



The Right Reverend Kirk Stevan Smith, Ph.D.
BISHOP OF ARIZONA

Pastoral Letter
The Diaconate in the Diocese of Arizona for the 21st Century
June 2014

“The community chose...individuals full of faith and the Holy Spirit and the apostles laid hands on them...and the word of God continued to prosper.” Acts 6:5-7

Dear friends in Christ,

In Acts, we see the early Christian community striving to follow Jesus. In choosing deacons from their midst to keep them vigilant about the plight of their neighbor, they embraced their baptismal call to diakonia, meaning caring for those in need and cherishing God’s creation, as essential to discipleship.

This year we mark the 20th anniversary of this diocese’s commitment to the systematic formation of deacons. This is a time to celebrate the ministry of deacons in our midst, to envision for the 21st century the role of deacon in this diocese, and to recommit ourselves to the universal call to diakonia.

Diakonia is not the strong serving the weak. It is deep mutual sharing. Both the servant and the served are transformed by Christ’s love. The Association of Episcopal Deacons states: “Deacons are to model and lead, by inspiring, empowering, and engaging every baptized person in living out the diakonia of all believers in everyday life.” Deacons do not “do” diakonia for us, they lead us to servant ministry, the essence of our baptismal covenant.

Deacons take the Good News into the community, inviting us to share the love of Christ across boundaries of wealth, religion, age, ethnicity and language. While engaging the community, the deacon hears the stories and aspirations of the poor, the rejected, the sick and lonely and the disenfranchised. In a ministry of petition and advocacy, the deacon gathers these “prayers of the people” and proclaims them in church meetings, corporate board rooms, and legislative hearings, everywhere the cry of God’s people needs to be heard.

Deacons ask challenging questions: Who is not at the table? How does God ask us to care for others? Are the decisions of government, business, civic groups and the church consistent with Scriptural tradition? This is a prophetic ministry.

The deacon serves with us, people, priest and bishop, at the Lord's Table, as a sign of our baptismal promise "to seek and serve Christ in all persons." This is a ministry of sharing responsibility. The work of the deacon is building capacity and commissioning: helping us recognize God's gifts to us and sending us out to act. Deacons challenge us to live into our own diaconal calling, to go out and do the work God has given us to do.

Deacons are a bridge between the church and the world: what deacons do to model and lead in the world is reflected by what deacons do every Sunday when we gather for Eucharist.

The commitment of this diocese to diaconal formation has borne great fruit. Currently the diocese has one of the largest contingents of deacons (64) in The Episcopal Church, and deacons serve in about half our parishes and missions. From my years as Bishop, I have seen that deacons bring deep community connections and extraordinary talents to the diocese, to the parishes to which they are assigned, and the communities in which they serve. Deacons are a creative force in readying us to participate in what God is doing in the world.

Dear friends, I invite you to share with me this vision for the 21st century:

First, that we all see and work for a day when every parish and mission in this diocese has at least one deacon, and that we encourage our diocesan Community of Deacons to grow spiritually, to enhance their skills, and to communicate and collaborate with us and the broader church.

The second part of the vision I offer you is interrelated and as important as the first: that we all recommit to our individual and communal call to diakonia, that we pray, study and discern what our diaconal vocation asks of us, and that we ultimately act "to seek and serve Christ in all persons."

I fervently believe that, in this way, the word of God will continue to prosper.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kirk", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

The Rt. Rev. Kirk Stevan Smith
Bishop