

Dear Friends at St. Francis:

I'm Mara Arack, your deacon. Most of you have known me for a while now, some for several years, as a member of the congregation. On the Feast of the Epiphany, 2012, I received a call to be a deacon. The call came through Pastor Jeri's calm voice reading the announcements from the service folder, something she does every Sunday just after the passing of the Peace and before we begin the Offertory in our Eucharist. I have to admit that my mind was wandering a bit since I knew I could read the announcements later myself, when all of a sudden my attention was seized and an inner conviction to "Pay attention!" announced itself. And what did I then hear? That a meeting at Christ Church, Eureka, for anyone interested in exploring becoming a deacon was to be held the following Saturday. Now, I had never thought about becoming a deacon before that moment. I didn't have any idea what deacons do, or of what their training consists. But from that moment on, I was sure that God had called me to this particular ministry. And four and a half years later, after three years of academic preparation and four years of spiritual formation, I was ordained by Bishop Barry Beisner at Trinity Cathedral, Sacramento.

You might already be familiar with transitional deacons, those ordained as deacons for six months before being ordained to priesthood. Many of you know David Shewmaker, who was a transitional deacon when he served at St. Francis in Fortuna, where I met him and Alicia several years ago. It's a bit confusing that in the Episcopal church we have two kinds of deacons. In recent years, there has been a lot of discussion about whether it's time to do away with the transitional diaconate, as the Methodists have done. They ordain directly to the priesthood now and directly to the diaconate, recognizing that God calls people to one ordained ministry or the other, but not both.

So, what is a vocational deacon? Deacons have been around since the early days of the church. We hear about the first deacon, Stephen, in Acts. He was one of "seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3) who were called from the community to insure that all the widows, both Jewish and foreign (Greek), were cared for and that the tables were served. They also preached and were reputed to work miracles. Stephen was also the first martyr, having been stoned to death for speaking truth to power. Another deacon you may be familiar with from the book of Acts is Philip, who proclaimed the gospel in Samaria (Acts 8) and to the "Ethiopian eunuch" (also Acts 8), hopping into the Ethiopian's chariot and baptizing him in a puddle! These texts display the roles of the deacon: helping the church care for the marginalized, using their prophetic voices to speak out against injustice, and proclaiming the gospel through words and actions.

Over time the separate order of deacons was incorporated into the priesthood in the Anglican communion as a step in the ordination-to-priesthood process, but at the world-wide Lambeth Council of 1958 it was decided to proceed with the restoration of the diaconate to its earlier form as a "full and equal order," rather than the "inferior office," as it was termed in the 1928 Prayer Book. In fact, this restoration is part of a general movement to recognize that all baptized persons are called to one of four equal orders: the episcopate (bishops), the presbyterate (priests), the diaconate (deacons) and the laos (laity). The church needs all four, working together, to function best. Sometimes we fall into the error of thinking that bishops are "holier" than the rest of us, and that priests are supposed to be more Christ-like than lay people. But remember that each of us is endowed with all the spiritual gifts we will ever have at baptism. The three orders that are ordained are no holier or Christ-like than the order that is not ordained, the laity. Those who are ordained are called to ministry just as are all the baptized.

The call to the diaconate is a call to a specific type of service. The deacon's ministry is primarily "in the world," specifically to the poor, the sick, the weak and the lonely, the marginalized. Each deacon reports directly to the bishop, and is charged with interpreting to the church "the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world." In the ordination service, we are told that "at all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself."

The deacons' role in the liturgy is a symbolic one that reflects this charge. The deacon bids the Prayers of the People and the Confession. The deacon sets the table in preparation for our sacred meal. The deacon proclaims the gospel as the messenger of Christ's word to us. The deacon sends out the Eucharistic visitors to those unable to attend the gathering at St. Francis. And the deacon dismisses the congregation to go out into the world and live the gospel, a reminder that the work of the Christian does not end with the end of the Sunday service, but in fact is the beginning of the work they are to do in the coming week.

Deacons have their own ministries, and in the days to come I will be telling you about ones I have participated in and ones I am working on. But I also want to hear about yours, your passion for ministry, your calling. The deacon's focus is the church's ministry in the world and to work with a congregation on how, together, that can be done most effectively. I'm really looking forward to working with all of you, to observe, listen, learn and serve.