

An Empirical Look at the
Ecumenical Diaconate
In the United States

by

Benjamin L. Hartley



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North American Association for the Diaconate

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An Empirical Look at the Ecumenical Diaconate in the United States

by Benjamin L. Hartley

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The growth of interest in the "escalating phenomenon" of the diaconate in a number of denominations – predominantly in the North Atlantic region – has been well-documented in ecumenical dialogues, denominational reports, and scholarly publications.¹ A number of articles have placed the diaconate in the larger context of ecclesiological reflection, but an accurate picture of the practical reality of individual deacons and their perceptions about their ministry has rarely been examined beyond anecdotal evidence.²

A better picture of the views and experiences of deacons is vital for at least two reasons. First, it is necessary to support ecumenical cooperation in the development of the diaconate as a movement for the renewal of the church's mission and liturgy.³ Without an honest appraisal of the similarities and differences of deacons' ministries, it is difficult to propose areas for ecumenical cooperation. Second, social scientific analysis of the modern diaconate can contribute valuable insights for ecclesiological reflection. Reflecting on his experience after Vatican II, Joseph A. Komonchak contends that social analysis must accompany theological reflection on the nature of the church.

Over several years I became convinced that one of the chief challenges was to bridge the gap between the lofty theological language which the Council had restored to the center of ecclesiology

¹ Sven-Erik Brodd, "An Escalating Phenomenon: The Diaconate from an Ecumenical Perspective," in Gunnel Borgegård and Christine Hall (eds.), *The Ministry of the Deacon, 1. Anglican – Lutheran Perspectives*, (Uppsala: Nordic Ecumenical Council, 1999).

² The author utilizes the term "deacons" instead of the more cumbersome "members of the diaconate" to refer to the diaconate generally. When discussing a particular denomination's form of the diaconate the appropriate title will be used.

³ Hanover Report of The Anglican-Lutheran International Commission, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*, Published for the Anglican Consultative Council and the Lutheran World Federation, 1993, p. 24.

and the concrete reality of the Church as realized in communities of believers.⁴

Similar calls for an integration of social theory with theology have been made by James Gustafson and other Protestants as they have reflected on the nature and mission of the church.⁵ If social analysis is valuable for ecclesiological reflection as a whole, then, by extension, it is also valuable for theological reflection on the diaconate. This may be particularly important at the present time as theologians and church leaders grapple with new insights into the nature of ministry and what the implications might be for the future ecclesial identity of the diaconate.⁶

This article summarizes the findings of a survey project conducted for the purpose of exploring areas of possible collaboration among organizations and denominations in the United States who are part of The Ecumenical Network for the Diaconate (TEND), a group which has been gathering annually since 1998.⁷ This project surveyed deacons in the Protestant Episcopal Church (U.S.A.), diaconal ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), deaconesses in the ELCA and Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, Roman Catholic deacons, and United Methodist deacons and deaconesses.⁸ This article is primarily descriptive in nature and thus extensive theological reflections on the data are beyond its scope. Theological issues will be highlighted at times, but only in a cursory manner.

The organizations and denominations that are official members of TEND as of November, 2001 include the Lutheran Deaconess Association, the General Board of Global Ministries (United Methodist), Lutheran

⁴ Joseph A. Komanchak, *Foundations in Ecclesiology*, (Boston, Boston College, 1995), p. ix. In this text Komanchak has two essays that deal with methodological concerns on the place of social theory in ecclesiological reflection.

⁵ James M. Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961).

⁶ Robert Hannaford, "The Representative and Relational Nature of Ministry and the Renewal of the Diaconate," in Gunnar Borgegård, Olav Fanuelsen, and Christine Hall (eds.), *The Ministry of the Deacon, 2. Ecclesiological Explorations*, (Uppsala, Nordic Ecumenical Council: 2000).

⁷ The full-length report of this survey project and color slides of graphs and charts can be found on the "library" page of <http://www.deaconpages.org>. The author acknowledges the financial assistance given to him for this project by the Section of Deacons and Diaconal Ministries of the United Methodist Church and the Boston University School of Theology.

⁸ An insufficient number of surveys for analysis were returned from United Methodist deaconesses. As a result, this study does not include any information about United Methodist deaconesses. Diaconal ministers in the United Church of Canada are also a part of TEND but were not included in this study.

Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (United Methodist), Deaconess Community of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Chicago Archdiocesan Office for the Permanent Diaconate (Roman Catholic), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Episcopal Diocese of Chicago (Anglican), North American Association for the Diaconate (Anglican), Section for Deacons and Diaconal Ministries (United Methodist), Seabury-Western Theological Seminary (Anglican), Secretariat for the Diaconate of the U.S. Catholic Conference, and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

TEND has identified its purpose as encompassing the following four areas. This statement of purpose is expected to develop as areas for action are identified:

- 1) Establish connections among faith traditions for the sharing of information resources for groups in *diakonia* in the United States. This is the primary role of TEND.
- 2) Develop and maintain a list of available resources for study and research.
- 3) Provide a place for leaders to meet for conversation on the diaconate – its present reality and future possibilities.
- 4) Develop internet resources to facilitate networking among members of TEND.
- 5) Explore and encourage publication of papers and scholarship relating to the diaconate.

The November, 2001 gathering of TEND focused on a discussion of the findings contained in this Monograph.

Surveys of the diaconate and diaconal formation programs have preceded this study in the United States, but none of these surveys were ecumenical in scope. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops (U.S.A.) conducted extensive surveys of the diaconate in the United States in 1981 and again, in 1996. The 1996 survey instrument contained over 200 questions, and statistical analyses were performed on over 3,000 questionnaires.⁹ The Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. also conducted a survey in 1996 of one hundred dioceses on the nature of their diaconate formation programs. The survey showed considerable diversity among

⁹ Bishops' Committee on the Permanent Diaconate, *A National Study on the Permanent Diaconate of the Catholic Church in the United States, 1994-1995*, (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996). The NCCB also conducted a large survey in 1981. Bishops' Committee on the Permanent Diaconate, *National Study on the Permanent Diaconate*, (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1981).

these programs.¹⁰ Two doctoral dissertations have also been performed in the past decade on the U.S. Roman Catholic diaconate, and have utilized interview or survey methodologies.¹¹ Both of these dissertations also address the complexities of deacons' struggle to discover their sense of identity, a theme often highlighted by deacons in other denominations.¹²

This research study focused primarily on quantitative research methodologies through the use of a survey instrument. A number of deacons from the denominations under consideration were interviewed to assist in the design of the survey instrument, and to gain a better understanding of the nature of the diaconate in each denomination. Suggestions for improving the survey instrument were also garnered from official denominational representatives for the diaconate. The instrument also borrowed a number of questions directly from the 1981 and 1996 Roman Catholic surveys and simply added a comparative dimension to the questions in order to assess denominational differences and similarities. A total of 1,542 questionnaires were mailed to deacons in all five denominations, and 549 surveys were returned, giving an overall response rate of 35.6%. 33 questionnaires were omitted from the data set due to incompleteness, leaving a total of 516 respondents included in the study.

Demographics

Figure 1 shows the distribution of respondents in each denomination by sex. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of Lutheran respondents in both Lutheran denominations are women (88 of these 103 self-identify their diaconal office as "deaconsess"). The Roman Catholic deacons are, of course, all men, since the permanent deacon is an ordained position, open only to men. The two denominations worth noting here are the Episcopalians, who have the highest percentage of male deacons responding to the survey (41.9%), and the United Methodists, with 20.6% of respondents who are male. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the proportion of United Methodist deacons who are male is increasing in the

¹⁰ Keith W. McCoy, *Survey Report – Deacon Formation Programs*, (Providence, Rhode Island: North American Association for the Diaconate, 1996).

¹¹ Richard H. McCord, *An Inquiry into Expectations for the Role, Definition of Permanent Deacon and its Implications for Educating Permanent Deacons in the Archdiocese of Baltimore*, doctoral dissertation, (University of Maryland, 1985). McCord surveyed thirty deacons, laypersons, and pastors in order to discover the extent to which respondents agreed with normative expectations of the diaconate coming out of official documents from the U.S. bishops. James Timothy Barry, *The Permanent Diaconate in the American Catholic Church: An Examination of Identity, Role, and Continuing Education Activities*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University, 1992).

¹² Ninni Smedberg has recently written about the challenge of diaconal identity as it relates to diaconal spirituality. Ninni Smedberg, "The Quest for a Spirituality for the Deacon," in Gunnel Borgegård, Olav Fanuelsen, Christine Hall (ed.), *The Ministry of the Deacon, 2. Ecclesiological Explorations*, (Uppsala: Nordic Ecumenical Council, 2000).

past few years as a result of the denomination's 1996 decision at their General Conference approving legislation for a "permanent diaconate" that is ordained. The practice of the *cursus honorum* or "steppingstone" process of ordination from deacon to presbyter was also eliminated at the 1996 General Conference.

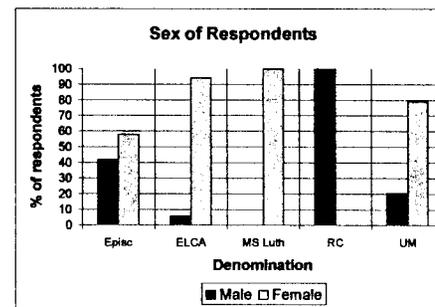


Figure 1. Sex of Respondents by Denomination

The gender differences by denomination are an interesting factor which is gaining increased attention in recent years for the implications these gender differences have on the self-identity of the diaconate within respective denominations. For example, the prominent role given to deacon wives in the Roman Catholic Church is much different than that given to spouses of deacons in other denominations. The book celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Diakonia World Federation also discussed the increase in the number of men entering the diaconate. How this will impact the diaconate's self-understanding is an important area for future research endeavors.¹³

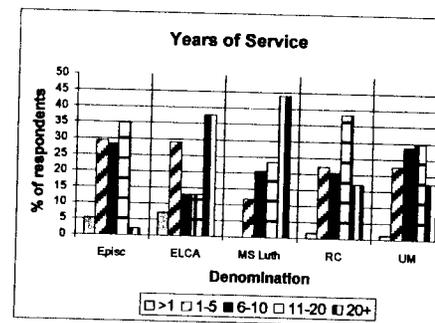


Figure 2. Length of Service by Denomination

¹³ Diakonia World Federation of Diaconal Associations and Diaconal Communities, *Diakonia: Challenge and Response*, (Utrecht, 1996).

Length of service can also be compared generally across denominations, as in figure 2. Several things stand out in the examination of this demographic feature. The first is that the population of Missouri Synod Lutheran Deaconesses appears to be rapidly aging. Almost half of the MS Lutheran survey respondents have been in the order for 20+ years, while only about 12% have joined the order within the past five years (with no respondents having served for under a year). The other denominations seem relatively more stable in terms of new membership, with the data suggesting a renewal of the office within the past five years in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The office of diaconal minister was instituted in the ELCA in 1993.

Figures 3 and 4 show the respondents' primary place of diaconal work, as well as whether or not they are paid for the work they do as a deacon. The biggest contrasts here are between the United Methodists, who carry out their ministries almost entirely within a church context and are by-and-large paid to do so, and the Episcopalians, fewer than half of whom do most of their diaconal work within a church, with only about 15% considering themselves as being paid for the work they do as a deacon.

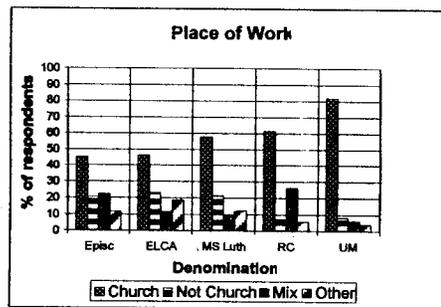


Figure 3. Place of Work as Deacon

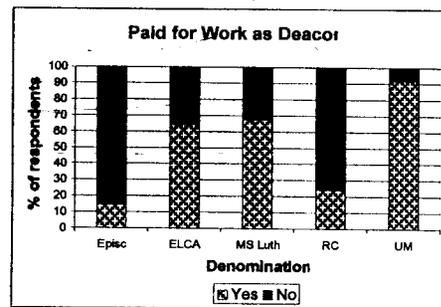


Figure 4. Paid for Work as Deacon?

There is some interpretive difficulty in assessing deacons' perception of whether they are paid for their work as a deacon. Question #6 in the survey asks, "Are you paid for the work you do as a deacon?" Some respondents clearly differentiated between a "secular" job and the work they do as deacons (e.g. visitation, "volunteer" work, etc.). Other deacons added notes indicating that they are always a deacon and since their job pays them money they are, in fact, paid for the work they do as a deacon. Despite these variations in interpretation the question is valuable in ascertaining a self-understanding of the respondents' work situation. This

question also reveals the ambiguities in modern understandings of what "ministry" actually means.¹⁴

The dramatic differences between United Methodists on the one hand and Episcopal and Roman Catholic deacons on the other, in respondents' perception of being paid for the work they do, illustrates what might be considered a greater "professionalized identity" among United Methodist deacons. Roman Catholic and Episcopal deacons largely view their work as volunteer in nature, whereas United Methodists are far more likely to be a paid member of a church's staff.¹⁵

United Methodist deacons were also the group with the greatest amount of formal education, with 82% of deacons in the UMC possessing a graduate degree. Nearly 60% of ELCA diaconal ministers and deaconesses have graduate degrees with the other denominations all roughly the same with 40% of deacons with graduate degrees. Educational levels, stipendiary or non-stipendiary employment, and primary place of work all figure prominently in a diaconate's sense of professionalized identity. There are clearly strengths and weaknesses of "professionalism" – both theologically and practically – and these should be explored in ecumenical conversations.¹⁶

Educational Emphasis vs. Current Benefit of Education

Deacons were asked to rate 12 subject areas in terms of (1) how much emphasis was placed on the area in their formal diaconal education prior to entering the diaconate; and (2) how beneficial they believe each area to be for their current life and ministry. These results are depicted below in two different ways. First, figures 5 and 6 present a comparative picture of all five denominations in terms of their mean ratings in each of the 12 subject areas. Figure seven illustrates educational emphasis and figure 8 illustrates current benefit. In these figures, a rating of "1" indicates a high degree of emphasis and benefit, with a "4" designating no emphasis or benefit.

¹⁴ Robert Hannaford, 2000.

¹⁵ Sven-Erik Brodd offers a helpful discussion of the theologically problematic understanding of the diaconate as voluntaristic. He argues that if the diaconate is understood as inherently linked to the mission of the church then it ought not be theologically understood as 'voluntary.' Brodd, 2000, p. 32.

¹⁶ Sven-Erik Brodd critiques a professionalized understanding of the diaconate for the way that it defines the deacon's ministry in a functional manner. An excessive professionalization of the diaconate leads to a definition of the deacon's identity as one who has received a certain amount of professional or educational credentials rather than a person who has been chosen by the church and "gifted" by the Holy Spirit to perform a certain ministry. Brodd, 2000, p. 49.

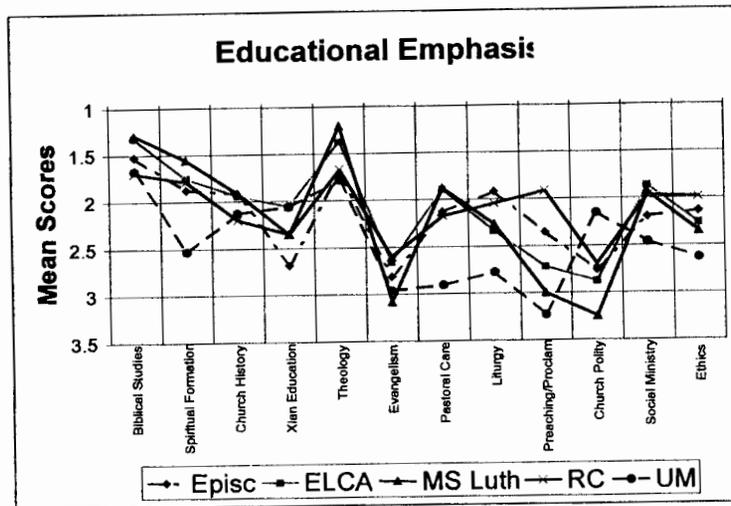


Figure 5. Denominational comparison of Educational Emphasis

While all denominations place a good deal of educational emphasis on the areas of Biblical Studies and Theology, the area of Evangelism uniformly receives the least emphasis. Mean scores for Evangelism were below 2.5 for all denominations. There is the greatest disparity among denominations in the areas of Pastoral Care, Liturgy, Preaching/Proclamation, and Church Polity.

The lack of emphasis placed on evangelism is difficult to interpret. There is considerable diversity in how "evangelism" is defined. The papal encyclical, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), for example, defines it very broadly whereas perhaps persons from a more Protestant evangelical background might limit its definition to direct, verbal, proclamation of the Gospel message. Regardless of how evangelism is defined, the low value placed on it in diaconal formation programs, according to this survey's results, is reason for reflection. Is evangelism being emphasized "across the curriculum" in such a way that it was not appropriately measured in this survey, or is evangelism not embraced as integral to the vocation of the diaconate? The unique role of deacons' vocation in the church and world and their identity as "go-between" agents suggest that training in evangelism should be a more integral part of diaconal formation.

The disparity among denominations in their educational emphasis is greatest in the areas of Spiritual Formation, Pastoral Care, Liturgy, Preaching/Proclamation, and Church Polity. The educational differences in

Liturgy and Preaching/Proclamation are understandable given the historic tendency in some denominations not to permit women members of the diaconate to preach or lead other aspects of the liturgy. The Lutheran denominations and the United Methodists have the strongest heritage of deaconess communities in the United States. This heritage helps to explain why United Methodists and members of the diaconate from both Lutheran denominations ranked "educational emphasis" low for preaching and liturgy. In contrast, Roman Catholic deacons are often asked to deliver homilies in their parishes.

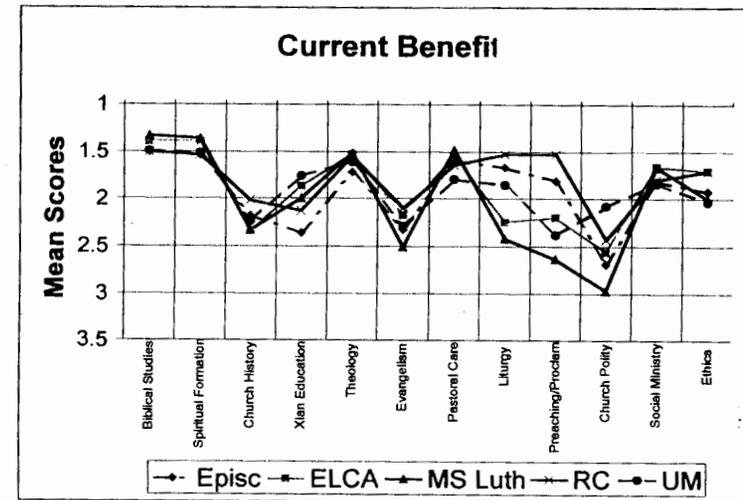


Figure 6. Denominational comparison of Current Benefit

Current benefit ratings show more uniform agreement among the denominations in terms of relative benefit of the subject areas. The areas of highest perceived benefit are Biblical Studies, Spiritual Formation, Theology, and Pastoral Care. The largest denominational difference is again in the areas of Liturgy, Preaching/Proclamation, and Church Polity.

Figures 7-11 present the same information in a different way. These figures show a comparison of the mean ratings for educational emphasis and current benefit for each category by denomination. It is in this configuration that it is possible to see perceived gaps between education and current ministry. The United Methodist response is unique, due to the large gaps (greater than half a point on a four point scale) between educational emphasis and current benefit in seven of the twelve areas. The other denominations have less pronounced gaps, with the largest discrepancies (over half a point difference) occurring in the areas of

Pastoral Care and Preaching for the Episcopalians, Ethics for the ELCA, Evangelism for the Missouri Synod Lutherans and Pastoral Care and Liturgy for the Roman Catholics.

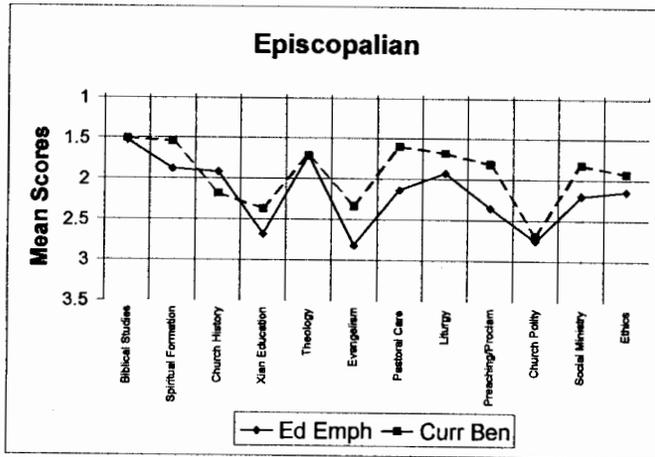


Figure 7. Episcopalian – educational emphasis v. current benefit

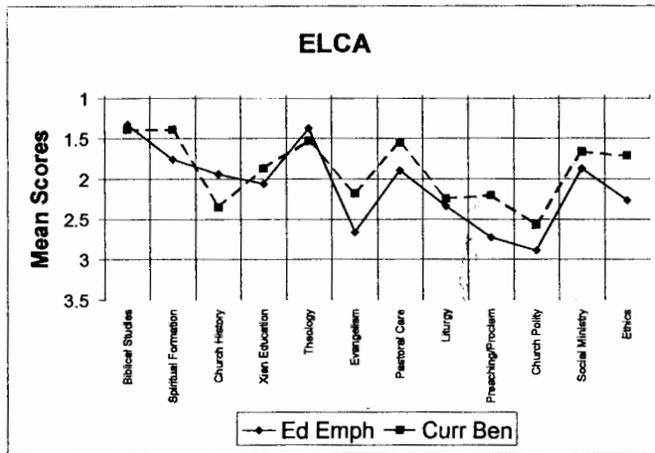


Figure 8. ELCA – educational emphasis v. current benefit

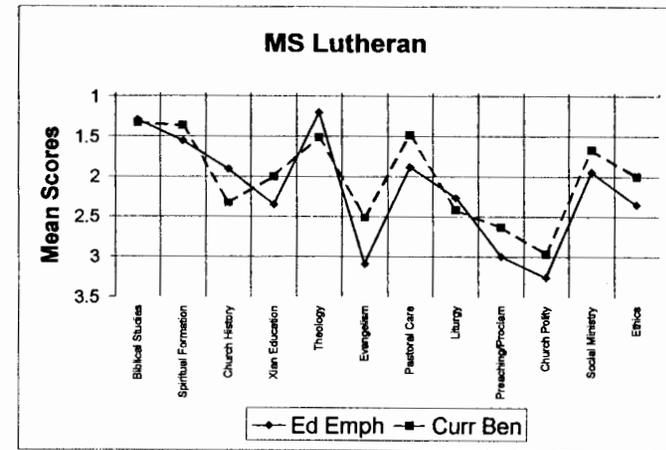


Figure 9. MS Lutheran – educational emphasis v. current benefit

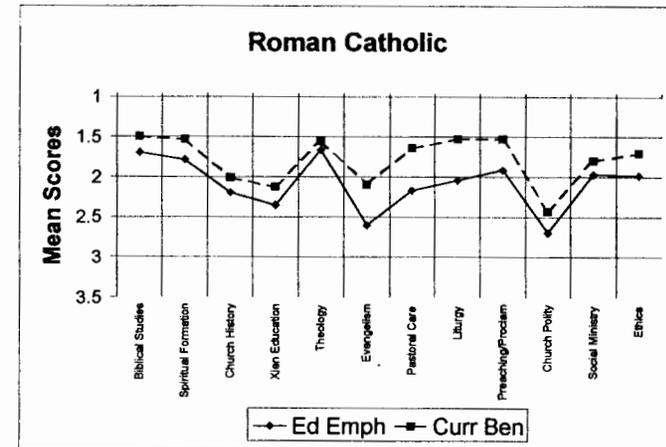


Figure 10. Catholic – educational emphasis v. current benefit

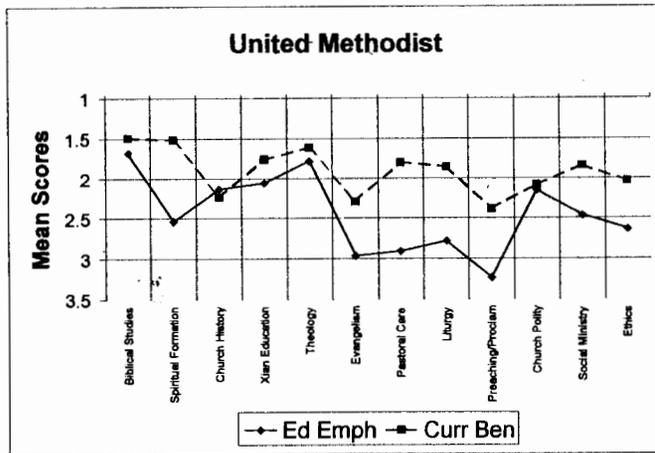


Figure 11. United Methodist – educational emphasis v. current benefit

When the distance between “educational emphasis” and “current benefit” ratings are looked at for each denomination, the areas of Evangelism, Preaching/Proclamation, and Pastoral Care have the greatest disparity in deacons’ ratings for all denominations. In the future, diaconate training programs might initially focus on these three items as areas of continuing education for deacons in North America. This would have the effect of reducing the perceived gap between educational emphasis and what deacons believe would be most beneficial for their life of ministry. Perceptions of “current benefit” may also change as deacons gain experience in their lives of ministry.

That the United Methodist diaconate shows the most disparity in educational emphasis and current benefit ratings of all the denominations ought not come as a surprise since the diaconate in United Methodism recently switched in 1996 from a lay office of diaconal minister to an ordained, “permanent” deacon. The disparities between liturgy and proclamation are most understandable since prior to 1996, diaconal ministers could not officiate at weddings and funerals and were generally not perceived as preaching a great deal. Since 1996, many deacons have found that their liturgical and preaching responsibilities have increased.

The Roman Catholics and United Methodists in particular are revising or putting into practice new educational norms for deacons. In the case of the United Methodist diaconate, few deacons have completed the current course of study that will be required for all persons entering the diaconate in upcoming years. Roman Catholic deacons are also awaiting approval from the Vatican of the new norms for education of their deacons. It would be valuable to compare the findings of this survey project with these new standards in education.

Continuing Education Needs

Respondents were asked about resources that they would like to be able to access more easily for their own continuing education and personal growth. They were given a list of nine items and asked to check as many as applied. The results of this question are presented in Table 1. The numbers reflect the percentage of each denominational respondent group who checked the item.

Table 1. Resources for continuing education

Resource	Episc	ELCA	MS Luth	RC	UM
Academic courses	32.3%	26.1%	20.6%	34.8%	31.6%
Mentoring opportunities	29.0%	40.6%	20.6%	21.4%	17.7%
Network with deacons in own denomination	46.2%	50.7%	35.3%	50.0%	47.8%
Network with deacons in other denominations	45.2%	52.2%	32.4%	36.6%	38.3%
Newsletters/periodicals with theol reflection	46.2%	55.1%	44.1%	52.7%	42.1%
Email or internet discussion groups	37.6%	33.3%	32.4%	27.7%	27.8%
Retreat opportunities	66.7%	55.1%	44.1%	47.3%	46.4%
Spiritual direction	62.4%	63.8%	52.9%	54.4%	56.9%
Continuing education specific to expertise	52.7%	43.5%	41.2%	57.1%	58.9%
Other	5.4%	10.1%	5.9%	12.5%	9.6%

There is uniform agreement that personal relationships, conferences, and other participatory education opportunities would be the most helpful educational resources in all denominations. In order of highest ratings to lowest ratings the categories which had the highest average response across all denominations were Spiritual Direction, Retreat Opportunities, and Continuing Education specific to expertise. Also noteworthy, an average of 40.9% of respondents in all denominations indicated that "networking with other members of the diaconate in other denominations" is desirable for their continuing education and personal growth. The educational resources respondents indicated as most helpful for them in the past, and their ratings of future desirable continuing education opportunities, reveal activities which denominations may choose to provide in the future.

Time/Value Study

To assess what ministries deacons were engaged in, the questionnaire asked about 24 different categories of work. Deacons ranked each of these categories on two, 4-point scales. The first scale indicated the amount of time they spent on the activity (1=frequently to 4=never). The second scale asked them how important they felt it was for them to perform the activity (1=above average importance to 4=not important at all).

On the questionnaire, the categories were grouped under four headings: Liturgical, Education, Pastoral Care and Social Action/Outreach. Rather than assume that the activities actually fit under each of these headings in the respondents' minds, a factor analysis was run on all 24 variables, first for time spent and secondly for importance.¹⁷ For both "time spent" and "importance" measurements, five factor groups seemed to possess the most interpretive value. (These five factor groups were almost identical for the two different rating categories.)

The factor analyses revealed that, rather than four major categories of activities, the respondents viewed the individual activities as constituting five types of work. These five factor groups, including the activities which make up each, are presented in Figure 12.

¹⁷ Factor analysis is an analytic technique used to (1) reduce a large number of variables into a smaller number of factor groups, and (2) to detect structure in the relationship between variables (which allows us to then classify or label those factor groups).

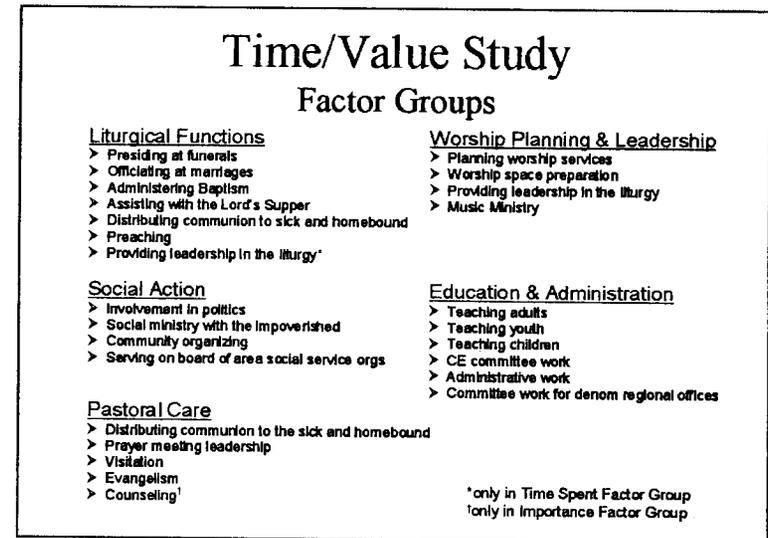


Figure 12. Time/Value Factor Groups

Having collapsed the 24 individual activities into five factor groups, it is then possible to compare the mean scores of each of the factor groups for each of the rating categories across denominations. These comparisons are presented in figures 13 and 14.

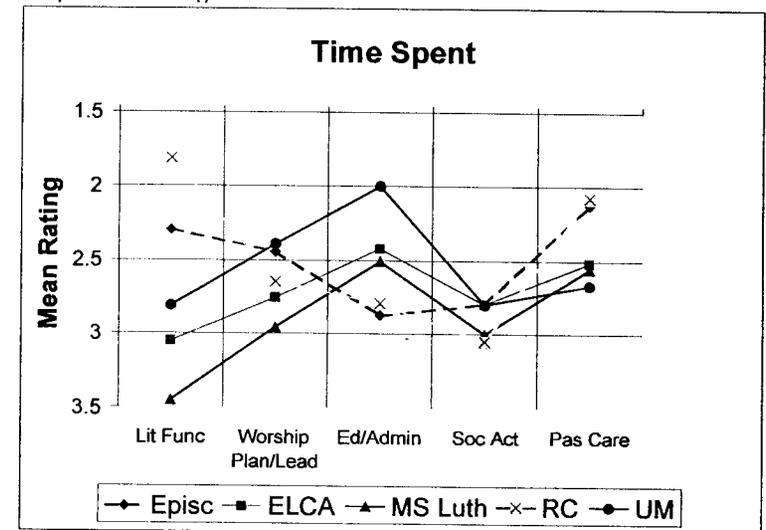


Figure 13. Time spent by denomination

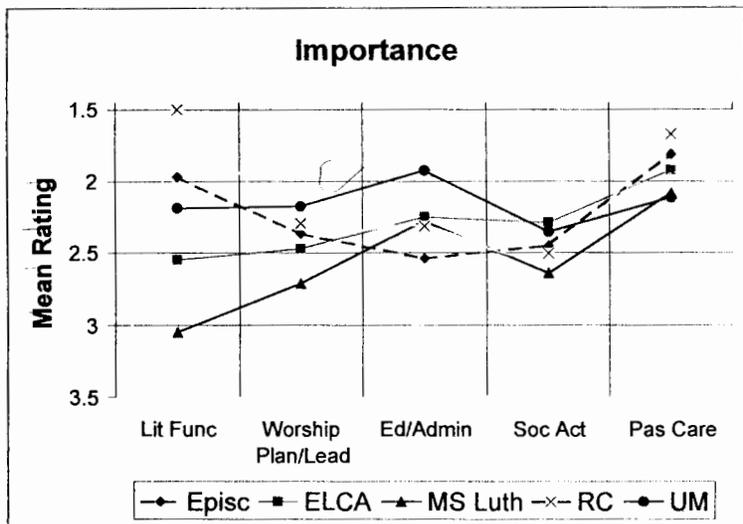


Figure 14. Importance by denomination

For both rating categories, the largest disparity among denominations is the factor of liturgical function, with the Catholics giving the most time and importance to these activities, and the Missouri Synod Lutherans giving the least. The factor of Social Action was the one rated most similarly across denominations, although as a factor, these activities are ranked fairly low compared with the other factors.¹⁸

Respondents in all denominations rated the factors higher in importance than in time spent. This similarity is true for all factor groups. The respondents generally find the time they spend on various activities to be proportional with their perceived importance (and possibly worthy of even more time, if they had it to spend). Among the factors themselves, Pastoral Care is ranked first or second by all denominations.

There are striking differences, however, among the other factor groups, most notably Liturgical Functions. These factor groups are ranked high by Catholics and Episcopalians and quite low by both Lutheran

¹⁸ The labels given to each of the factor groups were created by the author. They are only valuable for identifying the ways the 24 specific activities were similarly categorized by deacons themselves.

groups, with the United Methodists falling in between. Overall, the Missouri Synod Lutherans and Episcopalians seem to be doing the best in terms of having the time they spend on activities correlate with their perceived importance. Gaps between ratings of "time spent" and "importance" of more than half a point are found on some of the factor groups for the other three denominations: in Liturgical Functions, Social Action and Pastoral Care for both the ELCA and the United Methodists and in Education and Administration and Social Action for the Catholics.

The most noteworthy finding is the relatively low emphasis placed on social action activities, especially in the "time spent" ratings. This factor group included: involvement in politics, social ministry with the impoverished, community organizing, and serving on board of area social service agencies.

The relatively low priority placed on "social action" or advocacy activities of deacons seems to contradict the emphasis placed on these activities in their denominational publications. Among Catholics, H. Richard McCord found a similar disparity in his survey research and noted that documents from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops illustrated a greater emphasis on the deacon's role in charity even though their place in the ministry of liturgy and word was not denied. Compared to official documents, McCord found less of an emphasis on charity activities among deacons and laypersons he surveyed.

In their tending toward seeing the deacon as mainly a minister of charity, the United States bishops show both a familiarity with the history of this office and an attempt to read the contemporary signs of the times. They seem to be saying that the church today needs to emphasize in its ministry the works of charity and justice. Moreover, they could be interpreted as having an implicit concern that the duties of deacons and priests not become too interchangeable and confused.¹⁹

Similar emphases on ministering to the poor are also evident in other denominations. The 1996 United Methodist *Book of Discipline* connects the ministry of the deacon with the "Wesleyan passion for social holiness and ministry among the poor."²⁰

Given the emphasis that denominations place on deacons' ministry of charity and social action it is important to re-evaluate the extent to which

¹⁹ H. Richard McCord, 1985, p. 128.

²⁰ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 1996, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House), p. 187.

deacons are actually involved in such ministry. This survey project suggests that the emphasis on social action for the diaconate is not as great as the denominational documents might indicate. However, it must be acknowledged that the category "social action" identifies only measures deacons' rating for the four activities of "involvement in politics, social ministry with the impoverished, community organizing, and serving on board of area social service agency."

Effectiveness/Ineffectiveness in Ministry

Deacons were asked to list three ministry activities in which they feel they are most and least effective. The effectiveness and ineffectiveness responses are tallied for the following categories in table 2: Liturgical Activities/Music Ministry, Counseling/Pastoral Care/Visitation, Evangelism/Outreach, Education, Administration/Committee Work, Social Ministry/Social Justice/Work with Impoverished/Community Organizing, Spiritual Direction, and Preaching. These percentages do not reflect the percentage of persons responding with these answers but rather the percentage frequency of the answers themselves. A single respondent, for example, may have listed music ministry and presiding at funerals as the two activities he or she is most effective in. In this case, two ratings were recorded in the Liturgical Activities category.

Table 2. Perceived effectiveness by denomination

Ministry Category	Episc	ELCA	MS Luth	RC	UM
Liturgical	22.2%	15.4%	16.9%	20.8%	26.7%
Counseling/Pastoral Care/Visitation	30.8%	28.4%	28.6%	27.1%	17.0%
Evangelism/Outreach	4.1%	5.3%	2.6%	3.5%	2.9%
Education	10.5%	26.0%	19.5%	12.9%	28.6%
Administration/Committee Work	6.4%	7.1%	15.6%	3.5%	11.8%
Social Ministry/Social Justice/Politics	12.8%	14.2%	14.3%	12.5%	10.7%
Spiritual Direction	1.5%	0.6%	0.0%	1.2%	0.2%
Preaching/Proclamation	11.6%	3.0%	2.6%	18.4%	2.3%

All denominations scored Counseling/Pastoral Care/Visitation as the activity in which they are most effective except for the United

Methodists who rated it third. Christian Education and Liturgical Activities were the two most frequent responses for United Methodists. Episcopalians and Roman Catholics ranked liturgical activities as their second most effective ministry activity but were more likely to list the specific activity of assisting in the Lord's Supper than United Methodists.

Deacons in all denominations were most likely to list Social Action/Social Justice work as the area they feel they are least effective. Among United Methodists, Roman Catholics, Missouri Synod Lutherans, and Episcopalians, social justice/social ministry was listed over ten percent more frequently than the next frequently cited answer. The categories for the "least effective" rankings are the same as the "most effective" categories listed above. The frequency percentages are listed in Table 3 and again reflect frequency of actual responses rather than the frequency of actual respondents providing the answer.

Table 3. Perceived ineffectiveness by denomination

Ministry Category	Episc	ELCA	MS Luth	RC	UM
Liturgical	14.4%	24.8%	16.7%	14.0%	19.2%
Counseling/Pastoral Care/Visitation	9.2%	7.0%	6.3%	9.5%	16.5%
Evangelism/Outreach	7.5%	11.6%	8.3%	10.7%	7.4%
Education	17.2%	13.2%	12.5%	14.0%	4.9%
Administration/Committee Work	16.1%	10.1%	14.6%	14.0%	8.6%
Social Ministry/Social Justice/Politics	29.9%	29.4%	37.5%	37.1%	30.7%
Spiritual Direction	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%
Preaching/Proclamation	5.7%	3.9%	4.2%	0.0%	12.8%

The rankings for their "most effective" ministry activity correspond to what was found in the Time Spent/Importance factor groups. The fact that respondents identified Pastoral Care and Counseling activities most frequently suggests that such activities are perceived as more important than liturgical functions, even though in the Time Spent/Importance analysis, Pastoral Care and Liturgical Functions received similar ratings in the Episcopal and Roman Catholic denominations. The United Methodist

emphasis on education in the "most effective" rating category similarly reflects high marks in the Time Spent/Importance category.

The data for areas of least effectiveness are more instructive. There is general agreement in the Time Spent/Importance rankings and the frequency of listing Social action/Social justice concerns as areas of least effectiveness for all denominations. One possible explanation for the overwhelming feelings of least effectiveness in social action and social justice may be the perceived disparity between what denominational writings on diaconal identity and respondents' own examination of their ministerial priorities. It also seems plausible in a vocation that strives to interrelate church and world that there would be considerable tension in one direction or the other. The results of this survey suggest that deacons are being pulled toward more church-related ministries but feel some unease about this emphasis in their ministry.

Job Satisfaction and Sense of Feeling Appreciated

The next group of questions dealt with the issue of satisfaction and appreciation that the respondents felt in their vocation. The results here are positive. For all denominations, at least 89% of deacons expressed satisfaction in their current vocation. Deacons in all denominations were also virtually unanimous in believing they are sufficiently qualified for their particular ministry. Between 70% and 83% of deacons believed that they had enough authority to carry out the responsibilities of their ministry. 70.4% of Missouri Synod Lutherans ranked lowest with only 70.4% claiming to have enough authority. At the other extreme were the Episcopal deacons with 83.7% believing they had sufficient authority.²¹

When deacons were asked if they felt appreciated by various persons in their denominations (bishop, other area supervisors, denominational offices, presbyters, church congregation, other deacons, and lay leaders) the assessment was generally positive. Highest ratings of "feeling appreciated" were consistently given to those within the deacons' immediate circle of contact. The sense of appreciation deacons felt tended to decrease significantly in relation to bishops, other area supervisors, and denominational offices.

The Episcopal deacons were most likely to feel personally appreciated by their bishop. This corresponds with the Episcopal deacons' frequent mention of bishops as their reason for hope with regard to the

²¹ The diaconate's sense of having sufficient authority raises theological questions about how this authority is derived. See articles by Sven-Erik Brodd and Robert Hannaford in Gunnel Borgegård, Olav Fanuelsen, and Christine Hall (eds.), *The Ministry of the Deacon*, 2. *Ecclesiological Explorations*, (Uppsala, Nordic Ecumenical Council: 2000).

future of the diaconate. Ratings for personal appreciation were lower for other denominations but for all denominations at least 40% of deacons stated that they felt personally appreciated by their bishops. Episcopal dioceses tend to be of a smaller size than some of the other denominations which would likely contribute to higher ratings for deacons' sense of being personally appreciated. Creative ways of improving the relationship between bishops and deacons should be explored, especially given the historic importance of the relationship between bishops and deacons in the early church. Still, overall ratings for appreciation are generally good for these denominations.

The highest marks for feeling personally appreciated are found between Roman Catholic deacons and Roman Catholic priests. The high rating for other presbyters is understandable given the continued priest shortage in recent years and the perception that Roman Catholic deacons can "lighten the load" of parish responsibilities for the priest. It would be interesting to learn how these partnerships between deacon and priest are strengthened and how they also might contribute to or detract from the perception of deacons as an order with a distinctive vocation.

Vision

The final set of questions asked the respondents to rate these same categories of people with whom they interact in terms of the vision they have for the diaconate. Respondents selected from the following possible answers: (1) There is a very clear vision of the role of the diaconate; (2) There is somewhat of an understanding of its role, but nothing very specific; (3) There is some confusion about its role; (4) There is much confusion about its role; (5) I don't really know.

It is clear that there is still much work to be done in developing a vision for the diaconate across all denominations. Deacons feel generally appreciated across the denominations but the vision for what the diaconate is or could be is less well developed. The rankings that deacons gave to others for a vision of the diaconate were uniformly lower than the ranking given for feelings of appreciation. This ought not come as a surprise since a vision for the diaconate requires a considerable amount of education on what the diaconate has been in the past and could be in the future.

The Lutheran denominations reported the greatest percentage of respondents who believe their diaconal colleagues have a clear vision. Respondents from both Lutheran denominations were also most likely to perceive their bishops and other area supervisors as not having a clear vision of the diaconate. The "vision distance" between the deaconesses/diaconal ministers and the bishops or "other area

supervisors" in the Lutheran denominations suggests there is a great diversity of visions and/or disagreement among these groups in understanding the diaconate. Sixty percent of bishops and "other area supervisors" in both Lutheran denominations were identified as having "some or much confusion" or simply identified as people with unknown perspectives on the diaconate.

In the area of "vision," there are also strikingly low scores given to presbyters in both the United Methodist and ELCA churches. Seventy percent of deacons in these churches perceive presbyters as having "some or much confusion." Such confusion may result from both denominations having recently altered their understanding of the diaconate.

Respondents in the Roman Catholic and Episcopal churches are the only ones who perceive that more than half of laypersons have at least a general understanding of the diaconate. This is certainly better than what is found in United Methodism – with only 34% of laypersons having at least a general understanding, but it is still less than ideal. Deacons should explore ways of making their vocation better understood for all laity in the church. Denominational offices and the episcopacy also have a significant role to play in constructing a vision for the diaconate.

Conclusion

This survey research has provided the diaconal organizations and denominations in North America with a great deal of information about deacons' perceptions of their ministry. Three findings seem to stand out for their potential as areas of ecumenical cooperation.

First, the differences between "educational emphasis" and "current benefit" ratings are remarkable for their similarities across denominations. Evangelism, Preaching/Proclamation, and Pastoral Care were the areas that showed the greatest disparity between educational emphasis and current benefit. The data suggests that denominations could benefit from emphasizing these areas in their educational programs.

The second important finding is that respondents rated Spiritual Direction, Retreat Opportunities, and Continuing Education Specific to Expertise as the three most helpful areas of continuing education. There are ways of bringing together an emphasis on spiritual direction with an emphasis on pastoral care – both items being areas that deacons indicated they would like more education. Retreats sponsored by an ecumenical group could be one forum where these issues could be addressed in more detail.

The third important finding of this research project is the disparity between deacons' overwhelming feelings of "least effectiveness" in the area of social action/social justice work and denominational teaching which tends to emphasize this dimension of diaconal identity a great deal. The many reasons for this disparity should be explored further. Greater efforts might also be made in supporting deacons in gaining more education in the areas of social justice ministries. Because the diaconate historically has been virtually identified with social ministries of one sort or another it is understandable that deacons might be particularly sensitive to their assessment of how they are living up to this "diaconal ideal." Theological efforts to re-align the foundations of the diaconate's identity from a functionalist understanding of their vocation toward a more ecclesiological understanding may be a particularly helpful way forward in understanding theologically why deacons' sense of ineffectiveness in social action/social justice ministry is so overwhelming.

The results of this survey project indicate that there is an ecumenical opportunity for mutual strengthening of the diaconate in the North American denominations. An ecumenical challenge nevertheless exists to reconcile different educational emphases and different areas of ministry strength which are found in each of the denominations. Finally, the findings of this survey have the potential of leading toward ecumenical cooperation between Europe and North America which, to date, has not been as strong as the intra-European ecumenical dialogue on the diaconate.

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