'Diaconal Dilemmas – The Development of the Diaconate in the Church of the Nazarene'

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of the diaconate within the Church of the Nazarene. It addresses both the history of the diaconate and the current state of the diaconate within this evangelical denomination. Furthermore, this paper seeks to contribute to a recent referral made by the Church's General Assembly and to the wider Church catholic regarding reflections on our theological and historical positions concerning the roles of ministry. It provides a new study relating to a topic that is overdue for renewed consideration in this particular denomination, engaging with a number of recent ecumenical sources on the topic. It takes into consideration new ecclesiological initiatives, the burdens placed on bi-vocational ministry, and other needs that are filled by those who are called to be a deacon. Finally, this paper proposes a new way of understanding the role of the deacon in light of current research and practice.

Keywords: Nazarene; Diaconate; Ecclesiology; Ordination; *Diakonia*.

Introduction

The International Church of the Nazarene, a self-proclaimed 'Wesleyan-Holiness' branch of the Church catholic, has recently joined the current debate about the nature and function of the diaconate. The General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene, which has oversight of the overall governance of this denomination and is the final decision-making body for all decisions affecting it, received two resolutions at its meeting in 2009 that suggested drastic changes to the diaconate. One resolution intended to abolish the diaconate altogether and the other resolution intended to further develop the diaconate's role within the church. These resolutions were produced by two opposing views of the diaconate within the one Church of the Nazarene.[2] As a result, the Assembly voted to refer the two resolutions for further research and discussion.

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[2] These resolutions will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

In response to what happened at the Assembly and as a contribution to current ecumenical dialogue on the diaconate, this paper will address why the Nazarenes are having what I have called 'diaconal dilemmas', a topic that is overdue for renewed consideration. In order to do this, I will briefly address the history of the diaconate within the Church of the Nazarene, considering its heritage within the Methodist movement. Focusing on the theological issues of ordination and ecclesiology, I will assert that the role of deacon is a calling of God and should not be taken lightly. Therefore, I will engage in this dialogue judiciously, but with personal insight, as I am working out what it means to be a deacon myself. Finally, this paper will take into consideration new ecclesiological initiatives, recent ecumenical approaches to the diaconate, the burdens placed on bi-vocational ministry, and other needs that are filled by the diaconate. I will propose a way forward in developing the diaconate within the Church of the Nazarene in light of current research and practice in the British Isles.

Denominational History/Polity

In order to approach the 'diaconal dilemmas' within the Church of the Nazarene, we first need to be aware of the history and polity of this particular denomination. Doing this will help us understand the role of the diaconate within it. Officially organised in 1908, the nascent Church of the Nazarene found its origins in Los Angeles, California under the leadership of Phineas Bresee , Joseph Widney and the work of the Penial Mission in 1895. Bresee was an ordained elder in the Methodist Episcopal Church who had a heart for the poor and underprivileged people of Skid Row, Los Angeles. Responding to what they saw as a definite mission of the Church, the Penial Mission began to work with the people of this impoverished area.

Added to the emphasis on working with the poor, these early Nazarenes promoted the theology of Christian holiness. Put simply, they promoted a theology that asserts persons may be delivered from the power of sin in this life.[3] They were not the only group who emphasised the ideals of holiness. Pockets of 'holiness' Christians were scattered throughout the United States and the UK at the turn of the twentieth century. Remnants of the 'American holiness revival movement' of the nineteenth century, these relatively isolated Christian communities had formed a number of alliances across the US and UK. In 1908, three of these alliances - The Association of Pentecostal Churches of America, the Church of the Nazarene, and the Holiness Church of Christ - joined together to officially unite those in the East with those in the West and South of the US to form the nation-wide Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene.[4] Today there are approximately two million members of the Church of the Nazarene in 155 world areas.[5]

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[3] For a full treatment of Christian holiness from within the tradition of the Church of the Nazarene, please see T.A. Noble, *Holy Trinity, Holy People: The Theology of Christian Perfecting* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

[4] In 1919, the word 'Pentecostal' was dropped and the Church of the Nazarene continued the mission of working with the poor and promoting Christian holiness.

[5] For a comprehensive history of the Church of the Nazarene, see Floyd Cunningham (ed.), *Our Watchword and Song: The Centennial History of the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2009). For a history of the Church of the Nazarene in the British Isles, see Tom Noble and Hugh

Because of the nature of her formation, the Church of the Nazarene inherited various opinions on ecclesiastical polity. This new institution largely contained former Methodists, Pentecostals, Revivalists, Wesleyans and Independents. As a result, the Church of the Nazarene has developed a complex ecclesiology. Elements of episcopal, presbyterian, congregational, and free-church ecclesiological thought (coupled with influence from American forms of democracy) may be found within the official framework for organisation called the *Manual*.[6] What follows is a brief outline of the three levels of jurisdiction in the Church of the Nazarene as defined by the *Manual*:

1. **General Church** – The General Church of the Nazarene consists of all District and Local Churches who claim to be a member of her fellowship worldwide. The General Church is led by the Board of General Superintendents; six ordained elders elected by the quadrennial General Assembly (consisting of lay and ordained persons).

2. **District Church** – The international Church of the Nazarene is divided into Districts. Each district is a geographical area (much like a diocese) containing a number of churches (example: churches in England and Wales form the British Isles South District). The district is lead by the District Superintendent, who is an ordained elder elected by the District Assembly (consisting of lay and ordained persons) held annually.

3. **Local Church** – Each local Church of the Nazarene is lead by (at least) one pastor and a local church board.[7] The local church board is made up of laypersons, elected by the members of the local church, and chaired by the pastor. Local Church boards confer local ministers licenses to those who feel called into the ministry (lay or ordained). For clerical candidates, this license is the first step towards ordination.

This brief outline of the levels of jurisdiction in the Church of the Nazarene offers a framework from which the ordained ministry of the Church may be explored.

Ordained Ministry in the Church of the Nazarene: Elders and Deacons

There are two ordained orders within the Church of the Nazarene: Elder and Deacon. This has not always been the case. From its initial formation of 1908 to the General Assembly of 1985, the Church limited ordination to one order, that of elder. What follows is a brief account of the Nazarene understanding of both ordination

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Rae, *Called to be Saints: A Centenary History of the Church of the Nazarene in the British Isles 1906-2006* (Manchester: Didsbury Press, 2006).

[6] *Manual/2009-2013 Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2009), hereafter noted, *Manual* (2009).

[7] The pastor(s) may be a licensed or ordained elder. Licensed ministers are candidates for ordination who have the authority to preach and administer the sacraments only in their assigned local church. Ordained ministers have the authority to preach, administer the sacraments, and oversee the care for and business of the local church. Ordained ministers also have the authority to preach and administer the sacraments outside their own local church. See *Manual, (2009)*, 180-223.

and the order of elder. The evolution of the diaconate will then be addressed in the section following.

A theology of ordination is provided in the *Manual* section on 'Call and Qualifications of the Minister'.[8] In this statement, the Church of the Nazarene affirms the priesthood of all believers, the calling of God on certain persons to engage in 'the more official and public work of ministry', the equality and promotion of women in ordained ministry, and the public witness of candidates as exemplary of Christian character and holiness.[9] Ordained ministers are expected to have a 'thirst for knowledge, especially for the Word of God, and the capacity to communicate clearly sound doctrine.'[10] I want to develop three details of this statement on ordination.

First, the statement begins by affirming the 'universal priesthood and ministry of all believers'. Though many other churches affirm the same, it is not clear why the General Assembly elected to provide this statement in the beginning of a theology of ordination. The placement of this statement on the priesthood of all believers may be a reflection of the democratic nature of Nazarene polity or it may be an effort to avoid the problems that can emerge from an overemphasis on a distinction between clergy and laypersons. The 'Commission on God-Called Ministry', organised for the 1985 General Assembly, recognised that the call to ministry includes 'all who are redeemed by Christ's atonement and to whom God has given the gift of His grace', and it asserted that a recognition of lay ministry 'provide(s) the church with a core of committed workers equipped to advance the Kingdom.'[11] In contrast to lay ministry, ordination includes the 'authenticating, authorizing act of the Church', which affirms those who are called to a lifetime of more official and public ministry. The affirmation of lay ministry placed at the beginning of a statement on ordination also signifies that the laity, which comprises the majority of the body politic in the Church, receives recognition as such before recognising the existence of clergy. Being a church whose clergy are first elected and then ordained, this statement on ordination affirms the electorate before defining the clergy.

Second, the Church of the Nazarene recognises the 'public work of ministry' as a calling of God. The *Manual* states, 'He (God) still calls and sends out messengers of the gospel. The church, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, will recognize the Lord's call.'[12] As persons begin to sense the calling of God on their life they express the witness they feel in their spirit to the Church. It is the task of the Church, then, to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in discerning whether or not this call is of God. It is God who calls and the Church who affirms that calling. For the Church of the Nazarene, affirmation ultimately lies within the collective body politic (at District Assembly level), informed by the Board of Ministry's recommendation. The church gives ultimate authority to the movement and guidance of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the life of the Church in her 'authenticating' business of ordination.

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[8] *Manual,* (2009), 180.
[9] *Manual,* (2009), 181.
[10] *Manual,* (2009), 181.
[11] '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), 253.
[12] *Manual,* (2009), 180.

Third, the Church of the Nazarene affirms that ordination is gender-inclusive. Both men and women have equal opportunity in all positions of authority within the church, whether lay or ordained. The current *Manual* statement on ordination says 'ordination reflects the biblical belief that God calls out and gifts certain men *and* women for ministerial leadership.'[13] One distinct aspect of the Church of the Nazarene's perspective on ordained ministry is that from this denomination's inception at the turn of the twentieth century, the Church of the Nazarene has included both men and women as eligible candidates for elders' orders. Tracy and Ingersol noted:

> 'Women were eligible for every office in the new church. The ordination of women was a common practice in the three major parent bodies, and women were ordained at both uniting General Assemblies (1907 and 1908)'.[14]

The key biblical mandate for this affirmation was found by the General Assemblies to be Acts 2.16-17. Here, Peter acknowledges that Pentecost was the fulfilling of Joel's prophecy that stated 'your sons and your daughters will prophesy.'[15] These three aspects of ordination (recognizing the priesthood of all believers, affirming the God-ordained ministry of the clergy, and acknowledging the inclusion of both men and women ministerial leadership) are key to understanding the orders of elder and deacon within this church.

Elders

The order of elder is described in the current *Manual* in three paragraphs. It begins by stating:

> An elder is a minister whose call of God to preach, gifts, and usefulness have been demonstrated and enhanced by proper training and experience, and who has been separated to the service of Christ through His church by the vote of a district assembly and by the solemn act of ordination, and thus has been fully invested to perform all the functions of the Christian ministry.[16]

According to this definition, elders are ministers, called of God and ordained by the Church 'to preach' and 'to perform all the functions of the Christian ministry'. This brief definition is followed by a description of the functions in which the elder is authorised to participate. It states:

> We recognize but one order of preaching ministry – that of elder. This is a permanent order in the church. The elder is to rule well in the church, to preach the Word, to administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's

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[13] *Manual,* (2009), 180. Emphasis mine.
[14] Stan Ingersol and Wes Tracy, *What is a Nazarene? Understanding our Place in the Religious Community* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1998), 12.
[15] Acts 2.17 (New Revised Standard Version)
[16] *Manual,* (2009), 207.

> Supper, and to solemnize matrimony, all in the name of, and in subjection to, Jesus Christ, the great Head of the Church.[17]

Like many other Christian traditions, the ordained elder (or presbyter, or priest) is authorised to preach, administer the sacraments and perform wedding ceremonies. Elders are expected to show 'gifts', specifically in preaching, and evidence of good 'fruits' in their ministry. These gifts and fruits are made evident in the training period of 'licensed ministry'. For one to be accepted as a candidate for ordination, one must first go through appropriate theological/pastoral studies courses and have accumulated at least three years' experience in a local church as a 'licensed minister' under the supervision of an ordained minister and the Board of Ministry.[18] Once these two criteria are successfully accomplished, the candidate may be put forward for ordination at the District Assembly. The District Board of Ministry, which oversees the training process of the candidate, recommends the candidate for ordination to the District Assembly. A vote is taken to accept the Board's recommendation, and the presiding General Superintendent undertakes an interview of the candidate. If the General Superintendent is satisfied with the candidate's qualifications and progress, the candidate is approved for ordination, which takes place (typically) on the same day. Newly-ordained elders are then eligible to pastor a local church without the supervision of another ordained minister. They are also qualified to be nominated for the positions of District Superintendent and General Superintendent.

Historical Development of Diaconate

Deacons have not always been a part of the ordained ministry in the Church of the Nazarene. The position of Deaconess, however, did exist as a female-only, un-ordained position from the formation of this denomination until the most recent General Assembly. Deaconesses were described in the 1908 *Manual* as female members of a local church who, upon recommendation of the pastor and church board, were appointed and licensed to serve the local church for one year. The appointment was renewable on an annual basis in which no lifetime vow was required. Deaconesses were to 'minister to the sick and poor, to pray with the dying, comfort the sorrowing, seek the wandering and the lost, and endeavour to bring them to Christ.'[19] Deaconesses were understood as local women working in and authorised by local churches. This post existed virtually unchanged from 1908 to 1985.[20]

In 1985 a decision was made by the General Assembly to establish a new ordained order of ministry called the deacon. It was the culmination of five years of research and discussion carried out by the Commission on God-Called Ministry, which was established by the General Assembly of 1980. Appointed by the Board of General

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[17] *Manual,* (2009), 207.

[18] *Manual,* (2009), 201-205.

[19] *Manual/1908 Church of the Nazarene,* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, reprinted 1983), 44. Hereafter noted *Manual,* (1908).

[20] The issue of having a female-only, non-ordained role of ministry in a church that affirms the ordination of women could be the subject for another paper.

Superintendents, this commission (of 10 men, lay and ordained, all American with the exception of 1 Canadian) was assigned the task of studying the nature and structure of ministry in the Church of the Nazarene. Consideration was given to the biblical, historical and traditional background for ministry and particular attention was given to both the practical and legal implications associated with ordained ministry.

There are at least three reasons given by the commission regarding their recommendation that ultimately led to the establishment of an ordained diaconate: ministerial, legal, and structural. First, creating the diaconate was a suitable response to 'a current phenomenon' of the growing number of persons who, '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."'[21] According to the *Manual*, preaching is the primary issue that distinguishes the order of elder from the order of deacon in the Church of the Nazarene. Elders are considered the order of the preaching ministry. The 'current phenomenon' mentioned by the commission referred to the growing number of paid and unpaid ministers within the church who did not preach on a regular basis or even at all; namely, associate ministers, music ministers, youth ministers, etc. This growing group of ministers fulfilled the requirement of the ordained ministry of having a call to a lifetime of ministry, but their calling did not include the primary call to preach. Therefore, one reason the diaconate was established as an ordained order was to affirm and authorise those ministers engaged in a lifetime of ministry that did not always include preaching.

A second reason for providing ordained status to these non-preaching ministers was of a legal nature. Some countries, primarily the USA, offer tax benefits to members of the clergy. In the case of these Nazarene ministers engaged in lifelong vocational ministry, their status as un-ordained ministers disqualified them for the tax benefits offered by the USA government. By affirming these ministers through ordination, the Church of the Nazarene offered the possibility for tax benefits, at least for those in the USA. The commission phrased this action in the following way: 'The establishment of this order of deacon as an ordained ministry would give ecclesiastical standing and privilege as an ordained minister.'[22] The ecclesiastical standing and privilege included, but was not limited to, tax benefits.[23]

Thirdly, establishing the diaconate as an ordained position enabled the possibility of ordaining assistant pastors without conferring on them elders' orders. By doing this, the commission developed the idea that the establishment of the diaconate would be

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[21] 'The Commission on God-Called Ministry', 248.

[22] 'The Commission on God-Called Ministry', 251.

[23] Unfortunately, a major (if not the major) reason for accepting this resolution was, as in 1985, for tax reasons. According to the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS), ministers eligible for tax benefits must regularly perform 'sacerdotal functions' and 'conduct religious worship'. Prior to 1993, deacons did not have the authority to fulfil the required activities of a minister as defined by the IRS, thus rendering them incapable of receiving ministerial tax benefits offered by the US government. Therefore, the decision of 1993 changed the profile of the diaconate and thus enabled deacons the possibility to receive tax benefits. See http://www.irs.gov/publications/p517/ar02.html#en_US_2010_publink100033573, last accessed 30 July 2013.

the establishment of a clerical hierarchy. There are three roles that deacons are not eligible to fill within the Church of the Nazarene. Deacons may not be Pastors, District Superintendents, or General Superintendents. Only elders are eligible for these three positions within the church. Offering diaconal orders to associate ministers affirmed these persons as ordained, but did not offer them the opportunity to fill the highest offices of the church. According to the commission, doing this, 'preserve(d) the order of elder for those called to preach.'[24]

Upon presenting these reasons to the General Assembly 1985, the Commission on God-Called Ministry witnessed the establishment of the order of Deacon within the Church of the Nazarene. Paragraphs 404, 404.1, and 404.2 in the *Manual* (1985) define the order of deacon in the following way:

> **404.** 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 God 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.

> **404.1.** The deacon does not witness to a specific call to preach. The church recognizes, on the basis of Scripture and experience, that God calls individuals to lifetime ministry who do not witness to such a specific call, and believes that individuals so called to such ministers should be recognized and confirmed by the church and should meet requirements, and be granted responsibilities, established by the church. This is a permanent order of ministry.

> **404.2.** The deacon must meet the requirements of the order for education, exhibit the appropriate gifts and graces, and be recognized and confirmed by the church. The deacon shall be vested with the authority to administer the sacraments under the direction of a supervising elder and on occasion to conduct worship and to preach. It is understood that the Lord and the church may use this person's gifts and graces in various associate ministries. As a symbol of the servant ministry of the Body of Christ, the deacon may also use his or her gifts in roles outside the institutional church.[25]

These descriptive paragraphs stood virtually unchanged from 1985 until 2009 except for one major resolution. In 1993, the General Assembly accepted a resolution that changed the authority vested in the ordained deacon regarding the administration of the sacraments. According to the *Manual* (1985-1993) sacramental administration by a deacon was allowable only under the supervision of an ordained elder. The statement in the *Manual* on this issue read 'the deacon shall be vested with the authority to administer the sacraments under the direction of a supervising elder

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[24] 'The Commission on God-Called Ministry', 251.
[25] *Manual/1985-1989 Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1985), 161. Hereafter noted *Manual*, (1985).

and on occasion to conduct worship and to preach.'[26] In 1993, however, this statement was changed to read 'the deacon shall be vested with the authority to administer the sacraments and on occasion to conduct worship and to preach.'[27] In giving authority to deacons to administer the sacraments without the supervision of an elder, the General Assembly effectively promoted the level of authority vested in the diaconate to that of the elder, thus making preaching the primary difference between the two orders. Both deacons and elders now have the authority to perform all said ministries within the church. Deacons may administer the sacraments, conduct worship, preach, and lead the spiritual life of the congregation, but they must not 'witness to a specific call to preach'. Hence, *diakonia* in the Church of the Nazarene began to take new shape from 1993.

General Assembly 2009

In 2009, the General Assembly voted on two resolutions submitted regarding the role of the deacon. Resolution MED-509 proposed a 'Unified Order of the Clergy'. This resolution, in effect, would abolish the ordained position of the deacon and revert back to the pre-1985 position of having only one ordained order: elder. Resolution MED-510 proposed changing the wording in the *Manual* on the role of the deacon to clarify the position as distinct from the elder in relation to the Church.

MED-509 reasoned that the diaconate in the Church of the Nazarene did not reflect the Wesleyan/Methodist/Anglican tradition from which it emerged. Furthermore, the diaconate did not reflect the commonly held understanding and practice of the wider Church catholic. MED-509 also noted that establishing preaching as a distinguishing mark between the two orders was weakened by the fact that deacons are authorised to preach. Not only this, but lay-persons may preach as well.[28] The resolution concluded that extinguishing the diaconate from the ordained ministry of the Church of the Nazarene would bring the church in closer union with her ecumenical partners, it would eliminate the confusion between the two orders created by the decision of the General Assembly in 1993 on sacramental authority, and it would clearly define the differences between clergy and lay ministries.[29]

MED-510 reasoned that making preaching a distinguishing mark between the two orders created a 'fuzzy' tension. The resolution stated 'many ministers serve in positions not usually considered "preaching" ministries but do, in fact, preach. It is extremely difficult to distinguish between what constitutes a call to preaching ministry and what does not.'[30] Furthermore, the resolution suggested that the diaconate has been viewed as an 'inferior' order, although the authority vested in

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[26] *Manual,* (1985), 161.

[27] *Manual/1993-1997 Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1993), 184. Hereafter noted *Manual* (1993). See also Jack Stone, editor, *Journal of the Twenty-Third General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1993), 149.

[28] *Manual,* (2009), 183-184.

[29] *MED-509*, 1-3. https://secure.nazarene.org/mynazarene/web/general-assembly-resolutions/resolutions, last accessed 30 July 2013.

[30] *MED-510*, 3. https://secure.nazarene.org/mynazarene/web/general-assembly-resolutions/resolutions, last accessed 30 July 2013.

both orders is the same, saying, 'in practice, though not in principle, the order of deacon in our church is often viewed or treated as an inferior order while the authority for ministry for the deacon is identical to that of the elder, deacons are given the option of an "upgrade" to elder, while no provision is given for an elder to move toward being a deacon.'[31] MED-510 also recognised a trend in the membership of each respective order as being reflective of bad practice, namely the disproportionate numbers in each order of women and men. Point four of this resolution stated

> While our denomination has always recognized and supported the role of women in ministry, including that of elder, in practice women seem to have been disproportionately directed toward deacon orders. Current statistics show that nearly half of all ordained deacons are female, while less than 10% are elders. The use of a deacon order seems to communicate an implied sexism.[32]

These statistics may be a result of the fact that the deaconess was a female-only order from the beginning of the Church of the Nazarene in 1908 until the creation of deacons' orders in 1985; however, it does suggest a trend that needs to be curtailed.

After presenting both MED-509 and MED-510 to the General Assembly in 2009, the Assembly voted to defer these recommendations and pass them over for committee review. The appointed committee will research and discuss the possibilities each resolution provides and they will be up for adoption at the following General Assembly in 2013. Although these two resolutions were not accepted or rejected, there was another resolution that *was* accepted: The General Assembly 2009 adopted DA-200, which gave equal status to both elders and deacons in establishing newly formed districts.[33] DA-200 affirmed the status of deacons as being equal in ministerial authority and importance as elders. Unfortunately, 'diaconal dilemmas' still persist.[34]

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[31] *MED-510*, 4.

[32] *MED-510*, 4.

[33] See *DA-200*, https://secure.nazarene.org/mynazarene/web/general-assembly-resolutions/resolutions, last accessed 30 July 2013.

[34] 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 own right and clarifying the primary role of the deacon as one of Word and Service. The resolution was defeated 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, remains unchanged since the General Assembly of 1993. See https://docs.google.com/a/nazarene.ac.uk/spreadsheet/pub?key=0Atk3mMCwFcogdGVxN29aR1Nld1dOa1g1UkhCcDhqNlE&gid=15

Current Problems with Ecclesiology: Theology of Ordination

It has been shown in this essay that the Church of the Nazarene has struggled to clearly define and effectively promote and engage the diaconate as a valid and relevant ordained order. More than twenty-five years have passed since the establishment of the diaconate and the church continues to wrestle with what exactly the diaconate should be and do. In 1985, the diaconate was established out of response to the growing number of non-preaching ministers for admirable reasons informed by Scripture and experience, but since 1993, the relevance and distinction of the diaconate has been challenged.

A clearly-defined diaconate must be a product of a clearly defined theology of ordination, which can only derive from a clearly defined ecclesiology.[35] Although the form and shape of the Church of the Nazarene in the early twentieth century can be attributed to the homogenising of various ecclesiastical traditions, the forming and shaping of the diaconate emerged principally from pragmatism.[36] Associate, music, and youth ministers who were not on track to become elders were unable to be considered clergy in the eyes of the state. Being their vocation/career, it seemed prudent for the Commission on God-Called Ministry to find a way to give certain ecclesiastical status to these ministers. The way that emerged was the formation of an ordained diaconate. It is likely that a clearly defined theology of ordination and a concretely established ecclesiology would not have allowed such a decision to be made. Pragmatism is not the only option for the Church of the Nazarene; there is a wealth of material being produced by a variety of ecumenical traditions, which offer invaluable new insight into theologies of ministry and *diakonia*.

Contemporary Ecumenical Resources

It has been noted that the Church of the Nazarene is not alone in its quest to rethink the nature and ministry of the diaconate, as expored throughout this special issue of *Theology and Ministry*. The past two decades have seen a number of Christian traditions re-investigating and re-evaluating their own understanding of the diaconate. This renewed interest has largely been attributed to the changing world in which we live. Paul Avis' recent work on ecumenism and ministry has challenged the Church catholic to, at the very least, be in dialogue with one another and learn from one another, saying 'I believe that we are duty bound to consult with each other, to explain, to listen and to consider.'[37] He argued that churches can learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses.[38] This is something the Church of the Nazarene could helpfully do much more to inform its own reflections and practice.

In an effort to rectify this problem, and in order to listen to one another more, what follows are some key resources that have been produced in the past two decades on

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[35] For more on this see Jason Vickers, *Minding the Good Ground: A Theology for Church Renewal* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011).

[36] It is important to note that the 'Commission on God-called Ministry' in 1985 included no references to consulted works in their report.

[37] Paul Avis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology: The Church Made Whole* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 204.

[38] Paul Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 84.

the changing shape of the diaconate in the Church catholic. These resources are invaluable contributions to the questions being discussed within the Church of the Nazarene as well as a number of other denominations. It has been argued that no one has contributed more to the renewal of the diaconate than John N. Collins. His seminal work, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, is, according to Avis, 'having a seismic effect on the understanding of the diaconal ministry', and, 'the implications [of Collins' work] are revolutionary for our thinking about the diaconate.'[39] Most commonly, the *diakon-* words have been solely interpreted as 'to serve others' or 'service to others', often using Mark 10:45 as a key text. Collins' research has re-interpreted the meaning of *diakonia* and its cognates, to emphasise, not the one whom is serving (one who serves), but the reason why one is doing the serving (one who is commissioned to serve).[40] This new interpretation has fuelled much of the renewed interest in the diaconate and has contributed to virtually every publication on the diaconate since 1990.

Further to Collins' work, much has been written on the diaconate in light of a changing world. Recent emphasis on mission in ministry has invigorated churches to re-think all areas of ministry within the Church. For example, the report, *For Such a Time as This* (2001), commissioned by the General Synod of the Church of England, 'makes comprehensive proposals for the renewal of the diaconate in the Church of England.'[41] The collection of essays, *Theology of the Diaconate The State of the Question* (2004), was published as reflections on recent developments in the Roman Catholic Church claiming 'the ancient order of deacon is being developed in new ways to meet the present needs of the church'.[42] James Monroe Barnett, from the Episcopal Church in America, has suggested that the diaconate must be renewed as a 'full and equal order', one that is a representative of the whole of the church's ministry. The implications of this for Barnett are far-reaching, as:

> 'The restoration of the diaconate as a full and equal order would go a long way toward recovery of a truly organic conception of the Church and its ministry as is found in the New Testament.'[43]

In addition to these, countless articles and conferences have emerged in response to this movement of renewal. The present journal, a product of the recent conference titled 'Making Connections – Exploring Contemporary Diaconal Ministry' and held in Durham in September 2011, further contributes to the ecumenical discussion. These are just a few examples of the growing list of resources being produced on the renewal of the diaconate. Pointedly, in each of these resources listed above, various

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[39] Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission*, 105.

[40] John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 48-70. See also Paul Avis' article in the present volume.

[41] *For Such a Time as This; A Renewed Diaconate in the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2001), 1.

[42] Owen Cummings, William T. Ditewig and Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Theology of the Diaconate: The State of the Question* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), viii.

[43] James Monroe Barnett, *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1995), 217.

other traditions are consulted and proposals for the way forward are constructed in light of thorough research and reflection.

Recent Development in British Isles South

Although the Church of the Nazarene has created its own 'diaconal dilemmas', there is hope for the diaconate as a new century has begun, bringing with it the possibility of new paradigms. In the Church of the Nazarene in the 1980s, having multiple ministers in local churches was common. Associate, music, and youth ministers had more opportunities to pursue their role as their only vocation; this made the pragmatic rationale for creating a diaconal order of ministry seem worthy of consideration. Today, however, things are different. Local churches of the Nazarene are finding it increasingly difficult to financially support even one vocational pastor. In many cases, the sole pastor of a local church has become bi-vocational, taking on other employment alongside their ministry out of necessity to provide for his/her family. Earning a living wage has become a primary cause of stress for many ministers (elders and deacons) across the Church of the Nazarene.

For example, the British Isles South district, which includes the countries of England and Wales, contains between 40-50 local churches. Of these 40-50 churches about one third support a full-time vocational minister. The rest rely on bi-vocational ministers. These are elders who work part-time for the church and part-, or full-, time at another job. I do recognise the validity of 'tent-making' in this way, but this does place a strain on the bi-vocational minister, especially in the case of a minister who leads the church alone.[44] It is this situation into which the diaconate may thrive as an order who is called of God to a 'lifetime ministry who do not witness to a specific call [to preach].'[45] The Church of the Nazarene seems to be in a situation described by John Collins in 2002. Referring to Luke's account of *diakonia* in Acts, Collins said 'for today's deacons it is important to get the sense of Luke's vibrant scenario because it was only at a point of crisis, at a point where resources were failing, that the church took it upon itself to re-interpret the mandate which it had received from the Lord.'[46] The Church of the Nazarene, like many other churches, has an opportunity to re-define and re-engage the diaconate into the life of the ministry of the church.

At least two examples of this are currently being worked out on the British Isles South district with the possibility of more in the near future. One deacon in the district is employed part-time by a local church as a member of the ministry team that consists of one part-time elder and one full-time elder. The deacon shares the ministry of the team by fulfilling roles that would normally take time away from the elder. For example, having established that the elders' primary task is preaching in the worship service, the deacon is able to take on a number of administrative tasks that would otherwise take time away from the elders' dedication to preaching. In

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[44] For a discussion on the nature and form of 'tent-making', see Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995).
[45] *Manual* (2009), 205.
[46] Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections Old and New* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2002), 144.

addition, the elder is called of God to visit the flock and care for the spiritual lives of those under his/her leadership. The deacon, in this context, is able to release the elder from certain administrative tasks that would otherwise take time away from visiting and caring for the congregation. A third role that the deacon is able to fulfil is the leading of worship in the absence of the elder. Having been given the authority to preach, administer the sacraments and lead worship, the deacon is a called, educated, trained, and qualified minister who can take on the role of elder in certain circumstances (elder falls ill, on holiday, family emergencies, etc.). In this example, the deacon is fulfilling a complementary role in which his gifts of administration are employed as he works alongside the two elders of the local church, enabling the gifts of each minister to be used in the most effective ways.

The second example is of a deacon who is a theological educator by vocation, but gives much of her time to the local church in ministry. Her God-called ministry is theological education, but she recognises that she is also called of God to serve the local church. She is currently supporting the ministry of the local church by supplementing the work of a number of bi-vocational elders. This includes, but is not limited to, youth work, worship planning, children's work, leadership team, and on occasion preaching. Theological education is understood as this deacon's primary God-called contribution to the church, but she also contributes to the life of her local church.

These are only two examples of how the British Isles South district is trying to work out what it means to be a deacon today. It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop the concept of *diakonia* outside the local church context, such as in chaplaincy and para-church organisations. As mentioned above, more research and experience is required. Ecumenical dialogue is a hopeful sign of renewal for the diaconate in other traditions. My hope is the Church of the Nazarene will consult these resources and proposals as she seeks to move forward.

Moving Forward

Where do we go from here? It can be gathered from what has been presented that the Church of the Nazarene has developed a complicated and nuanced definition of the diaconate, one that has employed a mix of traditional and biblical models. To move forward, I suggest, the Church of the Nazarene must first move backward. A thorough re-consideration of the diaconate seems to be required. The church is in a place where this is possible, but to do this, three areas must be addressed for the diaconate move forward.

On a theological level, moving forward must include a re-consideration of the Nazarene theology of ordination and ecclesiology. Ordination must be clearly developed and practiced out of deeply biblical and theological convictions. Although it is stated that the difference between the elder and deacon is preaching, the Church of the Nazarene allows elders, deacons, and lay-persons to preach. This contradicts the claim that preaching is the distinctive mark between the orders of ministry. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to move towards making the distinction between the elders and deacons sacramental authority, as it was in 1985.

This would see the diaconate in the Church of the Nazarene as being more in line with Christian tradition.

On a practical level, a re-visioning of the diaconate in the Church of the Nazarene will require a new understanding of ministerial vocation.[47] If the diaconate is a lifetime calling of God and role in the church, then the church must be clearer about how that role can and should be manifest. The church should take into consideration that the diaconate would look different in each local church context. A statement of this nature would enable the diaconate to be more adaptable and accessible to various places and peoples. John Collins noted 'of its nature, however, deacons' ministry, varied as it has already shown itself capable of being and full of potential to take on other varied forms, is directed to and indeed conditioned by local needs and circumstances.'[48] Developing the diaconate as complementary to the order of elder, which is manifest in local church ministry may be a way forward for the Church of the Nazarene that currently gives no clear direction in terms of where their ministry is most needed. This new diaconate has an opportunity to address the growing stress placed on bi-vocational minsters. Engaging deacons alongside elders in the local church context would alleviate the workload placed on bi-vocational ministers and enhance the 'official' ministry of the church. Doing this would also reflect the biblical witness and early church tradition in which deacons were always in some way commissioned by a bishop or elder.[49]

Finally, moving the diaconate forward in the Church of the Nazarene would create the potential to affirm and ordain a number of people who feel called of God into lifetime ministry yet do not realise that this call can be engaged through the diaconate. It is possible that confusion about the diaconate has turned people away from the God-called ministry, when in reality the diaconate is exactly what God may be calling them into. Confusion over the diaconate must be overcome in order to promote and establish and clearly defined order of ministry for those who do not feel called primarily to preach.

The General Assembly of 2009 has at least brought the conversation on the diaconate forward into the twenty-first century, in parallel with, although much later than, its ecumenical partners. It is my hope that the Church of the Nazarene will engage with ecumenical partners, recognising that she is not the only one dealing with this issue. A judicious review of varying interpretations and practices will be helpful in the task of overcoming our 'diaconal dilemmas'. At the very least, the ecumenical consensus seems to conclude that the diaconate is an integral, complementary order of ministry, which has the potential to move the Church forward in mission as we seek to serve the world and proclaim the Gospel in ever-changing circumstances.

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[47] Recent contributions in this area are helpful: Gary Badcock, *The Way of Life: A Theology of Christian Vocation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission,* (2005); Christopher Cocksworth and Rosalind Brown, *Being a Priest Today: Exploring Priestly Identity* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2007).

[48] Collins, *Deacons and the Church*, 140.

[49] Collins, *Deacons and the Church*, 125.

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