). This threefold ministry, which combines liturgy, proclamation, and service to the world, reflects the practice of the early church and remains especially vital in times of crisis in modern society.

From these contemporary ecumenical perspectives on diaconia (a term rooted in the Greek word for service), the diaconate should be understood as a central ministerial order within the church's mission and ministry. These perspectives emphasise the role of deacons as intermediaries between the church and the world, embodying Christ's call to serve others - particularly the poor, vulnerable, and oppressed, the marginalised of society.

4. The ministerial order of the deacon in the ACSA

The New Testament attests to ministers responsible for apostolic oversight, pastoral care, and service, which, by the 2nd century, evolved into a threefold ministry consisting of bishops, priests, and deacons. This structure, with

some adaptations to address local needs and customs, remained largely unchanged for fourteen hundred years. During the Reformation, the Church of England - from which the Anglican Communion originates - intentionally preserved this threefold ministry, a tradition reflected in its ordination services (ACSA, 1989:571).

In the ACSA, a province within the Anglican Communion, the threefold order of bishops, priests, and deacons remains the ministerial structure for those who are ordained. Terms such as 'permanent diaconate' or 'distinctive diaconate' are used to describe individuals ordained as deacons who have little or no intention of pursuing ordination to the priesthood.

The Catechism of the APB (ACSA, 1989) states that ministers in the Anglican Church include lay persons, deacons, priests, and bishops. It further specifies that regarding the ordained:

The ministry of bishops is to represent Christ and his church, particularly as apostle, chief priest, and pastor of a diocese; to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the whole Church; to proclaim the word of God; to act in Christ's name for the reconciliation of the world and the building up of the Church; and to ordain others to continue Christ's ministry (:433).

The ministry of a priest is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as a pastor to the people; to share with the bishop in overseeing of the Church; to proclaim the gospel; to administer the sacraments; and to bless and declare pardon in the name of God (:433-434).

The ministry of a deacon is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as a servant of those in need; and to assist bishops and priests in the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments (:434).

The catechism presents the threefold ministerial order of bishops, priests, and deacons, highlighting their respective roles and responsibilities. In the ordination service for deacons and priests, the social responsibility of the diaconate is particularly emphasised in the 'deacon's charge', which emphasises the important foundational ministry of deacons in mission, development, and transformation.

By your word and example, you are to make Christ and his redemptive love known to those among whom you live and work and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, the concerns and hopes of the world. You are to assist the Bishops and priests in public worship and in the administration of God's word and sacraments and you are to carry out other duties assigned to you from time to time (ACSA, 1989:583).

By this proclamation, the distinctive diaconate within the ACSA implicitly mandates a model of ministry focused on nurturing and facilitating mission and development within the community. The reimagining of the diaconate in the ACSA has gained significant attention, with a strong focus on the value of contextual diaconia. The shift from viewing diaconia merely as a service to the poor and vulnerable (charity) to a more holistic approach that prioritises care, transformation, and empowerment is now widely accepted. There has been a marked transition from the notion of diaconia as a transitional role (from deacon to priest) to recognising it as a permanent and distinctive order of ministry. This evolution continues to gain traction and is actively promoted within the ACSA.

In his report to the ACSA Provincial Synod in 2024, Professor John Aitchison recommended that representatives from theological training institutions and diocesan training programmes take responsibility for implementing the proposals outlined in the report, particularly in relation to curriculum development and the education and training of deacons. He stressed that the ACSA must address the necessary canonical, liturgical, and synodal changes required for the genuine restoration of the distinctive diaconate. Additionally, Aitchison highlighted the importance of supporting the development of an effective network for the diaconate, known as the Fellowship of Deacons (Aitchison, 2024:vi).

Aitchison further noted that since the 1990s, several permanent self-supporting deacons have been ordained within the ACSA, though this was initially limited to certain dioceses and gradually lost momentum. In 2012, the Highveld Deacons' Fellowship was formed, followed by the inaugural provincial conference of the ACSA Fellowship of Deacons in 2015. Subsequent provincial conferences took place in 2016 and 2018. In September 2018, a Provincial Standing Committee resolution called

on Archbishop Thabo Makgoba to establish a commission to examine the ministry of the distinctive and permanent diaconate and report its findings to the Provincial Synod in 2019. The resolution affirmed that “ACSA recognises that the ordained ministry of the church is a three-fold ministry of deacons, priests, and bishops”. However, no action was taken following the initial resolution, leading the Provincial Standing Committee to pass a new resolution in 2022. This resolution urged Archbishop Makgoba to revisit and implement the 2018 Provincial Standing Committee resolution. In response, the Archbishop’s Commission on the Ministry of the Distinctive and Permanent Diaconate was established. The Commission’s final report on this ministry was presented at the Provincial Synod in September 2024 (Aitchison, 2024:13).

At the 2024 session of the Provincial Synod - the highest decision-making body in the ACSA - delegates unanimously agreed that the

ACSA should endeavour to deal with the inevitable changes that a true restoration of the distinctive diaconate would require canonical, liturgical, and synodal, and the support needed to develop an effective network for the diaconate (Aitchison, 2024:86).

Some of the recommendations from the report of the Archbishop’s Commission on the Ministry of the Distinctive and Permanent Diaconate to the Provincial Synod 2024 include: i) the need for the ACSA to clarify the distinctiveness of the ministry of deacons, in relation to the other two ministerial orders and in light of the crises facing our times, where we believe God is calling us to renew the diaconal order; ii) a call to re-examine the ACSA’s commitment to diaconia, recognising the vital role of deacons in galvanising this ministry; iii) a recommendation that the Commission, or an alternative body, continue the work initiated by the current Commission. This body should include representatives from theological training institutions and diocesan diaconal training programmes, with the task of developing recommendations for a curriculum and programme dedicated to the education and training of deacons (Aitchison, 2024:86). These recommendations signal a clear understanding within the ACSA of the crucial role diaconia plays in the mission and ministry of the church.

5. Conclusion

The ecumenical and global diaconal discourse presented in this chapter reinforces the understanding that diaconia is not merely a supportive ministerial order but a distinct and essential expression of the church's mission. Deacons are seen as agents of transformation, addressing social injustices, advocating for the vulnerable, and fostering reconciliation. Diaconia has evolved from being a response to immediate needs to an engagement with systemic issues, challenging unjust structures, and working towards social and spiritual renewal and development. This renewed understanding of diaconia embodies transformative care, empowering individuals and communities towards self-development. It reflects the church's commitment to living out the gospel in practical and visible ways, engaging with the pressing issues of the contemporary world. Critically, this understanding draws on a re-reading of biblical texts and explores the relationship between theory, context, and praxis as integral components of the whole.

Within the threefold ministry of deacons, priests, and bishops, the diaconate not only serves as the foundational stage for the priesthood and episcopacy; it also embodies the mission and ministry of the church, reflecting the very essence of Christ's ministry and His calling for His followers to serve.

Mark 10:45 reads, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (NRSV, 1989). Diaconia is a service that reflects God's desire for a holistic transformation of the world, engaging with the complexities of human life and society and seeking to bring about meaningful, lasting change - fulfilling its calling as the body of Christ in the world.

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