

*'DIAKONIA AND EDUCATION: EXPLORING THE FUTURE OF THE DIACONATE IN  
THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE'*  
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*Introduction*

A recent conference sponsored by the Methodist Church in Britain explored the nature and role of the diaconate within the church.<sup>1</sup> Ecumenical representatives were invited to attend, thus adding further dimensions to the conference. Many issues were discussed and each tradition represented voiced its own respective understanding and practice of the diaconate. I was invited to represent the Church of the Nazarene in this conference. I presented a paper on the history and development of the diaconate in the Church of the Nazarene. My research indicated that the Church of the Nazarene developed an ordained diaconate as a pragmatic solution to a difficult problem involving how the internal revenue services of various countries viewed un-ordained, paid, local ministers.<sup>2</sup> The substance of this development is not of concern for this particular paper, however, the outcome is important to note.

In the General Assembly of 2009, two proposals were debated in committee: MED-509 Unified Order of the Clergy and MED-510 Ordination of Deacons/Elders. MED-509 would effectively abolish the diaconate as an ordained role within the Church of the Nazarene, thus establishing only one ordained role of elder, and MED-510 would affirm the diaconate and attempt to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the diaconate. Both of these resolutions were referred to the Board of General Superintendents for further review. The referral of these two resolutions may be viewed as call to bring clarity to the diaconate in the church. When two districts have polar opposite views on the nature and purpose of the ordained ministry, one may conclude that clarity is required.

The 2013 General Assembly has recently come to pass. Held in Indianapolis, USA, in June 2013, the issue of the diaconate was again raised, however this time only one resolution was debated in committee that referred to the previous two from 2009. MED-512 Deacons and Elders may be read as a revised version of MED-510. This resolution sought to bring affirmation and clarity to the diaconate, recognising the diaconate as an ordained order in its

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<sup>1</sup> 'Making Connections: Exploring Diaconal Ministry' held in Durham, St John's College (September 2011). For more see, <http://www.dur.ac.uk/wsc.online/?p=1418> (Accessed 30 July 2013).

<sup>2</sup> See Joseph Wood, 'Diaconal Dilemmas: The Development of the Diaconate in the Church of the Nazarene' in *Theology and Ministry* (Volume 2, Forthcoming, September 2013).

own right and clarifying the primary role of the deacon as one of Word and Service.<sup>3</sup> The resolution was killed in committee, receiving a vote of 5 in favour and 75 opposed. Thus, the diaconate in the Church of the Nazarene, at least as far as the *Manual* is concerned, has stood unchanged since the General Assembly of 1993.<sup>4</sup>

It is apparent that the diaconate needs to be addressed. The conclusions drawn from the conference paper on the diaconate in the Church of the Nazarene suggest a renewal of the diaconate, not an abolishment of the diaconate, would be most beneficial to the church. A renewal in our own tradition would coincide with many other traditions and denominations around the world. James Barnett highlighted this wave of renewal in 1995, noting the various Christian traditions' attempts at diaconal renewal, the impetus for this renewal was grounded in Vatican II.<sup>5</sup> Because the ordained diaconate was established in the Church of the Nazarene in 1985, one may conclude that the church was simply a part of this ecumenical wave of renewal, but a close examination of the report of the *Commission on God-Called Ministry* (1984) reveals no reference to any ecumenical initiatives.<sup>6</sup>

Since 1985, a wealth of writing and experimentation on the role of the diaconate in various churches has emerged. One of the most significant works is that of John Collins. His work, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (1990) has proven invaluable to ecumenical initiatives in renewing the diaconate around the world. In this work, Collins challenged the traditional understanding of the word, *diakonia* (and its cognates), by re-interpreting both the New Testament and the available extra-biblical resources of the ancient world. Much of what has previously been said about the diaconate has been challenged by this important book.

A renewal of diaconate in the Church of the Nazarene may be possible in light research like that of Collins. Of the many ways in which the diaconate may be renewed, one area, explored in this paper, is Christian/theological education and its providers. Clarifying

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<sup>3</sup> See MED-512, 2013 General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene. <https://sp.nazarene.org/gar/Shared%20Documents/English/Resolutions/Ministry%20and%20Education/MED-512.pdf> (Accessed 30 July 2013).

<sup>4</sup> The 1993 General Assembly passed a resolution which gave deacons the authority to administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. See *Manual* (1993-1997).

<sup>5</sup> James Monroe Barnett, *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1995), 143-164.

<sup>6</sup> This Committee was commissioned by the Board of General Superintendents and tasked with developing what became the establishment of the diaconate in the Church of the Nazarene as an ordained role.

one element of the nature and purpose of *diakonia*, and thus, the diaconate, as education may lead to a more focussed role of the deacon in the church. This paper is only an exploration, but it seeks to interpret dimensions of theological education in terms of *diakonia*. It will suggest that theological education may be considered a part of the *diakonia* in the church. Clarifying, and affirming this may foster a more intimate connection between the Church and the academy. This suggestion is not exclusive to the diaconate, but it is at least one way in which the diaconate may be focussed and renewed.

To do this, a working definition of *diakonia* will be established, the present state of the diaconate in the Church of the Nazarene will be noted, and Christian/theological education in the Church of the Nazarene will be re-considered in light of this new understanding of *diakonia* provided by John Collins and others. Interpreting the role of theological education in ecclesial terms has both the potential to deepen the relationship between the academy and the Church, and introduce those persons whom God may be calling into a clear and specific, ministerial role within the Church as educators.

### *Diakonia*

John Collins provided what has become, for many, the definitive word study on *diakonia* and its cognates. Where *diakonia* has normally been translated to ‘service’ in English, Collins’ noted, ‘In recent decades what has been happening in the course of the modern shift from “ministry” to “service” is a profound change in perceptions not only of the ordained ministry called diaconate but of ordained ministry itself.’<sup>7</sup> This new emphasis on service has created new problems for defining the diaconate. If *diakonia* is ‘service’, and not ‘ministry’, then where do deacons fit in the church? Is there a place for those who are ordained to ‘serve’, when it is clear in the New Testament that all Christians are required to serve. Referring to the Roman Catholic Church’s renewal of the diaconate in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Collins explained, ‘The basic problem was in the underlying notion of “diakonia,” because when “diakonia” is service of others and is a mandate from which no Christian can be excluded one will have difficulty finding a place in the church for specialised servants like deacons of the “diakonia”.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Collins, *Diakonia*, 44.

A brief look at the Church of the Nazarene Manual descriptions of the lay minister and the deacon reveal a similar situation. The lay minister is defined in the following way: ‘All Christians should consider themselves ministers of Christ and seek to know the will of God concerning their appropriate avenues of *service*.’<sup>9</sup> The Deacon is described as follows: ‘A deacon is a minister whose call of God to Christian ministry, gifts, and usefulness have been demonstrated and enhanced by proper training and experience, who has been separated to the *service* of Christ by a vote of a district assembly and by the solemn act of ordination, and who has been invested to perform certain functions of Christian ministry.’<sup>10</sup> Both the laity and ordained deacons are considered ministers of Christ who serve. In the Church of the Nazarene, the priesthood of all believers is affirmed, all Christians are ministers of Christ seeking avenues of service, and an ordained ministry is affirmed, in which certain persons are called of God to ministerial leadership and service.<sup>11</sup> Collins recognised that situations like this may cause confusion, saying, ‘We could suspect we are being told that they are one in the same thing. Some find this an exhilarating possibility. Others find it confusing, perhaps even distressing.’<sup>12</sup>

By engaging the Hellenistic usage of *diakonia* (and its cognates) alongside the biblical use of the words, Collins concluded three ways in which these words may be interpreted. A recent study on the renewal of the diaconate in the Church of England offers a helpful summary of Collins’ work:

John N. Collins in *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (1990) explored the meaning of *diakonia* in secular usage and then applied it to the New Testament references. He came to the conclusion that the primary meaning centred around message, agency and attendance.

- As bearer of a message, a *diakonos* is a spokesperson, an envoy, a courier, a go-between, who is entrusted with important tidings.
- In terms of agency, a *diakonos* is an ambassador, a mediator, a person who is given a commission to carry out a task and to act on behalf of someone in authority.
- In terms of attendance, *diakonia* is attendance upon a person or within a household, on whose behalf one performs various tasks (not merely a servant who waits at table).<sup>13</sup>
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<sup>9</sup> *Manual* (2009-2013), 183.

<sup>10</sup> *Manual* (2009-2013), 205.

<sup>11</sup> *Manual* (2009-2013), 180.

<sup>12</sup> Collins, *Diakonia*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> *For Such a Time as This: A Renewed Diaconate in the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2001), 32.

These three emphases, message-bearer, commissioned-one, and serving-one, established a much wider interpretation of *diakonia* than the commonly used single interpretation of ‘service’, or ‘humble service’. One of these emphases, commissioned-one, will be explored as a way of renewing the diaconate in the Church of the Nazarene.

Collin’s highlighted that whatever *diakonia* is, it is always connected to one who commissions the *diakonia*. Interpreting Philippians 1.1 (‘to the overseers and their attendants’), Collins’ explained,

By force of the Greek language, the title implies that the deacon (attendant) stands in relationship to a person or institution that has commissioned the deacon to a status and a task. The status implied by the title brings the deacon within the sphere and authority of the commissioning authority; as a result the deacon’s task carries the authority it requires. Deacons are part of a congregation, are known to a congregation, and stand in permanent relationship to it. Deacons are thus essentially ecclesial persons.’<sup>14</sup> Collins summary of Paul’s various use of *diakonia* has contributed to wide-spread re-thinking and renewal of the diaconate in a number of churches. For the Church of the Nazarene, the emphasis on commissioning may be employed as one way of moving forward.

### *The Diaconate in the Church of the Nazarene*

In 1980, the General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene established the *Commission on God-Called Ministry* and assigned it with the task, ‘to study the nature and structure of ministry in the Church of the Nazarene, including preaching, nonpreaching, and lay ministries. Consideration was to be given to the “ministry credentialing and ministry roles within the church,” as well as sacerdotal privileges within the ministry.’<sup>15</sup> The report of this commission was presented at the following General Assembly of 1985, which recommended (among other things) the establishment of the ordained office of Deacon in the Church of the Nazarene. This recommendation was resolved and the office of Deacon was created. In the report, a number of key issues were addressed. These issues will be re-visited in light of

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<sup>14</sup> John N Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections Between Old and New* (Leomister: Gracewing, 2002), 125.

<sup>15</sup> ‘The Commission on God-Called Ministry’ in *Proceedings of the General Board of the Church of the Nazarene and Its Departments* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1985), 247.

Collins' work in order to explore whether or not different conclusions may be drawn, thus creating a possible way forward for the Nazarene diaconate for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For the purposes of this paper, the report's discussion of Christian education will be critiqued. The report noted 'a current phenomenon...in which a growing group of people are testifying to a call of God to give their lives in ministry to Christ and His church, but do not feel this call includes the "call to preach".'<sup>16</sup> The report then outlines paragraph 400 of the *Manual*, which discusses the proper steps a church must take when a divine call is discovered amongst the persons of the local congregation. It mandated that the church respond to this calling with appropriate action, '[The] church must recognize that divine call also and provide an appropriate entry into an official ministry of the church.'<sup>17</sup> The following sentence raises the issue at hand, 'At present, there is a commission for ministers of Christian education. However, *these persons are laity* and are not a part of an official order of ministry. Since there is a strong desire to ordain as elders only those called to preach, the commission finds it must consider the possibility of an additional order of ministry for associate and other ministries.'<sup>18</sup> This statement identified Christian educators as those who have a 'commissioned' role, but who are not a part of the 'official ministry of the church'. This 'commissioned' role refers to the 'Minister of Christian Education', found in the *Manual* (1980).<sup>19</sup>

A proposed amendment to the *Manual* (1985) was included as a part of the various resolutions proposed by the Commission; the proposal would revise the section titled, 'The Minister of Christian Education' and add a role in, 'Categories and Roles of Ministry' as follows:

D. The Educator

416. The educator is an elder, deacon, licensed minister, or layman serving as an educator.

416.1. When an educator having a ministerial credential has been employed to serve on the administrative staff or faculty of one of the educational institutions of the Church of the Nazarene, the district shall designate such a person as an assigned minister.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 'The Commission on God-Called Ministry', 248.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Commission on God-Called Ministry', 248.

<sup>18</sup> 'The Commission on God-Called Ministry', 248.

<sup>19</sup> *Manual* (1980), 198-200.

<sup>20</sup> 'The Commission on God-Called Ministry', 276.

The resolution passed and the role of Educator was included in the *Manual* (1985). If this is now the case, elders, deacons, and licensed ministers may be designated educators, then a significant question is raised. If the local church has the task of recognising a divine call on a person's life, and if the local church also has the task to provide an appropriate entry into an official ministry of the church, does the local church understand that a lifetime call to ministry includes those called to be educators? The description of the role is vague and confusing. It seems to indicate that an educator is anyone, ordained or not, who provides education of some description. This role is poorly defined and lacking in focus. It seems the definition should read in reverse. Rather than saying, these persons are called to education, the statement says these persons, already ordained (or not), may be designated educators.

The following section seeks to bring clarity to the role of educator, suggesting that this role is diaconal. The concluding section of this paper will seek to address this question, 'Could the diaconate be an office to which local churches encourage those persons who have a call to a lifetime of ministry as a Christian educator explore?'

#### *Trajectories in Diakonia and Christian/Theological Education*

It has already been said, the shape and focus of the diaconate varies within the Church. The Commission on God-Called Ministry sought to develop a complementary credential in order to affirm and ordain those persons who witnessed to a specific call to a lifetime of ministry in the church as something other than elder. It has also been noted that the description of the deacon in the Church of the Nazarene has caused confusion, not only because of the vague language used, but also in the authority given to deacons (namely, the administration of the sacraments). When deacons were given the authority to administer the sacraments in 1993, the offices of elder and deacon became virtually indistinguishable from one another. One may argue the difference in the two is the primacy of preaching for the elder, but deacons clearly engage in the preaching ministry.<sup>21</sup> If confusion persists, as evidenced by the two proposals discussed at the 2009 General Assembly, and further

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<sup>21</sup> '430.1 The deacon does not witness to a specific call to preach.' '430.2 The deacon shall be vested with the authority to administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and to officiate at marriages where the laws of the state do not prohibit, and on occasion to conduct worship and to preach.' *Manual* (2009-2013), 205-206. Although these statements indicate that preaching is not the primary role of a deacon, deacons are also preachers. It is also important to note that lay persons may also preach in the Church of the Nazarene (see *Manual* (2009-2013), 183-184.

confirmed by the 2013 General Assembly's rejection of a resolution on the diaconate, one must wonder, 'What do we do now?' What follows is a suggestion of one way forward for the diaconate in the Church of the Nazarene. This, again, is not exclusive. The diaconate can (and should) be varied in its manifestations. What follows is simply a direction in which the Church of the Nazarene may gain clarity and focus in an effort to support her local churches in their task of recognising the divine call on those who are clearly not called to be ordained as elders.<sup>22</sup>

It has been highlighted that one of the roles of ministry for lay persons, licensed ministers, elders, or deacons is that of 'The Educator'. This person is employed by one of the Church of the Nazarene's institutions of education, and, if ordained, the institution becomes the place to which the person is assigned.<sup>23</sup> A further role, often overlooked, is that of 'The Minister of Christian Education'.<sup>24</sup> This role is one that has its genesis prior to 1985. In fact, the first appearance of this role was in 1956, and was called, 'The Director of Christian Education'.<sup>25</sup> The role of director of Christian education (changed to Minister of Christian Education in 1972) was established for those persons, 'who feel called to serve' in the area of Christian education. Largely unchanged from 1956-1980, the description and requirements of the Minister of Christian Education is strikingly similar to that of an ordained Deacon. One finds in the description the words/phrases, 'called', 'respond to divine call', 'commissioned', 'minister', 'licensed', 'renewal of district license', 'two-thirds vote', 'examined', 'commissioned by presiding general superintendent', 'Certificate of Commission', and, 'report annually'.<sup>26</sup> If one changed the word, 'commissioned', to 'ordained', there would be virtually no difference between the two. So what happened to this role?

The current *Manual* (2009-2013), now includes two roles of ministry relating to education: The Educator and The Minister of Christian Education. The role of 'The Educator' has been described above. The following is the description of The Minister of Christian Education:

409. A member of the clergy employed in a ministerial capacity in a Christian education program of a local church may be assigned as a minister of Christian education.

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<sup>22</sup> 'The Commission on God-Called Ministry', 248.

<sup>23</sup> *Manual* (2009-2013), 186.

<sup>24</sup> *Manual* (2009-2013), 188.

<sup>25</sup> *Manual* (1956-1960), 147-148.

<sup>26</sup> *Manual* (1980-1985), 198-200. See also Appendix ?

409.1 A person who was, in the years preceding 1985, licensed or commissioned as a minister of Christian education, shall continue in good standing. However, those persons desiring to begin the pursuit of the role of minister of Christian education may complete the requirements for ordination to the order of deacon as their credential for this ministry.<sup>27</sup>

At least three questions emerge from a reading of this description: 1) What is the difference in Christian Education in the local church and education in a Nazarene Institution, and does that difference require two different designations? 2) Although the minister of Christian education may be any member of the clergy (licensed, deacon, elder), the recommendation for these persons is to pursue ordination as a deacon. Why is this role not made explicit in the description of a Deacon? 3) If Ministers of Christian education, prior to 1985, fulfilled virtually the same requirements of the Deacon, established in 1985, why were these given the option of remaining ‘commissioned’, and not ordained as Deacons? These questions may only be answered by those who participated in the events of the past. I can find no evidence to support answers to any of these questions. My present task is to offer a way forward.

An exploration of the role of Minister of Christian Education may offer one way forward for the future of the diaconate. If we consider a deacon as ‘a person who is given a commission to carry out a task and to act on behalf of someone in authority’, as defined by Collins, we may find that education is one area in which deacons may be commissioned to engage.<sup>28</sup> If one evaluates the descriptions of both the Minister of Christian education and The Educator in light of new research on *diakonia*, a pattern of focus emerges. The role of education in the Church is one that may be filled by the diaconate. Education in the Church, whether in the institutes of higher education, or in the local church, has already been recognised by the Church of the Nazarene as a commissioned task. Therefore, it may be suggested, The Minister of Christian Education in the Church of the Nazarene in 1980 was, in light of Collins’ work, a deacon. Furthermore, The Educator and Minister of Christian Education in the Church of the Nazarene from 1985, clearly fulfils a diaconal role.

Although it may be argued that this proposal already exists within the Nazarene description of the diaconate, it must be noted that it is not clearly designated. What I am suggesting is this; the *Manual* should explicitly state that the task of Christian/Theological education is primarily fulfilled through the diaconate. This does not mean that all current

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<sup>27</sup> *Manual* (2009-2013), 188.

<sup>28</sup> *For Such a Time as This*, 32.

Ministers of Christian Education and all Educators in Nazarene institutions need to be ordained as deacons. Neither am I suggesting a mandated ordination to the diaconate of all laypersons in Christian and Theological education. What I am suggesting is that local churches and district Boards of Credentials be informed and empowered to direct those in their congregation who are sensing God's call to a life-time of ministry in Christian/Theological education towards the diaconate.<sup>29</sup> It may be helpful to renew the role of Minister of Christian Education and merge it with the role of The Educator in the *Manual*, highlighting the diaconal features of these roles. It may be that there are a number of persons sensing God's call on their life who, when seeking discernment, are met with confusion and misdirection. If elders are primarily called to the preaching and pastoral ministry, it seems that emphasising the diaconate as alternative option for those who have a different calling is most appropriate. This would require very little change in our polity, but a large-scale campaign to inform and educate our local and district leaders. Educating our local and district leaders of this avenue may also produce a visible change in practice. Ultimately, it may be an area in which we see a rise in ministerial candidates, and a flourishing future for the diaconate.

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<sup>29</sup> A renewal of the diaconate through focusing on education as diakonia is merely one way forward. A logical next step of critique may be aimed at Missionaries. Could missionaries be considered deacons? Should the church be directing those who sense God's call to missions (foreign or domestic) towards the diaconate? I hope to explore this in a future paper.