

growing.

- Deaconesses and home missionaries expand the church's impact in the world by engaging in diverse cutting edge ministries and in training the laity for mission.
- The Deaconess and Home Missioner ministry is strengthened and expanded through strong global relationships within the ecumenical diaconate and Pan-Methodist connections.
- Deaconesses and home missionaries engage in spiritual growth and self-care for themselves and as an example for others.
- The Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner has the resources and administrative capacity to support their purpose.

Our strategic plan is titled, "Living the Vision," because we understand that a vision has meaning when it is being lived out. By aspiring to these outcome statements, we are living out our vision to be a prophetic voice for love, justice, and service.

Our diaconal call continues to be clarified and strengthened as laity in fulltime vocational ministries of love, justice, and service, representing Christ's presence among those whom we serve. In fulfilling our call under the authority of the church, we witness daily in our servant ministries to the mandates of Christ as affirmed by *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*. Our strategic plan supports the governance for the deaconess and home missioner community and builds upon it by guiding how we actively live out the mandates today and into the future. Deaconess and home missioner ministries continue to evolve as the needs of the world evolve, though the

call to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ remains constant.<sup>14</sup>

### For reflection and discussion:

It is our premise that laity and clergy are both professionals and that defining laity in terms of the clergy creates a class system within our ecclesiastical structures. How do we move from hierarchical classifications (professional vs. non-professional) to classifications that affirm and enable all ministry callings?

We emphasize the significance of covenant community in our functioning as the lay diaconate of The United Methodist Church. How do you see community undergirding and guiding the future of the diaconate movement?

The professional training and coursework required for deaconess/home missioner preparation emphasizes the Wesleyan-based understanding that evangelism and social action are inseparable. What do you envision as the training/equipping needs for the future?

The United Methodist deaconess and home missioner movement answers the call to serve on the edges and in the borderlands between church and society. Where do you see the cutting edge of ministry leading or developing in the future of the diaconate movement?

United Methodist deaconesses and home missionaries serve with full inclusiveness representative of God's love. What does it mean to be fully inclusive today and how might that change within the next ten years?

14. This article is an adaptation of "Living the Vision: How United Methodist Deaconesses and Home Missioners Understand and Embody the Lay Diaconate," prepared for the Study of Lay Order in Relationship with the Deaconess/Home Missioner Movement in The United Methodist Church and presented at the Lay Order Conference, September 26–28, 2014.

## A Deacon's Eye for Healing Congregations

Darryl W. Stephens

*Director of United Methodist Studies*

*Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lancaster, Pennsylvania*

This is a time of ecumenical rediscovery for the diaconate. The Word and Service Task Force of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), preparing for a proposed unified Word and Service roster,<sup>1</sup> offers the following definition under the single title "Deacon":

Deacons provide a ministry of Word and Service, exemplifying the life of Christ-like service to all persons and creation: nurturing, healing, leading, advocating dignity and justice, and equipping the whole people of God for their life of witness and service within and beyond the congregation for the sake of God's mission in the world.<sup>2</sup>

This definition offers a special emphasis on justice and healing. In The United Methodist Church (UMC), deacons are ordained to a lifetime ministry of Word, Service, Compassion, and Justice.<sup>3</sup>

1. [http://www.elca.org/en/Living-Lutheran/Seeds/2014/07/140725-A-unified-word-and-service-roster?\\_ga=1.173983651.1268984575.1412122259](http://www.elca.org/en/Living-Lutheran/Seeds/2014/07/140725-A-unified-word-and-service-roster?_ga=1.173983651.1268984575.1412122259)

2. The ELCA Word and Service Task Force "suggests that Deacon be used as the working title for the new roster." Word and Service Task Force Update, July 15, 2013. ELCA. [http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Word\\_And\\_Service\\_Task\\_Force\\_Update\\_February.pdf?\\_ga=1.208054418.1268984575.1412122259](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Word_And_Service_Task_Force_Update_February.pdf?_ga=1.208054418.1268984575.1412122259)

3. In 1996 the UMC established a permanent order of deacons, ordained

As Lutherans and United Methodists continue to live into a full communion agreement, including mutual recognition of ministries, an important aspect of this recognition is the task of understanding and interpreting the service of the deacon.

Many other members of the body of Christ also participate in ministries of word, service, compassion, and justice. What distinguishes the deacon, however, is an identity fully shaped by these gifts, combined with a calling from God and an affirmation by the church.<sup>4</sup> As a called, set-apart, and ordained deacon, I have a distinctive perspective on ministry: a deacon's eye for compassion and justice. The apostle Paul writes, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ... If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of

to Word and Service. In 2012 the UMC expanded this description to include Compassion and Justice.

4. In her recent book on the diaconate, Margaret Ann Crain suggests that what distinguishes the ministry of a deacon is not so much our function but our identity. Margaret Ann Crain, *The United Methodist Deacon: Ordained to Word, Service, Compassion, and Justice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), 11.

it" (1 Cor 12:12 and 12:26-27). Each deacon is a member of the body of Christ with unique gifts, rejoicing and suffering along with the other members. Furthermore, each and every congregation is one manifestation of our incarnate Savior who suffered, died, was buried, and rose again. Before we jump too quickly to Christ's resurrection, however, Paul's words to the congregation in Corinth remind us that the body of Christ can suffer even now. We are the body of Christ, wounded and wounding, at times betrayed by one of our own members.

It is with a deacon's eye that I view the congregation, the body of Christ, wounded and wounding. It is with a deacon's eye that I see compassion and justice as salves for these wounds. It is with a deacon's eye that I see the need for healing congregations. Indeed, healing is a central part of diaconal identity, as illustrated by the title of The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) report of its Johannesburg consultation in 2002, *Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World*.<sup>5</sup> It is through a deacon's eye that the church can learn to identify, name, and address the wounds of violation due to sexual abuse in ministry. Moreover, it is through healing congregations that the body of Christ can offer grace in a world of violence and abuse.

## Sexual abuse in ministry

One of the most devastating wounds to the body of Christ today is sexual abuse in ministry. This occurs when a person in a position of ministerial leadership, lay or ordained, violates the sacred trust of that office by inappropriately crossing sexual boundaries. Sexual abuse by individuals

5. [www.lutheranworld.org/LWF\\_Documents/EN/Consultation\\_Diakonia-2002.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/LWF_Documents/EN/Consultation_Diakonia-2002.pdf)

## Each deacon is a member of the body of Christ with unique gifts, rejoicing and suffering along with the other members.

in ministerial leadership is an abuse of the power. When a church leader engages in sexual behavior with someone, whom they should be serving in ministry, that leader is no longer serving the best interests of the other person but instead using that person and the position of ministerial leadership to gratify his or her own desires. When a ministerial relationship becomes sexualized, it ceases to be a ministry of the church, and the aftereffects can be devastating not only to the exploited congregant but to the entire congregation.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, ministerial sexual abuse is not as rare as we might suppose. Diana Garland, Dean of the Baylor University School of Social Work, surveyed thousands of women who had attended church at least once in the preceding month. She found that 1 in 33 women reported having been sexually harassed or abused by her own pastor during her adult life.<sup>7</sup> The UMC handles between

6. See the special issue, "Violating Boundaries: Improprieties in Ministry," of *Caring Connections: An Inter-Lutheran Journal for Practitioners and Teachers of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 10 (Spring 2013).

7. Diana R. Garland, "The Prevalence of Clergy Sexual Misconduct with Adults: A Research Study Executive Summary," <http://www.baylor.edu/clergysexualmisconduct/index.php?id=67406> (April 20, 2015).

150-500 credible allegations of clergy sexual abuse every year in the United States according to recent research.<sup>8</sup> From my own experience as a clergy boundaries trainer, I estimate 12 percent of United Methodist congregations in the United States, nearly 4,000 congregations, are suffering from the aftereffects of sexual abuse by a ministerial leader.<sup>9</sup> This is a problem that affects us all.

## A wounded congregation

The following is a fictionalized illustration of a wounded congregation, based on events from actual cases.<sup>10</sup> The church secretary, in her mid-40s and also a church member, had filed a complaint against the senior pastor, alleging that he had coerced her into a sexual relationship, violating the sacred trust of ministry. She admitted that at first she thought the relationship was based on genuine and mutual love. It had felt like God intended her to be with this man and that she could imagine a wonderful future with him. He admonished her to keep it their secret, explaining how others in the congrega-

tion would not understand and that they should wait to tell people when the time was right. Their sexual intimacy went on for nearly a year before she became so uncomfortable with the secrecy that she demanded they make their relationship public. He tried to convince her to keep quiet, saying this was God's plan for their lives. But she told him she could not stay quiet any longer. He then broke things off with her and asked her to resign her position at the church. As a single mother with no other source of income, she did not want to quit her job.

She sought help from a victim advocate, discovered the definition of clergy sexual misconduct, and learned to name his behavior as abuse. It was at this point that she began to realize the extent of his manipulation and coercion, filing a complaint with the bishop alleging sexual misconduct. Meanwhile, she was afraid of losing her job. In fact, the congregation's personnel committee, on a directive from the pastor, gave her two weeks' notice, even as she told them about the pastor's abusive behavior and her complaint to the bishop. When she tried to contest her firing to the bishop, she received an official letter from the conference's lawyer stating that personnel matters were up to the local congregation to decide, not the bishop.

She left her job, her congregation, and her pastor. The bishop dismissed her complaint as lacking sufficient evidence. The pastor continued in his appointment and members of the congregation became divided over who and what to believe. As she began sharing the real reason for her departure with members of the congregation, she was met with a range of responses: from skepticism and denial to righteous indignation at the pastor and compassion for her circumstance. Some members grew in distrust and suspicion of the pastor and others grew in their unfaltering support for

8. Sally Badgley Dolch, *Healing the Breach: Response Team Intervention in United Methodist Congregations*. Doctor of Ministry Thesis. Wesley Theological Seminary, 2010.

9. In 2009 I conducted a survey among over 600 clergy in the Northern Illinois Conference of the UMC, during a required healthy boundaries training workshop. We found that about 50 percent of those present had served a congregation, in which sexual misconduct by a ministerial leader had occurred in its past. This data is consistent with surveys by boundaries trainers of UMC clergy around the United States.

10. This illustration is based on an amalgam of actual cases. All names and identifying details have been altered to provide anonymity.

his ministerial leadership. The personnel committee, who this time interviewed only male candidates for the job, told the next church secretary nothing about these circumstances and the growing conflicts in the congregation.

This story of abuse by a ministerial leader illustrates the damaging and lingering effects of that behavior on a congregation.

### Congregational trauma and dysfunction

A congregation wounded by its own trusted leader suffers a type of trauma distinct from other traumas in the faith community: the perpetrator is in a position representing God. The very resources that a church typically draws upon—its pastoral leadership, judicatory personnel, and integrity as a community of faith—are thrown into disarray and distrust, hampering recovery. Every ministerial leader becomes tainted by distrust, stemming from one minister's offense.

In a wounded congregation, laypeople often take sides over what really happened and who is to blame for the alleged sexual abuse. Furthermore, when the victim is an adult, congregations are often divided because many people find it difficult to understand how an adult can be a victim, lacking the ability to offer genuine consent to the sexual advances of his/her pastor. Often victims are blamed and perpetrators are not held accountable. Even when the abuse is acknowledged, many judicatory personnel mistakenly believe that simply getting rid of the perpetrator (and often also the victim) will solve the problem. However, when a traumatized congregation is not assisted in healing, it remains mired in unhealthy patterns long after the initial breach of trust. This type of wound does not go away on its own.

When a traumatized congregation is not assisted in healing, it remains mired in unhealthy patterns long after the initial breach of trust.

Conflicts over leadership can become part of the congregational system, inhibiting the leadership of the incoming pastor, who follows a pastor whose departure was clouded by suspected or confirmed misconduct. Recently, I heard from a judicatory leader who is working with a congregation that is trying to come to terms with the departure of their pastor because of sexual misconduct that occurred over ten years ago, which was never handled publicly. The initial call for help was about deepening conflict over pastoral leadership—a sure path to congregational decline.<sup>11</sup> This congregation's unhealed wounds continue to hamper its ministry a decade after the incident. The wounded body of Christ needs healing.

11. According to the Faith Community Today FACTs on Growth 2010 Report, "serious conflict is a very strong predictor of congregational decline" and conflict over pastoral leadership is the conflict type "most strongly associated with decline." <http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/faithcommunitiestoday.org/files/FACTs%20on%20Growth%202010.pdf>

### Healing through justice and compassion

To recover vitality, a wounded congregation needs an intentional process of healing, in order to grieve in healthy ways and to reconcile the violation of sacred trust committed by a ministerial leader in relation to the community's historical narrative and self-understanding as a church. The congregation must be able to come to terms with what happened and move forward in faith. A past that is not fully acknowledged has lasting and binding power over the present, which hampers our ability to imagine a better future. Healing within a congregation allows members and leaders to become co-owners of a common story, bad and good, and no longer stuck in the present. We must find ways to re-tell our congregational narratives to open us to the vast possibilities of God's future, so that we are neither continually reacting to a traumatic past nor obsessed

The congregation must be able to come to terms with what happened and move forward in faith.

with nostalgia for a previous era. With a deacon's eye, I see a way to that future through specific practices of justice and compassion. I mention here only a few of the seven elements of justice-making named by Marie Fortune, the founder of the FaithTrust Institute: truth-telling, acknowledging the violation, and compassion for victims.<sup>12</sup>

12. Marie M. Fortune, *Is Nothing*

Healing begins with truth-telling, and, indeed, truth-telling is one of the primary gifts of the diaconate.<sup>13</sup> One of the challenges associated with sexual abuse in ministry is that the church must tell the truth to and about itself. Breaking the silence surrounding an incident of sexual abuse by a ministerial leader is the only way to give voice to what really happened and to re-empower the survivor/victim, both for individuals and the congregation itself. Sexual misconduct begins as a secret, with all the appeal, allure, and danger that secrets harbor. When a survivor/victim is empowered to speak the truth about what happened, to name the abuse and to identify it as a violation, then the secret is dispelled and a healing process can begin. A wounded congregation must be similarly empowered to name past abuse and acknowledge the wound in need of healing. This is as important for the community of faith as for the primary survivor/victim.

A recent example of truth-telling in community took place at the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, which held a special service to acknowledge and apologize to the victims of John Howard Yoder on March 22, 2015. Some of the women who had been sexually violated by Yoder were able to tell their stories publicly for the first time. What is so remarkable is that the institution finally,

*Sacred? The Story of a Pastor, the Women He Sexually Abused, and the Congregation He Nearly Destroyed* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 114–115.

13. "To Love and Serve the Lord: Diakonia in the Life of the Church," *The Jerusalem Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission* (ALIC III), 2013, 17. [http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Transitivity%20ALIC\\_report-EN%20for%20ACC.pdf?\\_ga=1.138265648.1268984575.1412122259](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Transitivity%20ALIC_report-EN%20for%20ACC.pdf?_ga=1.138265648.1268984575.1412122259)



decades after the fact, acknowledged Yoder's abuse of over 100 women and offered an apology to them. The current seminary president, Sara Wenger Shenk, confessed: "What was done to you... was grievously wrong. ...It should never have been allowed to happen. We failed you. We failed the church. We failed the Gospel of Jesus Christ."<sup>14</sup>

Shenk's apology illustrates Fortune's second element of justice-making: acknowledging the violation. The congregation mentioned above, still mired in conflict over an incident of sexual misconduct from years ago, needs the salve of truth-telling to acknowledge the violation, in order to begin healing from this wound of betrayal. As Fortune explains, "Simple though it is, verbal acknowledgement conveys a depth of understanding and compassion that cannot be accomplished in any other way."<sup>15</sup> Often this requires the assistance of judicatory leaders, who are unafraid to acknowledge the reality of sexual abuse in the church. Healing requires that the institutional church and its judicatory structures be forthright about specific violations and acknowledge the harm done.

Fortune's third element of justice-making is compassion. It takes bold leadership to reestablish ministerial trust where it has been violated. In the best cases, a trained Response/Intervention/Care Team can facilitate a congregational disclosure meeting in partnership with the bishop and other judicatory personnel. Such a Response Team, composed of

individuals with specific skills and expertise in handling sexual trauma, can help members of a congregation work through their reactions, feelings, and responses to the news of sexual misconduct by one of their pastoral leaders.<sup>16</sup> A Response Team member may also be assigned to accompany the alleged victim through the process of adjudication. These ministries of listening and being present with those suffering in the body of Christ are courageous acts of compassion, in which many deacons already participate.

## Justice and compassion in response to sexual violence are vital practices for mission in a hurting world.

Justice and compassion in response to sexual violence are vital practices for mission in a hurting world. Not a week goes by that I do not read a news headline about some form of sexual assault or violation by individuals with power—church leaders, professional athletes, political leaders, entertainment celebrities, or military personnel—in institutions unwilling or unable to address these offenses with compassion and justice. The *New York Times* recently reported credible allegations from multiple women of sexual harassment by a professor at the Yale School of Medicine. The report describes

16. See "Response Team Ministry for Sexual Misconduct," in *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 131–134.

14. Michelle Sokol, "Mennonite Seminary Apologizes to Victims of Famed Theologian John Howard Yoder," *National Catholic Reporter*, April 9, 2015. <http://nconline.org/news/accountability/mennonite-seminary-apologizes-victims-famed-theologian-john-howard-yoder>

15. Fortune, 115.

a pattern of sexually harassing behaviors and complaints over a period of decades, during which the school failed to offer compassion and justice.<sup>17</sup> This school and many other institutions in our society are in need of a model for compassion and justice, a way toward healing.

## Healing congregations

It is through a deacon's eye for compassion and justice that we can identify, name, and attend to the church's need for healing, so that it can again bear witness to the good news of Christ Jesus. The work of healing congregations is transformative. When a wounded congregation becomes a healing congregation, the wounded body of Christ becomes an agent of grace in the world. The church's authenticity in tending to its own woundedness is essential to being a credible and reliable witness to the gospel in a world, in which domestic violence, sexual abuse, and violence against women and children continue to be the existential reality for millions of individuals. The ministry of healing is a moral imperative for the body of Christ, wounding and wounded. "...Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."<sup>18</sup>

17. Tamar Lewin, "Seven Alleged Harassment by Yale Doctor at Clinic," *New York Times*, April 13, 2015.

18. This article is based on a presentation made by the author to the Deacon Dialogue 2015 at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary on April 17, 2015.

When a wounded  
congregation  
becomes a healing  
congregation, the  
wounded body of Christ  
becomes an agent of  
grace in the world.

## For reflection and discussion:

As you listen to the news this week, view current events with a deacon's eye for compassion and justice: Where is there need for healing in this broken world?

Take time to pray and meditate on the meaning of Christ crucified and the image of the body of Christ, wounded and wounding, listening for grace and the work of the Holy Spirit in your life: What do you hear God calling you to do?

Have you ever known about or been part of a congregation wounded by its ministerial leader? How was healing hampered? Who proved to be an agent of grace?

Think of a time in your life when someone you trusted wounded your soul. Where did you experience healing? Were you able to find healing in the church?

"Healing congregations" has a double meaning, in which the church could either be receiving healing or bestowing healing. How does this dual meaning point to the surprising work of the Holy Spirit, offering possibilities of grace and transformation in our lives?