

Article

The Diaconate of All Believers: Theology, Formation, Practice

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Abstract: This article proposes an innovative direction for Christian social practice by reclaiming and revitalizing the diaconate of all believers. While the ministry of the laity received attention in ecumenical circles in past decades, the diaconate of all believers now needs elaboration and reception. A focus on the diaconate of all believers can provide a vital theological and practical paradigm for expanding Christian social practice. In this paradigm, diaconia engages the world through the involvements of Christian people in all their roles and relationships in life, including family, work, civic engagement, and church. Christian communities need to undertake focused education and intentional formation of the diaconate of all believers through their worship and educational practices. The liturgy provides substance for this formation process. Reclaiming the diaconate of all believers as a primary expression of the church's diaconal practice means reorienting the ministry of deacons, pastors, and bishops in relation to the universal diaconate. The recovery of the diaconate of all believers has significance for a revised ecclesiology and theology of ministry that places ministry in daily life at the forefront of Christian social practice.

Keywords: baptism; daily life; diaconate of all believers; diaconia; ecclesiology; formation; laity; ministry; ordination; vocation; worship

1. Introduction

This essay first affirms the service of the baptized as the primary agents of God's mission in the world, what can be designated as "the diaconate of all believers". In this paradigm, diaconia engages the world through the involvements of Christian people in social practice through all their roles and relationships in life, including family, work, civic engagement (including in the local community), and church. What was called the "priesthood of all believers" (universal priesthood) at the time of the Reformation comes to more dynamic expression as the diaconate of all believers today, due especially to the clerical connotations of the term "priesthood". Second, Christian communities need to invest in an intentional formation of the diaconate of all believers through their worship and educational practices (Apostola 1998, pp. 65–70 and 75–78). Worship practices need to be reimagined as the formation of the baptized for their diaconal vocation to the service of neighbors in the world. In this essay, the term "vocation" refers to the identity received by Christian people in baptism and the calling to live out one's Christian faith in daily life. Third, the church's theology of ministry needs to be transformed to focus the mission on accompanying and equipping the diaconate of all believers in response to the world's suffering. How can the ministry of deacons, pastors, and bishops become integrally linked to the ministry of all the baptized in their roles and relationships in daily life?

The retrieval of the biblical theme of *diakonia* by the ecumenical church is one of the most significant and promising developments in contemporary theology. Although the ecumenical movement paid keen attention to the role of the laity in the church during the post-World War II era from the late 1940s to the 1960s, this focus was redirected in subsequent decades and requires renewed development today. In the World Council of Churches (WCC) document, *Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diaconia*, three components of ecumenical diaconia are highlighted: (1) "It is action, or performing services, by using



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words and deeds;" (2) "Christian faith motivates this action and views it as an expression of Christian discipleship;" and (3) "Diaconal intervention reflects social reality and seeks in its performance to alleviate human suffering and promote justice, peace, and human dignity" (World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance 2022, p. 16). Each of these components points to an intentional, embodied, outwardly facing engagement in mission, emphasizing the church as a verb. Whereas attention to the diaconate of all believers thus far has received formal recognition in recent ecumenical discussion, it deserves fuller attention, theological elaboration, and implementation within the scope of Christian social practice.

2. Universal Diaconate of All Believers

At the time of the Reformation, the universal priesthood made a radical claim about the equal status of all believers before God based on baptism. It was designed to overcome the dependency of the laity on the ministrations of a clerical hierarchy. Luther wrote:

For thus it is written in 1 Peter 2, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a priestly royalty". Therefore, we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians. But the priests, as we call them, are ministers chosen from among us. All that they do is done in our name; the priesthood is nothing but a ministry. This is what we learn from 1 Corinthians 4: "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (Wengert 2008, pp. 112–13).

Due to the connotations of the term "laity" as meaning amateur or lacking expertise, it would be better today to refer to them as the "Christian people".¹

To affirm baptism as the primary ordination of Christian people lends significance and status to the baptized as ministers of the church (Apostola 1998, p. 62). By teaching baptism as ordination to ministry in the diaconate of all believers, the church needs to undertake intentional formation of the baptized for service in daily life.²

Martin Luther's teaching about the universal priesthood of all believers remains an unfulfilled promise of the Reformation. If justification and vocation are the twin pillars of the Reformation, justification has been given priority, while vocation has never realized the promise of Luther's teaching (Tranvik 2016, p. 164). Instead of developing Luther's theology of vocation in tandem with justification, the universal priesthood has been marginalized.

The gospel occurs through the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. The law, in its first use, sends the baptized out through baptismal vocation into their respective stations in daily life: "domestic life, officialdom, labor, kinships, talents with correlative stations" (Wingren 1957, p. 28). Christian people live out these stations under the sign of the cross, taking suffering upon themselves for the sake of neighbors in the ordinary tasks of daily life (Wingren 1957, pp. 29–30, 72–73). In exercising these stations, the Christian serves as a "mask of God" in service to others (Wingren 1957, p. 180).

The WCC was formed in 1948 by the joining of two movements: "Faith and Order" and "Life and Work". One impetus for the formation of the WCC arose from antecedent lay movements, especially the World YMCA (since 1855), the World YWCA (since 1894), and the World Student Christian Federation, founded in 1895 (Goldie 1987, p. 308). "The Methodist layman John R. Mott has summed up their vision in what was probably the first major publication of the ecumenical discussion on the laity" (Apostola 1998, p. 36).³ At the formation of the WCC, the place of the laity in the life of the churches was one of the central themes given attention.⁴ This focus built directly upon on the work of the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, Switzerland, directed by Suzanne de Diétrich and Hendrik Kraemer (Apostola 1998, p. 37). At the first assembly of the WCC at Amsterdam in 1948, a committee was formed on the "significance of the laity in the church" with Kraemer as its secretary (Adler 1991, p. 581). Laity conferences were subsequently held at Bad Boll, Germany (1951) and Buffalo, New York, USA (1952), accompanied by publication of the bulletin, *Laymen's Work*, from 1951–1955.

At the second assembly of the WCC at Evanston, Illinois, USA (1954), one of the six major themes addressed the rediscovery of the laity. Subsequently, the Secretariat for Laymen's Work was replaced by a regular Department on the Laity, led by Hans-Ruedi Weber from 1955–1961 (Weber 1986). The periodical *Laity* began to be published in 1959, co-edited by Weber and Madeleine Barot. It "had a wide circulation and considerable impact on the ecumenical thinking of laypeople and church leaders throughout the world" (Adler 1991, p. 581). At the third assembly of the WCC, held at New Delhi, India (1961), the influence of the Laity Department was central in all three sections of the gathering: witness, service, and unity. Three lay persons addressed the assembly on the theme, "The Laity: The Church in the World". The message from this assembly emphasized this theme: "We Christian people, wherever we are, are a letter from Christ to the world" (Adler 1991, p. 582).

The shift away from the laity as a thematic focus toward other concerns was notable at the fourth assembly of the WCC at Uppsala, Sweden (1968). Reporting retrospectively on the shifting priorities within the WCC, Konrad Raiser wrote: "The 'laity' has almost disappeared from ecumenical discussion. This is all the more striking in that, only a generation ago, 'laity' was an ecumenical keyword" (Apostola 1998, p. 12). Raiser named three emerging themes toward which the work on the laity was redirected: (1) Social change according to the themes of "justice, peace, and the integrity of creation;" (2) Advocacy for the status of women in society; and (3) Attention to ecumenical questions about the ordained ministry of deacons, pastors/priests, and bishops in the *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* process of the 1980s (Apostola 1998, pp. 12–22). The program on the laity in the WCC existed until 1971 when it was absorbed into the sub-unit on Renewal and Congregational Life. Additional consultations were held in the 1990s, including at Nashville, Tennessee (1995). The work from this consultation was published in the book, *A Letter from Christ to the World: An Exploration of the Role of the Laity in the Church Today* (Apostola 1998), although the focus on the laity never regained the momentum of earlier efforts.

Already in the 1950s, ecumenical and theological literature joined the focus on the laity to the work of diaconia. "All the members are baptized, so to speak, into or stamped with this 'diaconal' seal and should acknowledge it with heart and mind" (Kraemer 1958, p. 153).

The Church then as a whole being ministry or diaconia, it follows that, theologically speaking, the ministry of the laity is as a constituent for the true being and calling of the Church as the ministry of the "ministry" (the office-bearers or clergy). Both, the ministry of the clergy and the ministry of the laity, are facts inherent in the Church's being, are divine data (Kraemer 1958, p. 154).

This proposal has aimed to recover in our time the significance of the diaconia that vitalized the earliest church: "The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem; and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).

For Christian people, vocation is grounded in the promises of God in Christ made at holy baptism. Baptism gives an identity to the baptized as those unconditionally loved and forgiven. Baptismal existence involves daily dying to sin (cross) and daily rising to life in Christ (resurrection). The "diaconia of all believers" originates in baptism, where the baptized person is joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit bestows spiritual gifts to be shared in service to others in Christian social practice.

At baptism, a commission is given from Jesus: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:16). The gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit are for the common good (cf. 1 Cor 12:4–7). According to *Diaconia in Context*, these gifts are the grounding of "the priesthood of all believers," which "can be reformulated as the diaconia of all believers to which all baptized are called and equipped, regardless of their apparent status or social condition" (Lutheran World Federation 2009, p. 27). The "diaconate of all believers" is a form of "individual diaconia,

which normally is spontaneous in everyday life and expressed through a wide variety of good works" (Lutheran World Federation 2009, p. 47).

Diaconia belongs to all the baptized as "a dimension integral to the nature and mission of the church" (World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance 2022, p. 10). *Called to Transformation* gives new ecumenical attention to "the diaconate of all believers, based on the view that God's spirit graciously empowers and equips for discipleship, from the youngest to the oldest, men and women (Acts 2:17)" (World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance 2022, pp. 16–17).

From this follows that the diaconal vocation in the first place relates to everyday life: the family that cares for its members and in particular children and the elderly, the neighborhood and the workplace, civil society, and other arenas for social action (World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance 2022, p. 17).

There is clear recognition that "diaconal activities organized by local congregations and other church structures, including professional diaconal agents, depend on and are largely borne by the diaconate of all believers" (World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance 2022, p. 17). How can the church be mobilized by intentional focus on equipping the baptized for the diaconate of daily life?

While these ecumenical affirmations of the universal diaconate are crucial for the revitalization of the church, they have remained largely undeveloped beyond these formal acknowledgements. The homeostasis that strangles the vitality of the institutional church—which can be called "churchification"⁵—remains a formidable challenge to reconstituting the church's mission through the service of the baptized diaconate. In North America, a deep rift exists between what happens in the name of the institutional church and the rest of people's lives. In this regard, the churches of the North have much to learn from the churches of Africa, South America, and Asia about validating and equipping all the baptized for their vocations in daily life (Jenkins 2006).

The primary vocation of Christian people is to live out the covenant God in Christ made with them in baptism: "To live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth".⁶ At the time of the Reformation, the universal priesthood was a radical claim about the equal status of all believers before God based on baptism. It was designed to overcome the dependency of the Christian people (laity) on the ministrations of a clerical hierarchy.

Baptism needs to be understood as a rite of ordination to the ministry for all Christian people. "Baptism and confirmation constitute the ordination of the laity, which makes it possible for them to participate in Christ's ministry in and for the world" (Apostola 1998, p. 9). Affirming baptism as the primary ordination of Christian people grants significance and status to all the baptized as ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. By teaching baptism as ordination to ministry in the diaconate of all believers, the formation of the baptized for their service to others in daily life must be taken as seriously as theological education for deacons and pastors. The formation of believers for the universal diaconate begins with focused attention in the church's worship, education, community, and leadership practices.⁷

The baptized live out their callings by serving neighbors in their arenas of daily life. Luther, at the time of the Reformation, sought to elevate the status of the daily work of the baptized in a context in which the work of ministry had become equated with the work of clerics.

Each shoemaker, smith, farmer, and the like has his own office and trade, and, nevertheless, all are equally consecrated priests and bishops. And each with his office or work ought to provide aid and service to the others, so that all kinds of work can be set up in a community to support body and soul, just as the members of the body all serve each other (Luther [1520] 2008, p. 13).⁸

Today, it is useful to focus on four arenas for Christian social practice in living out baptismal vocation: family, work, civic engagement, and church (or the religious institution of other faiths). For example, in the family, the baptized serve as ministers to their neighbors as a son/daughter, sister/brother, aunt/uncle, spouse, or parent. In the workplace, the baptized serve neighbors in their designated roles, responsibilities, and relationships. In civic engagement, the baptized care for the common good, for example, through volunteer work in the local community, caring for creation, and participating in the political process. Through church, the baptized gather for worship, community, and education and then are sent into varied forms of service, including sharing the good news and caring for the suffering ones. Given today's urgent climate emergency, it is imperative to take seriously that each of these arenas is located within creation, whose elements, flora, and fauna are also neighbors given by God to be served.

What does this look like in practical terms? Christian social practice involves caring for an elderly parent or serving meals in one's family as much as working on a church committee. It encompasses the work done for an employer, both in terms of the designated responsibilities and the established relationships, both of which are an occasion for ministering to the world's needs. It embraces that working on projects to improve the neighborhood and advocating for issues in the political sphere are necessary means by which God works through Christian people for the common good. Furthermore, it means expanding the imagination of the church for how members of the body of Christ already are serving as ministers in their roles and relationships in daily life, not just in what they are doing for the church as an institution. One of the primary schools for learning the practice of ministry in daily life is through formation of the baptized at worship.

3. Worship Practices as Diaconal Formation for the Baptized

The historic *ordo* of Christian worship immerses the faithful in liturgical practices that form them for diaconia in the world (Schmit 2009).⁹ Often, people have a difficult time making connections between the things done at the worship service and the things they are called to do upon leaving the church building after worship. However, in fact, everything done at worship is directly related to forming worshippers for a way of life as Christian people in the world.

... the primary task of political ethics for the Christian churches today must be looked for not so much in political influence in particular cases or sectors, as in regaining the position *and* function of the congregation in worship, where they can develop their political form of life in accordance with the gospel (Wannenwetsch 2004, p. 163).

Those participating in liturgy not only are worshipping God but also engaging in rituals that immerse them in the way of Jesus Christ, who makes them members of the body of Christ, engraves upon them Christ's own character, and equips them for Christian social practice.

Worship practices truly are life practices.¹⁰ This claim is predicated on a basic conviction: God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit is the primary actor as the people gather for worship. To describe liturgy as "the work of the people" may obscure the central conviction of a theology of worship. The people are not the primary actors at worship; instead, God in Christ is the primary actor who is dynamically forming the people in life practices. Worship is intrinsically about what God in Christ is enacting upon the assembly, not merely an activity by the people.

What is God doing at worship? God is actively forming the people in a pattern that corresponds to the way of Jesus Christ.¹¹ Through each element of the worship service, God etches upon the people the character of Jesus Christ, which shapes them as they are sent to live out Christian social practices in their daily lives (Nessan 2010a, pp. 45–49). Repetition of the distinctive parts of the liturgy imprints upon the faithful both a way of being and a way acting in service to neighbors in the arenas of family, work, civic engagement, and church.

Each element of the worship service makes a distinctive contribution to the formation of the diaconate of all believers.¹²

Invocation: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”. The naming of the Trinity at the start of the liturgy is a signal that everything done in the worship service involves the activity of the Triune God, who promises to be present and transform the lives of those gathered according to the practices undertaken at worship. The practice of naming the Holy Trinity and making the sign of the cross join worshippers inextricably to their baptismal identity in Christ, the source of Christian vocation for service to neighbors in daily life.¹³

Confession and Forgiveness: Certainly, the confession of sin and receiving forgiveness involves admitting our fault and responsibility for sinning, even as the absolution grants God’s forgiveness and pardon for Christ’s sake. However, this worship practice also is formation for a life practice. Learning to admit mistakes, ask for forgiveness, and practice reconciliation is a way of life for Christian people every day. Those who confess sins and receive forgiveness from God in Christ at worship, thereby learn to practice confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation in their relationships with other people in daily life.¹⁴

Thanksgiving for Baptism: The rite of Thanksgiving for Baptism is an alternative to confession and forgiveness at the opening of worship (Lathrop 2005, pp. 59–63). Thanksgiving for Baptism instructs the people to embrace God’s call to renew baptism each new day. Because ministry in daily life derives from the promises and call of Jesus Christ made at baptism, the frequent use of Thanksgiving for Baptism can connect the believer to the lasting significance of baptism for living out baptismal vocation in Christian social practice through neighborly love.

Gathering Song: There are many different themes in the hymns and songs used at worship. The lyric of a particular hymn immerses the people in remembering God’s saving deeds and connects them with what it means to be a community of persons following the way of Christ. The music of the hymns penetrates wholistically, affecting people at a level deeper than conscious thought. Favorite hymns provide topics for talking to others about the promises of God and inspiration to live according to the words. The very act of singing hymns teaches worshippers that one’s entire life is meant to be a song of praise to God. Everything done in life is offered as a song to glorify the God who creates, loves, and sustains life.

Kyrie: “In peace let us pray . . . Lord, have mercy”. This ancient prayer sung at worship teaches that God’s way is peace and mercy. The people pray for peace for the world, for the church, and for the unity of all. As the assembly sings this song of peace, asking for mercy, and repeats these petitions week after week, God forms them to become people of peace and mercy, who are becoming the peace and mercy of God in relation to others every day.

Song of Praise: The people sing: “Glory to God in the highest and peace to God’s people on earth” and “This is the feast of victory of our God. Alleluia”. These songs of praise draw the faithful into communion with Jesus Christ, whose victory over the principalities and powers means God’s life ultimately prevails over all the forces of suffering and death. Through these hymns, the people are formed for peace, courage, mercy, and hope to face their struggles and losses. The songs of praise are instructive about the way of Christ’s cross and resurrection, not only when gathered at worship but for daily living in a world of suffering and distress. Called by the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ, the people take up the cross and follow him into places of suffering and engage in Christian social practice.

Prayer of the Day: This prayer asks God in Christ to form the people in accordance with the times and seasons of the church year and the assigned Bible readings for the week. Each prayer makes a unique request, asking God to grant the gifts needed for faith and life.

Reading of the Word: As the assembly rehearses the Psalms inherited from the Jewish people, claiming these songs and prayers as their own, and then listens to God’s Word in the lectionary readings, the spirit transforms these ancient words into a living word addressed to their own context. “The scriptures function as the script of the people of God, the constitution of the baptismal city, and the fuel of Christian imagination” (Smith 2009,

p. 195). Through the reading of scripture, God is present as the Living One who makes God's promises come alive as good news for those who hear. The living word forms them through these stories to be people of the Word. This provides orientation amidst all the other words that compete for attention. By this Word, Jesus Christ nourishes the people both on the day of worship and the rest of the week.

Sermon: The preacher serves as God's messenger for proclaiming God's Word, bridging between what this Word has meant to the faith community in previous generations, and what this Word means today (Schmit 2009, pp. 180–83). The preacher shares a message that functions both as law and gospel. The sermon, as law, challenges the hearers of the Word to examine their lives and recognize their need for God and God's gifts. The sermon as gospel announces the good news in Jesus Christ to bring the gifts of Christ: mercy, love, forgiveness, grace, peace, hope, and eternal life. The sermon sets hearers *free from* every form of bondage that prevents them from being the persons God created them to be. At the same time, the sermon as the living Word of God sets hearers *free for* lives of service to neighbors in Christian social practice. The people are sent to engage the needs of the world as they live out their baptismal callings for the sake of others.

Creed: "I/We believe . . . ". The words of either the Apostles or Nicene Creed are confessed at worship in communion with those who have lived for these convictions in previous generations and in solidarity with all Christian people throughout the world today. The creeds serve as a "pledge of allegiance" (Smith 2009, p. 190). These are the things for which one stands as a Christian. These are the beliefs according to which one intends to live and, if necessary, for which one would be willing to die, as did martyrs of old and as Christian people suffer yet today under difficult circumstances. Confessing the Creed grounds the faithful in core convictions and forms them to live according to these commitments. The people are called to live as members of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, practice the forgiveness of sins, and trust in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. The threefold form of these Creeds joins worshippers to faith in the Triune God. Confession of the Apostles' Creed explicitly reconnects believers to the confession of faith made at baptism and their baptismal vocation to serve others through ministry in daily life.

Prayers of Intercession: " . . . let us pray for the church, those in need, and all of creation". The prayers of intercession—which include petitions for the mission of the church; the wellbeing of creation; peace and justice in the world; the poor, oppressed, sick, bereaved, and lonely; all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit; the congregation; special concerns; and those who have died—clearly bring these concerns to the attention of God and ask God's benevolent intervention (Lathrop 2005, pp. 44–46). As worshippers utter these prayers, they participate in a cry of lament in solidarity with all the needy and suffering ones of the world.¹⁵ At the same time, the prayers of the church function as a mission statement. If the people dare to ask God to address these prayer petitions, those who pray declare these are also things to which they commit their own time and energy. For example, those who pray for the hungry or the healing of Mr. Johnson not only turn these things over to God but also ask God to align their own energies with feeding the hungry and showing concern for Mr. Johnson. The prayers of intercession provide direct connections between worship and the service to which people are committed in their daily lives (Smith 2009, pp. 193–94).

Offering: "Blessed are you, O God, maker of all things. Through your goodness, you have blessed us with these gifts: ourselves, our time, and our possessions. Use us, and what we have gathered, in feeding the world with your love, through the one who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord". The people owe their entire lives to God and, through the offering, present a sign of their intention to live as God's people with all they have. "The reconciled and redeemed body of Christ is marked by cruciform practices that counter the liturgies of consumption, hoarding, and greed that characterize so much of late modern culture" (Smith 2009, p. 205). The worshippers offer signs from their livelihood in gratitude for the life and blessings God has given them. This offering is made available for the common good.

Passing of the Peace: “The peace of Christ be with you always. And, also, with you”. Passing the peace is one of the most tangible moments in the liturgy for linking a worship practice with Christian social practice. As Christ grants peace to the people, they exchange this peace with one another at worship and become those who are called to pass this peace to others beyond the sanctuary into the streets. At worship, the faithful learn Christ’s way of peace and share this peace in their spheres of influence throughout the week.

Great Thanksgiving and Communion: “The body of Christ, given for you. The blood of Christ, shed for you”. In the Great Thanksgiving, the people recall the gift of Christ’s death on the cross, his resurrection, and all the benefits received from Christ’s generosity. “It is indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should, at all times and in all places, give thanks and praise . . . ”. Through the Eucharistic prayer, worshippers rehearse God’s saving deeds done on behalf of God’s people and follow Jesus’ command to eat the bread and drink the cup, in which the sacrament of eating and drinking Jesus comes to them (Lathrop 2005, pp. 50–52). In the Holy Communion, Jesus Christ is really present to grant forgiveness, life, and salvation. Here is a meal where all people are welcome. Here is a meal where there is enough for all.

The eucharistic feast is a tiny normative picture of the justice that characterizes the coming kingdom of God, where none go hungry because of poverty or alienated labor (Is 65:21–23). None will hoard a surplus, leaving others with a lack; as in the eucharistic meal, bread and wine are freely and equally distributed. The Lord’s supper constitutes practice for such a kingdom economics. In addition, in *performing* it is enacted a foretaste of the way things really ought to be (Smith 2009, p. 201).

At the Lord’s supper, the people receive a foretaste of the eternal feast to come in God’s kingdom. The life practices embedded in the Holy Communion are many. At this meal, those gathered learn to be a people of radical hospitality, welcoming all people as neighbors, as Jesus Christ welcomes all. Here, worshippers learn to be a people of radical generosity, sharing with neighbors the love of the One who first loved them. By participation in the Great Thanksgiving and Holy Communion, they are formed to be a people whose entire lives are lived in communion with others and with God’s creation as a Great Thanksgiving: “I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1).

Blessing: “The Lord bless you and keep you . . . ”. Liturgy concludes with God’s benediction. The Triune God, who has formed them in the liturgy, blesses the people as they scatter. God in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, accompanies the faithful as they prepare to enter the worship service of their daily lives, sharing the blessings they have received: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). Those engaging the practices of worship are formed in the life practices that belong to Christian social practice.

Dismissal: “Go in peace . . . ”. As the people have been conformed at worship to the way of Christ Jesus, they are sent to be the people of God according to this life pattern in every role and relationship. “The blessing speaks of affirmation and conferral—that we go empowered for this mission, graced recipients of good gifts, filled with the Spirit, our imaginations fueled by the Word to imagine the world otherwise” (Smith 2009, p. 207). The people are sent with the peace of God to serve the Lord, share the good news, and remember the poor. As they are sent to do works of mercy for neighbors, they also receive the promise: “Christ is with you!” As worshippers have become the forgiveness, praise, word, intercessions, peace, hospitality, and food of God at worship, they now share forgiveness, praise, word, intercessions, peace, hospitality, and food in the ministries of daily life. Amen. Let it be so! Thanks be to God!

Those who join in the fourfold pattern of worship—Gathering, Word, Meal, and Sending—enter into the selfsame reality that Jesus Christ named the kingdom of God (Schmit 2009, pp. 60–68). At worship, the spacetime coordinates of this world intersect with the spacetime coordinates of God’s kingdom: “ . . . your kingdom come, your will be

done, on earth as in heaven". The eschatological kingdom of God here breaks in, forming those at worship as God's kingdom people, whose life as the body of Christ conforms to the character of "Jesus Christ existing as community" (Bonhoeffer 1998, p. 141). Worship forms the people to become the shalom of God in Christian social practice for the life of the world (Nessan 2010b, pp. 41–56).

A robust theology of worship insists that God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit is actively imprinting upon the people a Christ-like pattern of life through the practices of worship (Smith 2013, pp. 173–75). This requires: (1) Renewed imagination for the ways God employs the familiar elements of worship as means of grace to conform worshippers to the way of Christ¹⁶; and (2) Active participation in doing liturgy with expectancy about what God is doing. The perceived gap between worship and ministry in daily life requires instruction in how worship practices are rehearsal for life practices of everyday neighborliness (Smith 2017, pp. 219–21).

4. The Diaconate of All Believers in a Transformed Theology of the Ministry

The inherited theology of ministry derives from the age of Christendom. Although ministry in the life of the early church was primarily the daily service of disciples—formed through worship and catechesis—who shared their faith in Jesus through words and acts of mercy in their life orbits, the establishment of Christianity as state authorized religion after the fourth century led to the hierarchical and clergy-dominated church institution that has predominated into the 20th century. Although the Reformation, especially by the teachings of Martin Luther, sought to recall ancient practices by retrieving the universal priesthood of all believers, the Christendom model of a clergy-centered church continued to prevail in most Protestant traditions after the 16th century. In this hierarchical model, the ministry of bishops, pastors, and priests, as well as other clerics, function as the center of gravity for the ministrations of the church. Distribution of the means of grace flows through the clergy. The people are passive recipients dependent upon the clerical system.

The Babylonian captivity of the church, which Luther critiqued in relation to the hegemony of the late medieval church, continues today in a new form.

Today, the Babylonian captivity of the church, although differently guised, is equally deadly for the vitality of the church's mission: the reduction of Christian ministry to that which is done in the name of the institutional church. Church members largely think that only what is organized by the institutional church or done within the confines of a church building really counts as Christian ministry (Nessan 2019, p. 11).

This captivity undermines not only the ministry of the baptized, but also the work of deacons by prioritizing matters related to the church's internal operations rather than the interface between church and the world belonging to diaconia. This constitutes the "churchification" of Christian missions. The center of gravity for the mission of the church has become centered on institutional structures that resist change and power sharing.

Over the course of centuries, most churches have become closely identified with the ministry exercised by pastors and priests.¹⁷ Both in terms of polity and practice, the vocation of pastors and priests is deeply established. This has given pastors and priests power to define the nature of church's mission according to their own exercise of ministry. The center of power in the organization of the church by definition and precedent is largely located in the office of pastors and priests. The weight of history and the homeostasis of existing power relations fuels momentum that inhibits changes that might make greater room for both the vocation of the baptized and the vocation of deacons.

This analysis should not be interpreted as devaluing or denigrating the ministry of pastors and priests. Affirming the vocations of the baptized and of deacons should not be understood as a competition or zero-sum game in relation to pastors and priests. Instead, it offers the occasion for rethinking and transforming the entire theology of ministry to better approximate the full partnership among the baptized, deacons, pastors, priests, and bishops (O'Meara 1999, pp. 141–51). How can the value of all these agents of ministry be

affirmed in a reimagined, reconstituted, and transformed ecclesiology? How can all these ministries be realigned to serve the shalom of God and extend diaconia to all creation?

At the end of Christendom, the church needs a new paradigm for its theology of ministry within a renovated ecclesiology: “a theology of the laity need only be a total ecclesiology” (Apostola 1998, p. 55). Stephanie Dietrich proposes the need for developing a “diaconal ecclesiology”.

The gift of baptism is simultaneously the gift of God’s call to every Christian person to *diaconia*—being incorporated in Christ and, at the same time, into the community of believers, the Church. Through baptism, humankind becomes liberated to live and act God’s call to *diaconia*, and cleansed, renewed, and empowered to live God’s call to *diaconia* in the world (Dietrich et al. 2019, p. 85).

This transformed theology of ministry needs to focus both on diaconia and the mutuality of the gifts of all its ministers.

Now, there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Cor 12: 4–7).

While the weight of tradition favors a hierarchical understanding of ministry, with bishops at the apex and with pastors and priests at the next level of authority (Kraemer 1958, pp. 53–55), *a new theology of ministry paradigm places the diaconate of the baptized at the forefront*. In this model, the ministry of deacons accompanies the diaconate of all believers to equip and accompany them for Christian social practice.

In a Trinitarian understanding of diaconia, the primary actor in sending the church into service for the life of the world is God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit (LaCugna 1992). The mission of God orients ecclesiology as the entire church is commissioned and sent by the Triune God for diaconia. The point of ecclesiology is not the building up of the institutional church but sharing the shalom of God, what Jesus named the kingdom. Shalom describes the fullness of life in communion with God, one another, and the entire creation (Nessan 2010b, pp. 7–25). This is God’s purpose for humankind and for creation: to abide together in mutual life-giving relationships. The ministry of the church is in motion between its commission from the Trinity and its arrival at the fullness of shalom. A transformed theology of ministry belongs to an ecclesiology that places itself in service of the diaconia generated by this movement from divine commission toward eschatological goal.

Who are the ones whom the Triune God sends as the agents of diaconia in the world? *In the first place, this diaconal commission belongs to the baptized*. Never since the first three Christian centuries (apart from the commitments of some free churches) has ecclesiology focused principally on the calling and equipping of the baptized for the diaconia of daily life. The diaconate of all believers belongs at the forefront of God’s mission for the life of the world. The baptized are the primary agents of Christian social practice.

The total activity of the Church in its worship, preaching, teaching, and pastoral care should have the purpose of helping the “ordinary membership of the Church” to become what they are in Christ (Kraemer 1958, p. 100).

All the other offices in the church receive clarity about their calling and purpose in relation to maximizing the effectiveness of the ministry of the baptized. This was the character of the early church and provides the plumbline for the revitalization of the church today (Stark 1997).

With their definitive orientation toward the universal priesthood, the offices of deacon, pastor, priest, and bishop each discover proper focus. To recover the primacy of the diaconate of all believers gives renewed logic to the ministry of deacons. The call of deacons encompasses the work of equipping and accompanying the baptized to fulfill their vocations in all their roles and relationships in daily life.

Deacons exercise this ministry in a twofold way. First, according to their respective charismata and responsibilities, deacons model, for the entire church, the movement from liturgy to diaconia. By call and training, deacons have distinctive specializations that they exercise through their diaconal service to others and creation. While these specializations in ministry have their own integrity, the office of deacon also has an exemplary function: to witness the ecclesial movement of the entire church to the world through diaconia. Second, it is the responsibility of deacons intentionally to accompany the baptized in their diaconate of Christian social practice in daily life. This gives deacons a vital role in equipping the Christian people for diaconia. The universal diaconate of all believers lives symbiotically with the ministry of deacons.

The vocation of pastors and priests also finds itself revitalized in relation to the diaconate of all believers. This transformed ministry paradigm deconstructs the passive dependency of the baptized upon pastors and priests by making pastoral ministries a service for the liberation and formation of the baptized for their callings in daily life. Pastors and priests preach, teach, preside at worship, and exercise pastoral care that, by the gospel of Jesus Christ, the baptized are set *free from* all that holds them captive and are *free for* serving the neighbors God gives them in the arenas of daily life. This proposal should not be construed as a threat to the value of the pastoral ministry of Word and sacrament. Rather, the diaconate of all believers provides the ecclesial framework according to which pastors can serve in life-giving partnership with all members of the body of Christ. Moreover, it reminds pastors of their own roles and responsibilities, which they are called to serve in the arenas of daily life beyond their pastoral service (Nessan 2019, p. 12).

Finally, the office of bishop discovers new vitality as a ministry of service to deacons and to pastors and priests by supporting them in their work of accompanying, equipping, and liberating the baptized for their diaconate. Within this transformed theology of ministry, bishops have a distinctive calling to minister to the whole church: "... to equip the saints for the work of diaconia, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12). The saints are those made holy by their baptisms into Jesus Christ. Bishops exercise authority as servants of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church, in order that the church "promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Eph 4:16).

In relation to the unity of the church, the bishop promotes ecumenical relationships and works to address conflicts that undermine the church's witness. In relation to the holiness of the church, the bishop upholds the centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ and ethical standards in alignment with that gospel for all of its ministers, including the baptized and with special responsibility for those in professional ministry (Mahlberg and Nessan 2016). In relation to catholicity, the bishop tends global relationships and the work of the church for creation care. In relation to apostolicity, the bishop cares for the faithfulness of the church's teaching and tends to the reach of its apostolic mission. In every respect, this office of oversight gives sustained attention to the effectiveness of the ministry of the baptized in service to the world.

Although the ecclesiology of most traditions continues to be constructed from fragments of the Christendom model, revitalizing the church largely depends on breaking open the church to the needs of world through diaconia. This nascent ministry paradigm involves the activation of the baptized in the diaconate of all believers. Formation for the universal diaconate occurs through worship and educational practices interpreted and taught as life practices. The emergence of a diaconal church depends on a renovated theology of ministry that places the ministry of the baptized in daily life at the vanguard of Christian social practice. The redevelopment of the office of deacons is crucial to this transformation, not only through their own diaconal activities but through their role of equipping the baptized for the universal diaconate. The ministry of pastors, priests, and bishops also attains new energy and vitality in relation to their respective service in activating the diaconate of all believers.

This essay argues for three main conclusions: (1) The significance of the ecumenical proposal about the diaconate of all believers for the revitalization of the church; (2) The centrality of worship practices, interpreted as formation, for equipping Christian people for this diaconate; and (3) The need for a transformed theology of ministry within a renovated ecclesiology that places the diaconate of all believers at the vanguard. This proposal is offered in the wake of the disintegration of the Christendom model and of the notable decline in the strength of the established churches in North America. It reclaims the centrality of the Christian people as agents of the church's mission that characterized the early church and that was proposed again, although not fulfilled, during the Reformation. The diaconate of all believers provides a promising way forward for reimagining the future church.

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Notes

- ¹ See the discussion by Hans-Ruedi Weber in (Apostola 1998, pp. 32–33). Whereas the term “people of God” may refer to all those created by God in general or to the Jewish people in particular, the term “Christian people” may best address what is meant by “laity” without the connotations of inferiority.
- ² The Life of Faith Initiative states: “The purpose of the Life of Faith Initiative is to stir up a culture change that frees us to make the service by the baptized in the arenas of daily life the central focus of the church’s mission” (Life of Faith Initiative 2023).
- ³ Mott’s book title is *Liberating the Lay Forces of Christianity* (Mott 1932).
- ⁴ In the 1950s, two issues of the WCC journal, *The Ecumenical Review*, gave major attention to the work of the laity. The first was in 1954 after the Evanston Assembly (vol. 7, No. 1) and again in 1958 with major articles on the role of the laity (vol. 10, No. 3). An issue of *The Ecumenical Review* (vol. 45, No. 4) on “Re-opening the Ecumenical Discussion of the Laity” was published in 1993 during a time when there was an effort to revive the focus (Apostola 1998, pp. x–xi).
- ⁵ Use of this term occurs, for example, in Kraemer (1958, p. 176) and Raiser (1993, p. 376).
- ⁶ This liturgical formula is taken from the “Affirmation of Baptism” in the Lutheran tradition (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 2006, p. 237).
- ⁷ On the implementation of church practices to form the ministry of the baptized (Van Hunnik 2019).
- ⁸ Translation by Timothy J. Wengert (Wengert 2008, p. 13).
- ⁹ The theology of worship presented here is based on the historic liturgy but may have significance more broadly for churches where the structure of offices and worship practices are different.
- ¹⁰ On the significance of ritual practices for Christian formation see Smith (2009, pp. 57–62 and 80–85).
- ¹¹ On the practices of Christian worship as formation through a “social imaginary” see Smith (2009, p. 68).
- ¹² “Liturgies are the most loaded forms of ritual practice because they are nothing less than our hearts. They want to determine what we love ultimately” (Smith 2009, p. 87).
- ¹³ On the theological and formational significance of baptism, see Smith (2009, pp. 182–90).
- ¹⁴ “Consequently, the Christian practice of forgiveness constitutes a political virtue of the first order. The forgiveness of God that has been received frees people from the iron law of retaliation, and this in its turn also frees the other people concerned for action” (Wannenwetsch 2004, p. 307).
- ¹⁵ “For this reason, too, it is highly desirable that intercession in our worship should be restored as a *congregational* ministry, which is what it was in the early Church; it is important that intercessions should be formulated by members of the congregation and spoken by members of the congregation, and it should not be treated as if they were a function of the ‘professional’ ministry” (Wannenwetsch 2004, p. 341).
- ¹⁶ On imagining and desiring the kingdom, see Smith (2009, p. 54).
- ¹⁷ This was not overcome in the churches shaped by the Reformation, rather was perpetuated in new forms (Kraemer 1958, pp. 62–69).

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