

**International Anglican-Roman Catholic-Ukrainian Catholic
Conference on the Diaconate**
The Ministry of the Deacon: Word and Sacrament, Charity and Justice

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Last May I was privileged to attend a most remarkable conference in Regina, Saskatchewan, at Campion College. The conference was organized by Deacon Canon Michael Jackson, the longest-serving deacon in the Anglican Church of Canada. The conference grew out of conversations between the Most Rev. Donald Bolen, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Regina and the Right Rev. Robert Hardwick, Anglican Bishop of Qu'Appelle. Both of these men are strong supporters of the diaconate and, with Deacon Jackson, chose to offer an academic, ecumenical conference on the diaconate in their community.

This conference consisted of the presentation of papers rather than workshops. There were nine sessions in which presenters offered papers on topics of importance to deacons: The Transitional Diaconate, The Theological Basis of the Diaconate, Women and the Diaconate, The Diaconate as an Ecumenical Opportunity, The Diaconate in the Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches, The Prophetic Ministry of Deacons, Deacons and Worship, Diaconal Formation and Diaconal Relationships. The presentations were well-researched and extremely informative. After the first talk, I began to bring my computer and I just typed non-stop as I was listening in an attempt to gather in all the information coming my way. I ended up with 16 single-lined pages. Deacon Jackson is seeking to find a way to distribute these papers. When he does, I will see to it that they are available on the AED website.

About two-thirds of the 90 participants were Anglicans, most of them deacons. The rest were Roman Catholics, mostly deacons and deacons' wives – those from the Archdiocese of Regina were having their own meeting after the conference. I was struck by both the differences and similarities in the understandings of diaconal ministry and the challenges of being a deacon. The people who offered papers on the Prophetic Role of the Deacon were all women: Deacons Susanne Watson Epting and Phina Borgeson, who spoke about the work of social justice in the world, and Roman Catholic Sister Gloria Marie Jones, the daughter of a deacon, who spoke about the spiritual roots of the prophetic role of the deacon in the life and ministry of Jesus. Roman Catholic Deacon Fritz Bauerschmidt from Baltimore spoke at length and hilariously about the challenges of being a deacon in a church whose leadership tends to focus on the priesthood. When he spoke of his own ministry, however, it was focused on pastoral work in the parish – weddings, baptisms, funerals and being deacon in the Eucharist. He did not reference social justice work outside the church.

Sub-Deacon Brian Butcher, from the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church, spoke about deacons in the Orthodox and Eastern Churches. In these churches, the role of deacon is crucial to liturgy: it is not possible to have a liturgy without a deacon present. I did not entirely understand that until we attended a Ukrainian Catholic Vespers. It was the first time I had attended an Eastern or Orthodox service. While the bishop stood still in

contemplation, the deacon walked around the altar and chanted while the sub-deacon led the community in its part of the chanted service. I found it numinous and beautiful. I could also understand that the role of deacons in these churches is primarily liturgical. The call to “speak to the church about the needs, concerns and hopes of the world” is not a part of what they do.

I had not realized before how complex the communities of the Eastern and Orthodox churches are. As we began to talk about women in the diaconate, Sub-Deacon Butcher explained that there are some Eastern Churches who allow women to be deacons, but the vast majority do not. Roman Catholic Sister Gloria spoke of leading her delegation of Prioresses to meet with Pope Francis, which led to the formation of a task force to discuss women in the diaconate. I kept wondering what it was like for these folks to present papers on the question of women as suitable to be deacons as they were speaking to a group over half of whom were women deacons. Sister Gloria began her talk by saying she felt like she had been transported to a place she did not even know existed.



Panel on the Prophetic Ministry of the Deacon: Deacon Susanne Watson Epting, Sister Gloria Marie Jones and Deacon Phina Borgeson

Deacon Maylanne Maybee’s talk on ecumenism included the concept called “Receptive Ecumenism.” This is an ecumenical focus on what we can learn from other denominations rather than what we can teach them. She felt that Anglicans can learn from the Roman Catholic Church the following: a clear connection to the origins of the church; formal processes of decision-making and authority; high standards of formation and education for deacons; and an emphasis on a stable personal life and balance of personal ministry and family. She felt that the Roman Catholic Church can learn the following from us: the impact of the experience of deaconesses – creativity, resourcefulness and a pioneering spirit; deacons who are really called to be deacons rather than not allowed to be priests; the importance of deacons doing useful and important work in the world.

I would like to thank Diakonia of the Americas and Caribbean who sent me to this conference as their representative. I will do all I can to make the tremendous, high-quality information presented available to Episcopal deacons and anyone else who wants it. I believe it would benefit the diaconate greatly if other communities could find a way to create diaconal experiences like this.