

## Should this impair the right of a deacon to move to another diocese?

Deacons are often non-stipendiary or they express their diaconate principally through an organisation other than the church. This complicates the issue somewhat.

Again getting the parties of a previous covenant together with the parties of a possible new covenant may help. As always the bishop is the person who issues the licence and any initial negotiations for ministry in a different diocese need to happen with that bishop. If the bishop is happy to proceed then support from the signatories of the previous covenant might enable an harmonious development for a new and effective ministry covenant.

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Exploring Diaconal Ministry — Paper 4

# DEACONS & RESPONSIBILITY

## Preamble

- Deacons are ordained to ministry.
- Deacons belong to a 'full and equal order'.
- Deacons are called to a servant ministry on the margins and boundaries of life.
- Deacons model diaconal ministry which belongs to the whole church.
- Deacon's ministries may not fit comfortably into parish or diocesan boundaries.
- Deacons can help to explore ministry responses to difficult issues the church faces.

## To whom are deacons responsible?

A deacon's area of ministry often does not fit neatly into parish (or sometimes even diocesan) boundaries. Parishes tend to be built around what used to be neat geographical areas for a gathered church community. Deacons go where people are; they minister to the marginalised, the poor, the lonely, the isolated, and the sick.

From the times of the New Testament church deacons have had special relationship with bishops. This has meant that with the resurgence of deacons and diaconal ministry it is natural for the deacon's



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initial responsibility to be to the bishop. The bishop issues a licence to the deacon and therefore the deacon's responsibility rests there.

## **The Covenant**

Where a deacon's ministry lies within a parish, a church institution or a ministering community then it is important that the ministry responsibilities of the deacon are formalized within that community or institution with the bishop, the Archdeacon to the deacons, and the leader of the ministry unit, together with the deacon working through and signing a Covenant which develops a shared understanding of what the ministry entails. This covenant is an important expression of understanding and expectation.

It is important to understand that the deacon has a specific ministry to which that deacon has been called. The calling has been tested through a rigorous process prior to ordination. Following or leading up to ordination the process of developing a covenant enables the ongoing ministry to be undertaken in an atmosphere of mutual acceptance.

The covenant, as a document, reminds all parties that the ministry of a deacon is not that of parish assistant or curate. While the deacon may have a liturgical role in a parish, and must be a member of a parish unit for worship, nurture, and care, the ministry itself relates to a diaconal and not a priestly calling.

## **What happens if the deacon's ministry changes?**

The ministry area to which a deacon is called will often change. In fact one of the marks of a deacon is that of encouraging others in their diaconal call. It is often the case that the deacon will develop a team of

people working in a particular ministry, and then the deacon will move on to a similar area where no such ministry is offered, and begin again. Or it may be that the deacon may receive a new call. When either of these things happens then the signatories to the original covenant should come together and discuss such a move. Then the bishop, the archdeacon to the deacons, the leader of the new ministry area, and the deacon begin the process of a new covenant.

## **Reviewing the Covenant**

A regular process of review of the covenant should be undertaken. This process should be built in to the covenant as it is being developed.

If one of the signatories to the covenant becomes unhappy with an aspect of the practical development of the deacon's ministry then this should be dealt with sooner rather than later. Initially the person with the problem should sit down in discussion with the deacon. Often just talking together will solve the issue. If this is not easily solved then all parties to the covenant should sit down together and work out a solution. If all else fails the final arbiter is the bishop.

## **Do deacons retire?**

Within the diocese it seems a natural practice for priests to retire at 65 years of age. Some priests then go on to undertake locums of varying lengths of time. Others simply move into retirement and undertake some parish activities similar to that of lay people, as well as taking a service every now and then to assist the rector.

To date this has not been the case with deacons in this diocese.

Diocesan regulations enable the bishop to issue a new two year licence to any clergyperson reaching 65,

should that clergy person wish to continue in full time ministry. This happens again at age 67, and a further review is made at 69 where a one year licence can be issued. At age 70 an Authority to Officiate has to be issued.

Several of our deacons operate under an Authority to Officiate. They continue in a very active ministry which is meaningful and effective. It seems that this may well indicate that diaconal ministry is similar to lay ministry. It does not end at 65. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with priests wanting to retire from full time ministry at 65, nor is it to say that all deacons need to continue their ministry fulltime after age 65. What it does say is that diaconal ministry can continue beyond that time and still remain a legitimate expression of ordained ministry. It also implies that the church as a whole needs to be aware of the need to nurture and care for deacons who do continue in this way, just as it should nurture and care for priests who continue in locum ministries beyond retirement.

## **What happens when a deacon feels called to move to a ministry in another diocese?**

When a priest seeks a position in another diocese there is a due process followed. This is not an unnatural process because the expectation of a priest's role is strongly confirmed within the church as a whole. This is not necessarily so for a deacon. The deacon's role is not as clearly defined and not all Australian dioceses share a similar understanding of what a deacon does.