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By Dani Gabriel

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Living With Jesus

I have been living with Jesus for a while now. My symptoms are an incredible, growing love for all people who have been pushed out into the margins; an overwhelming love for people on the borders of countries and communities; a love for people like myself who ARE the borders, between “normal” and “queer,” between acceptable and outcast; and a love of those who would reach out and touch the fabric of Jesus’ clothes, bold enough to seek healing even though they were thrown away by their families and communities. The effects of Jesus also include a strange compulsion to get to know the people I’m afraid of: the comfortable, the respectable, those invested in the status quo. I have tried staying in bed. I have tried staying long hours at work. I have tried shopping and I have tried special diets and I have tried various herbal and pharmaceutical treatments but Jesus just will not go away.

He has led me to a place I had absolutely no intention of ever setting foot in: the Episcopal Church. And he has led me right into the middle of this thing called “diakonia,” serving God in serving others. He has introduced me to the order of deacons, ordained to bring the church within the walls and the church outside of the walls together. He has compelled me to embark on a crazy journey

toward ordination, toward embodying the kind of love and service he taught us.

I can't say I'm universally pleased with this turn of events. Living with Jesus can be tough. I'm up at all hours. I'm constantly doing things that terrify me. But Jesus finds me at the crossroads between all the things that make me feel cut off from God and cut out of relationships. Jesus shows up where all of the violence I have experienced has damaged me and all the love I have experienced has held me. Jesus saves me from the certainty that all is lost and replaces it with the certainty that no one, none of us, is ever lost.

The first thing I was told to do when I expressed that I felt I might be called to be ordained a deacon was read the section in the *Book of Common Prayer* (the book that shapes our piety and practice) on ordination. Not just ordination of a deacon, but ordination of a deacon, a priest, and a bishop. The idea was that I would get a sense of the different ordained roles in the church and how I might fit into that. I think it was also meant to impress upon me the seriousness of what I was suggesting. When you read the ordination rites you can't escape the fact that these are vows. This isn't the signing of a contract, this is pledging a lifetime commitment. You also do get a clear picture of the orders: bishops coordinate the diocese and administer sacraments, priests shepherd the flock

and administer the sacraments, deacons assist in the sacraments and connect the church with the world outside and serve “the least of these.”

In the consecration the Bishop says:

Make her/him/them, O Lord, modest and humble, strong and constant, to observe the discipline of Christ. Let her/his/their life and teaching so reflect your commandments, that through her many may come to know you and love you. As your Son came not to be served but to serve, may this deacon share in Christ's service, and come to the unending glory of her who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, forever and ever.

I knew when I first read the Ordination of a Deacon in the Book of Common Prayer that I felt called to be one. I felt like my name was written all over the pages. I also felt a growing sense of apprehension that Jesus was walking me into something much bigger and more difficult than I had been imagining. In the rite the ordinand is asked:

My sister/brother/sibling, every Christian is called to follow Jesus Christ, serving God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit. God now calls you to a special ministry of servanthood directly under your bishop. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely.

As a deacon in the Church, you are to study the Holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them, and to model your life upon them. You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you live, and work, and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. You are to assist the bishop and priests in public worship and in the ministration of God's Word and Sacraments, and you are to carry out other duties assigned to you from time to time. At all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.

My sister/brother/sibling, do you believe that you are truly called by God and his Church to the life and work of a deacon?

I hope to have the opportunity to answer “yes.” The deacons I have met along this journey have kept me inspired – with their ministries, their humor, and their love of Christ. They have a variety of approaches and perspectives. Their stories are divergent and singular. They are each unique and yet united in their call. I see deacons taking a critical role in widening the sphere of the church so that there is more and more room in it. I see deacons working toward a day when there is no “in” the church and “out” of the church, there’s just the

all-powerful presence of God, everywhere. The buildings are beautiful, but church does not depend on the buildings. Our congregations are loving communities, but the Body of Christ extends far beyond them. Making church, to me, looks like working for justice and peace for all people. And that's what deacons are here to facilitate, bringing all the baptized into the project. It is holy work, and it is work without which the church is not going to survive.

In a time when the church is keenly aware of the need to be relevant to the world today, the order of deacons is here to provide a model for how we might do that. Deacons are all over the Episcopal Church, proclaiming the Gospel, working with youth, building bicycles for folks that don't have transportation, organizing food ministries and protests. Deacons are advocates, motivators, and innovators. They invite the homeless people on the corner inside. They preach truths that can be inconvenient. At every service, they send the people out into the world to serve the Lord.

There is no church separate from the world. There are no people who deserve membership and people who do not. Every church that dismisses the poor from the doorstep so they won't disturb worship has entirely missed the point of Jesus' message. And we need people to remind us of that. Church is beautiful. The stained glass paints the walls, the

music floats, your friends are at the table with you at coffee hour. Who wouldn't want to stay there? In some ways, I do too. But Jesus did not show up here on earth or in my life to make anyone comfortable.

Two books that give great context for conversations about deacons and the diaconate are “Unexpected Consequences: the Diaconate Renewed” by Suzanne Watson Epting and “Many Servants: an Introduction to Deacons.” by Ormonde Plater. The role of a deacon has two thousand of years of history, but in other ways it is changing and transforming today. Pretty much everyone in Western culture knows what a priest is, even if they have very little familiarity with Christianity. A lot of people don't have a clue what a deacon is, even within the Episcopal Church. If you ask everyone in the pews on a Sunday what a deacon is, you'll get a variety of different answers. Plenty of people are only familiar with “transitional” deacons, and think all deacons go on to become priests. The invisibility of deacons, and the confusion about what they do, limits the growth of the order, and the growth of the church which it is their task to widen.

I want more people to know about the transformative work of deacons. In this series of interviews I will share an exploration of the variety of ways the diaconate expresses itself in the Episcopal Church. I have had the privilege of

interviewing deacons from around the country (and Cuba!) as well as our Presiding Bishop about their thoughts on the diaconate. What they told me has inspired me as I continue on my own journey, and I hope will inspire you on yours. Who knows, maybe the spirit is calling you as well!

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is the 27th Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. Bishop Curry talks a lot about the “Loving, Liberating, Life Giving” Jesus Movement. He says “Now is our time to go. To go into the world, let the world know that there is a God who loves us, a God who will not let us go, and that that love can set us all free.” Deacons will propel that movement forward. I had the privilege of interviewing Bishop Curry at the Association for Episcopal Deacons Triennial in Rhode Island. Here is the excerpted interview.

Dani: Why do we need deacons?

PBC: Why do we need deacons?

You know, this is going to sound strange, but the order of deacons has...particular integrity and authenticity that is somewhat unique...And by that I mean that most priests, it's not true of all of them, but most priests and bishops are on the payroll of the church. So they're seen as kind of professional Christians.

And, people listen to their pastor, priest, or their bishop. I mean, they really do. I don't mean that they don't. But there is a very different voice from a deacon who actually has a life and living in the world, what people call the real world, not just the

church world, but the real world, and has a life in the church. They actually become the most profoundly bridg[ing] people in terms of leadership. They're bridge leaders intrinsically. I mean that is the nature of the order, which is why the ordinal actually talks about the deacon bringing the hopes and needs of the world to the church and the church to the world, back and forth.

The deacon is at the intersection of world and church, if you will. Which is why the deacon reads the Gospel. I mean it's not because it's an honorific position. The deacon is reading the Gospel because it is the teachings and the life and the spirit of Jesus, who was God incarnate, who bridged Heaven and Earth. You see what I mean? Who is our bridge to church, our faith in the world. And so the deacon is that person, at the intersection. That's a unique charism and calling for the deacon. It's not the same for priests. It's different for a priest. It's not the same for a bishop. Though, the irony is bishops and deacons have the most in common.

I've been a bishop since 2000, that's nineteen years. And, you know, I'm very much a priest, and I get that. When I retire, I'll go and take a little church and be a priest. Some little congregation that they can't get anybody else that they can afford to pay for, I'll have a pension by then, so I'll go and take a church, that's fine. But the ministry that I do has a lot more diaconal elements to it. I think that is why

deacons are actually linked to the bishop. Because those two ministries actually are very similar. If you look at the ordinal, at the ordination services of a bishop and a deacon, there are real similarities in the vows.

For example, in the preface to the vows for a deacon, the language it starts out... You know, "[every Christian is called to] follow Jesus Christ." And then, "[God now calls you to a special] ministry of servanthood directly under your Bishop." And [in the ordination of a] bishop...it actually quotes the passage where it says, "[Your joy will be] to follow him who came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many." There's a similarity between the orders of deacon and bishop. I think, the reason they're linked together aside from historical precedent, that was the way it was in the beginning.

Go back to the acts of the apostles now. I know there's debate as to what Acts 6 [says]. I know. I know there's all this debate. Were these deacons or not deacons? It's certainly diaconal ministry. Now, what the apostles had in mind, I don't know. But it's interesting that the apostles and deacons were tied to each other. The deacons were actually the administrative arm in that context. For both, administering the food and the supplies to the needy and also making sure that justice and equality was happening in the Christian

community. That's what was going on. The issue arose because some people saying, "Our widows aren't getting..." You see what I mean?

And so the deacons were responsible for being instruments of justice and equality in the Christian community. As well as administering the food and supplies and whatever else people needed. They were directly tied to the apostles...apparently the apostles were trying to do it. And really weren't doing it. They were running around running their mouths preaching. But so I think that intimate relationship has been there from the beginning. It's in the origins and the two ministries are radically servant. They're radical, and I mean radical servanthood ministries that really are tied to that thing in Mark 10, the son of man came not to be served, but to serve.

Now, having said all that, I think the deacon is positioned to summon the church to actually follow Jesus in that way of radical servanthood. Because you can't write the deacon off as, "Oh, they just done the seminary, all they know is church stuff. They don't know anything about the real world." Well, deacons do know. I just met a lawyer who is a deacon. I mean, you think about it. I know people who work [as] accountants who are deacons. This person [I'm traveling with] is the COO of the episcopal church, the Chief Operating Officer who is a deacon. They know the world. You can't write

them off. You can't just say their heads are up in the clouds. They know what it's like down here on Earth. And yet they follow Jesus. If they can do it, you can do it.

Dani: That's exactly what my archdeacon told me.

PBC: Yes, that's the unique charism of the deacon and the unique voice of the deacon comes out of that. It really does. And [I] remember Bob Ihloff, who used to be bishop in Maryland...he preached, he came to one of our deacon's conferences when I was in North Carolina. And it was on...'What's the deacon's voice in preaching?' And that was one of the things I remember him saying, that the deacon has a unique voice. It's not the same voice as a priest. That's different. We need all of them together, you know, we're the body of Christ. We need arms, and hands, and feet, and all that stuff.

But the truth is, the unique voice of the deacon, that's not the same as a priest, not the same as a bishop. That unique voice actually brings the world and the faith together, and that's powerful. And that's calling the church to be what Jesus intended in the first place. Not just the church, the Jesus movement. I had to get that in there.

Dani: That's good, that's good. So you see things that no one else sees, right, from your position? So what is your vision for the diaconate?

PBC: Well, I mean, I really do [have a vision for the expansion of the diaconate]. And we're actually getting there. We really are...I mean, I'm running into deacons virtually everywhere we're going and I'm traveling around the church. So they're there in good numbers and you can tell...I don't think I've gone anywhere, with only one exception that I can think of, where there haven't been deacons. That wasn't true 20 years ago.

I mean, that wasn't true 20 years ago. And some of it has been just a canonical change in Title 3, which was...2012. Which made the diaconate a normative part, not just [in] word, but actually had a process for it and all that kind of stuff. And it basically had the assumption that there would be deacons in every diocese. And that's now actually happening. I mean it really is happening now. My hope and vision is that we will have real deacons. Real deacons. Not people who are trying to be junior priests. Not, you know, imitations. We don't need imitations. Priests have an integrity in their order and bishops have integrity. We need deacons who are really deacons, who are living at the crossroads, at the interface of world and church.

I mean that's why last night I talked about Francis of Assisi. People forget he was a deacon. And his whole life was modeled after following the teachings of Jesus and trying to follow His

footsteps. For deacons to be the main people who voice and live that witness, calling the whole church to follow the teachings of Jesus, and to walk in His footsteps, that is...the primal calling of the church. I mean, that's what the Christian community is about. I mean...we're supposed to be followers of Jesus I thought. I could be wrong. But last time I checked...

So if that's the case, the deacon is the primary witness to who we are to be as the baptized followers or disciples of Jesus. That's what the deacon is, which is what Francis of Assisi did. That's exactly what Francis did. He called the church from bishops being princes and princesses in royal purple, called us back to the holy poverty, to daring to take up the cross, and give up self, and follow Jesus. That's the Jesus movement, the deacon is the primary inviter to the Jesus movement.

Let me tell you something, that's a game changer. You're talking about a church that is serious. I mean that's my vision of the diaconate in the church. That [it] is the leaven that will leaven the whole lump. It really will...The deacons are poised, it's like they've been pre-positioned by God, which I guess is the case, to do this. Because Francis, I mean I keep going back to Francis, but part of Francis of Assisi, he drove the church crazy, well drove bishops crazy because he was calling them to

be what they were supposed to be in the first place. He was calling the whole church to do that and be that. Which is what a deacon is supposed to do.

And so anyway,...the revival of the diaconate in our time...I don't think it's an accident...I'm speculating now. You'll have to get a scholar to back this up, but if you think...on the church before the 1960's...the kind of outreach churches tended to do was they would have had scout troops maybe...Girls and boy scout troops...AA groups, that would have been part of it. There would have been foreign missions, outreach that would have gone overseas to support mission work around the world.

In the mid 60's there started to be these urban priests. The urban priest movement, the church and city conference came along around that time, or late 60's early 70's...And the church was beginning to get engaged in a more direct way in public issues. So, it took a while. But it was beginning to do that. You had the urban church movement where parishes kind of on the Catholic model from Church of England, where you know, God became human, Word became flesh, the church must be present in the city, incarnate in the city...

So you're beginning to get that in the late 60's. So all that stuff is going on, but it's in the 70's that that stuff really takes fire. I don't think it's an accident that the re-emergence of the diaconate is

coterminous with that emergence [of] a sense that part of what it is to be a Christian in the Christian church is to be engaged in the kind of radical service like Jesus. You know, washing the feet of the world. I don't think that's an accident.

And I got a feeling that people who were pushing the re-emergence of the diaconate knew that. I don't know, they're probably gone to glory now, but I got a feeling they would have known that. They read the Bible, they knew the history of the church, they knew the history of the diaconate and so I think you've seen a resurgence of a commitment to serving others. Sometimes it's under the way of outreach or sometimes it would be everything from soup kitchens, to clothing closets, to peace and justice networks, and advocacy, and all that kind of stuff. That kind of stuff didn't exist before about the early 1970's. It wasn't normative. Now you'd be hard-pressed to find very many episcopal churches where they weren't at least doing something. You really would be hard-pressed.

Dani: What does the diaconate have to do with evangelism?

Ah, that's actually it...I'm going back to Francis as a model. That Francis of Assisi became frustrated with the church that wasn't reaching out and teaching people about Jesus and about His life, and about His teachings. And he was frustrated with a

church that wasn't, at least as consistently as it needed to, actually...walking in the footsteps of Jesus. And so Francis was busy...he went to meet the Muslims during the crusades. Part of what he was thinking about, he was going to convert actually. He later kind of backed off that a little bit with the Muslims, because he realized there's some integrity there. That's not my job. But it was evangelical mission. That was his thinking. So that when he was in Italy, he was actually trying to help people find a deeper faith. He really was...

See deacons are practical people.

Dani: Yes they are.

So they're going to talk with practical people, you see what I mean? And so you're talking about formation, preaching [and] spiritual formation is greatly in the hands of deacons. I don't need them to teach Sunday school. I mean, they do that. But, I mean in terms of part of their job is to form people who are in the Christian community as people who dare follow the teachings of Jesus, not just the Christmas Jesus, not just the Easter Jesus, but the sermon on the mount Jesus.

That Jesus. Who follow Jesus and they're following His footsteps in their lives, and will help people learn how to do that. That's an evangelical. That's evangelism through the church. They are also

people who are supposed to be in the world which means because they probably, unless they're retired, are working secularly. I remember a couple deacons in North Carolina, who were in secular positions, most of them were until they retired. And they would talk about all of the sudden they were having spiritual relationships and conversations with people in the workplace when people found out they were deacons...Whereas most priests if they're working through the church, they're in the church.

You know what I mean? That's just the nature of the beast...they're creatures of the temple...

The deacon is actually in the world. I mean priests are supposed to get out there too, but their ministry is in the world. And so they are part evangelists in the world. I know people quote a quote attributed to Francis. I don't think it really was Francis. "Preach the Gospel at all times and if necessary use words." Actually scholars don't think he actually said that.

But even if he didn't, it's a good saying. But the irony of it is, everybody jumps to "preach the Gospel, and as necessary use words," assuming we don't need to use words. Now in 21st century America, you got to use words...In 21st century America, people don't know the religious story, Christian or otherwise. I mean, we're living in a

pretty secular society. So, actually, this a context where you need some words...the deacon is positioned to...do as well as speak.

You ever read, it's in one of the C. S. Lewis books, I want to say it's in Mere Christianity. Where he talks about Christians as kind of this, like, not underground army, what does he call it? He talks about it as the good infection. They're positioned around the world, they're kind of a good infection, they're in great positions of power, and they're in workplaces, and they should be the good infection in the places where they are.

[He] talked about the incarnation as God's good infection of creation. Deacons are particularly that good infection and can help and show the average person sitting in the congregation who is part of a community, here's one way we do this. Your job is to be that good infection in the world. See the deacon is the role model to help folk actually be followers of Jesus in their lives for real. And not just in some vague, being a nice person sense. But in a real concrete sense of the teachings of Jesus...

And the dismissal. Go out and do it.

You've been fed, you've been set free.

We focus on the doctrines of the incarnation at Christmas and the resurrection at Easter, and that's

good. But how come there's no focus on the Jesus who told parables about the first shall be last, and the last shall be first? The Jesus who told the parable of the good Samaritan. Not the way everybody always reads it, but the real... Go back, read what he actually said with that. The parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus. Go back and read that one and have a good night sleep. I mean the Jesus who actually teaches stuff, who says stuff, and then who actually dared to live it. It got Him killed, but He actually lived it. That teaching Jesus...it was the teaching Jesus that the disciples first encountered. They lived with Him and they saw the congruence of what He was saying with how He was actually living.

It was by living what He was teaching them, both what He said and what He did, that they realized this dude is connecting us to God in a real way. This is the Messiah...There was a time in the history of the church, and this is true, and it's one of the reasons that you see all these sermons, like Augustine and all these people in the first couple of centuries had these sermons on the sermon on the mount. Mainly Matthew 5-7, but also the sermon on the plain...I think in those two Gospel writers, what they were doing was bringing together a number of the teachings of Jesus into one coherent thing...Matthew's gospel is divided into kind of five sections, which Matthew is kind of crafting that as a new Torah. And so the key to the new Torah, the

teaching the sermon on the mount, is kind of like Jesus doing what Moses did. You see?

Dani: I did not know that.

PBC: Yeah. It's designed literally to be that...it's like the new Moses so to speak, or a continuation of Moses. There was a thing in Deuteronomy. Remember that God said, "I will send you a prophet like Moses." Jesus is that prophet like Moses for Matthew...One time in the history of Christianity, the catechism of the church was the sermon on the mount. And that's when Christians refused to serve in the Roman army. That's when... You see? That's when Christians were willing to sacrifice their lives rather than give total allegiance to the empire. It was as they drew close to the teachings of Jesus and dared to follow in His footsteps, that they were doing pretty profoundly counter-cultural things. When the church and the empire marry...the sermon on the mount no longer has the same [centrality]. And all of a sudden we get Christmas and Easter as the big things. I don't think any of that's an accident. And check this out, up till that time, early on Mary Magdalene was big. As soon as church and empire get married, we got to get her out of here. And all of a sudden you get hierarchy.

(I have a tattoo that says "Magdalene," my daughter's name, so I rolled up my sleeve.)

Dani: That's my daughter's name.

Is that your daughter's name?

Dani: Yeah, Magdalene.

What a good name! Oh.

Mary, that's my saint. That's my saint. But she gets pushed out of the way. I mean, it's not an accident. The teaching Jesus leaves too. And I don't mean radical in terms of left wing, I mean radical from the Latin word radius...Radical in terms of getting to the root. That's what radical is about. What the real root of it. That real Christianity that gets to the root of the Gospel and dares to live what Jesus taught. That stuff happens when the teaching Jesus is allowed to the Jesus who is Christ. And the deacon, you see?

Dani: Yeah.

PBC: The deacon is actually charged with that. That's what Francis rediscovered and...If we rediscover that, if our deacons reclaim that, and I hear and see them doing it, I'm telling you, that will be a revival in the church. I guarantee it. And this little church will participate in a revival of this culture and this world...And I think I can see elements of it happening. I actually can.

I remember when Frank Griswold was Presiding bishop...He was leading a retreat for us and one of the things he said [was], "The more vestments and things you put on, the more within you must take off." And what I think he was getting at by that, was that yeah bishops put on a lot of stuff, I mean vestments, you know, a lot of stuff, but if you are not emptying from within, that self-emptying, for God to fill that spot, then you will fall for the false notion that you are a prince or a princess of the hierarchical established church. You will fall for that nonsense...Because you ain't got the power. You ain't got the power. That's not me playing humble, just telling you. Michael Curry doesn't have it. I bring something to the table, I'll own that, but everything I bring to the table does not have the power, the wisdom, the capacity, the endurance, all that stuff to do what a bishop is supposed to do. The only way I can do it is the way of genuine humility that you know your job is to serve...We didn't even talk about that until we were resurrecting the diaconate. I don't think that's an accident. I really don't. I'm not sure that any human being [knew]. But I think the Holy Spirit knew. And [the spirit] said, okay, "Y'all going to get a revival." And that's the way your country will get it. I think the diaconate was the key.

The Rev. Stephen Bentley **Diocese of San Joaquin**

The Rev. Deacon Stephen runs a bike shop. He provides free bikes for folks who have a ways to go to work and school and no money for transportation. Even if they do have money the transportation is not that accessible. There's not that many buses in Stockton and they're not that frequent. I am spoiled by rapid transit four blocks from my house, as well as a car. Imagining what it would be like to get through my day if I also had to contend with a lack of transportation has is overwhelming. It's one of the many ways we humiliate the poor in this country, creating barrier after barrier to doing the things we demand as tickets to security and upward mobility. When you have a sick kid, you not only have no health insurance you can't get to the hospital. You might get a job, but if the bus passes you by one morning you lose it. And just try getting groceries.

Stephen's project seems like a really interesting way to start to address these problems. It sounds pretty empowering: you own the method by which you would address your transportation problem. Stephen collects old bikes and bike parts, and builds new, tough "frankenbikes." If you have a bike but it's in disrepair he'll fix it. He's distributed over 350 bikes in the last three years and repaired thousands. His shop is called the HUB, which

stands for “Helping Urban Bicyclists.” He’s drawn in volunteers from churches and the community.

Steve has covered a lot of ground and seen a lot of things. He has a level of determination to pursue this work that I have seldom encountered. He clearly sees justice as the end goal, not bicycles. His intern, Tom, says “It’s like Cheers over there. Someone’s always stopping by, having coffee.” The key is, he tells me, everyone is respected. And Steve is someone you can count on.

Dani: My first question is: what drew you to the diaconate?

Steve: A priest noticed the things that I was doing in church that appeared to be forms of leadership, working with youth group, putting together projects, and outreach types of things, and the priest asked if I would be interested in pursuing the diaconate. It took me about a year to really discern, because I did not think that that was a role that I wanted to play in the church. I was happy being a lay person. But he apparently saw much more than I did in what I was doing, and it took about a year before I addressed it with him.

Dani: Wow. So what changed your mind?

Steve: The thought that changed my mind was, “am I doing this for me, or am I doing this for the church?” As a lay person sometimes you feel like

what you're doing is especially for you because you get the accolades for what you're doing. But when you're doing things as [an ordained person], then everything that you're doing is for the church, and it's not especially for you, and you're not getting the accolades for it. The church and God are getting the glory for that.

Dani: What do you think is the most important thing that a deacon does?

Steve: Finding out what the needs are on the outside of the [church] doors and bringing [them] inside, bringing them to the smaller church so that they know that the greater church is out there, out in the open needing to be addressed.

Dani: That's beautiful, the smaller church. So will you talk a little bit about what you specifically do, what your ministry is?

Steve: That's kind of a tough one. It's easy to see what it is I do because the doors are open, I'm building bicycles for the community. That is the [obvious thing] we do. We build bicycles for the unemployed, the underemployed, those who need reliable transportation to reach the resources that are necessary for them on a day-to-day basis. So our job when the doors are open to our particular ministry, which is called The Hub, Helping Urban Bicyclists, [is] making sure that people who need to

get to their daily, weekly, monthly programs and jobs [can do that].

But that's just a small portion of what we do. When people come in the door, we always have to discern what it is that their needs are. Do they need this prayer? Do they need to be listened to? Do they need food, clothing? Whatever it is, we are patient enough to have those doors open and whomever walks past the door is how we minister to.

Dani: Can you say more about the history of Hub and how you started it?

Steve: As deacons we are placed in our particular parishes, and we are to look at that community and see what is missing from the community, basically. And what I saw in the community was there that were a lot of people trying to get to their resources and not having an adequate way to get there.

I'm a bicyclist, and my bicycle runs in perfectly good shape. I used to work for two different bicycle companies and retail shops. I knew the performance of a bicycle and how it's supposed to be [taken care of], so my bike was always in good repair. But I would see a lot of people who did not have their bicycles in good repair and they couldn't afford to have it done.

The cost of labor in some of these retail places, they're phenomenal. Many people have no funds whatsoever and might have a bike that's in

disrepair. They may dump that bike, steal another bike that seems to be in good repair, and ride that. So someone's missing a bike; someone has a new bike.

So my efforts were to try to become the stop-gap in having bicycles stolen by making sure people who need that transportation are [getting it] for free.

Dani: So do you fix people's bikes when they come in? Or do you salvage bikes and fix them up and give them to people? Or both?

Steve: Both. We receive bicycles from various places; from people's garages; from people who may have decided they no longer need a bike; those who may have a bicycle that's in parts, and they just don't want to have anything to do with a bicycle anymore. Sometimes we take those repair parts, and we build bicycles so that we can offer that bicycle to someone who does not have one.

If we have people that they're just coming by, and they just need to have something done to the bicycle, then we take care of that as well.

Dani: That's cool. How many folks do you think you have given bicycles to, or fixed their bicycles?

Steve: Over the three years that we've been open, we probably have given out about 350 bikes.

Dani: Wow, that is a lot!

Steve: Yeah, not too bad

Dani: "Yeah, not to bad?"

Steve: Yeah, and the amount of bikes that we have repaired would probably be in the thousands. And that could be light repair, something from inner tube breakage, to a full mechanical replacement of parts.

Dani: Do you feel like you've had to do a lot of outreach, or that word has spread through the community?

Steve: In the beginning it takes work. You have to create partners and also create some credibility in your community. Not everybody understands what it is that you're trying to do. Particularly if you're saying, "Well, we're doing this for free."

So you get a lot of people saying, "You're not accepting money for this?" Well, you can make a donation, of course. We'll accept financial donations, but maybe the people that we work with do not have funds. But we may have people that come in that want to support what we're doing, and they're the ones that are paying money and offering funds that help support the mission.

It takes a lot of work to create and build relationships. And I would say easily the first year of operation, and even probably before then, was creating those partnerships.

Dani: Wow. Are there any stories you would feel comfortable sharing about folks who have come through and gotten a bike?

Steve: There's several, and there's a couple of them that sorta repeat itself. There's been a couple of instances where we've had people who have received the bicycle from us with the idea that they were going to move forward in their lives. And they have moved forward receiving a car, home, all of that, and then bringing the bicycle back to us because now they want to pay it forward.

Dani: That's awesome. How do you think that deacons can transform the church and transform the world?

Steve: I think that, first of all, a deacon has to realize that it's not about them. It's not about who you are, it's about what your community needs and quite frankly, it's about how do we interpret what Jesus is saying in scripture and how do we actually put that to practice?

Dani: What is powerful about the diaconate, in particular?

Steve: I think the easiest way to say it is, it's God's work in real time.

I have to deal with the real folks, the things that are happening day to day, the people who are crying on the streets, those who are dirty, hungry, they're

asking with their hand out. Those folks that are in the office, they don't see that on the day to day, and when they hear about it, it's more of a "Ew, that's kinda nasty. I don't want to have to deal with it."

But being a deacon, if that's where you are, and that's where you're working, and that's what is real to you, then you have to deal with that. Sometimes you have to forget what those people in authority are saying, and forget how [church] people may feel about something, and do what it is to take care of the people that are in need. Does that make sense?

Dani: So why do we need deacons? Why can't we have just priest and laity?

Steve: Well, laity needs to be trained, and I think that's where deacons come into play. Priests pretty much take care of the parish and the people within the four walls of the church, so you need someone who is outside the doors of the church, or leading outside of the doors of the church. Because that's what we're doing when we're [giving the] dismissal, is we're telling the congregation, "Follow me, go outside and let's take care of what's out there."

Priests don't do that. They are tending to the flock. We're looking beyond that, and going out into the world and bringing the flock in. Bringing in more sheep, bringing in more goats, bringing in more cattle of every sort.

Dani: So what is your best deacon moment?
What is the best moment you've had as a deacon?

Steve: I haven't had it yet.

Dani: You haven't had it yet?

Steve: No. I tell my wife this, and I tell everybody else this: Every day is a new normal. So, I won't know what is the best until I've had it. I've had good experiences, and I've had aha moments, and I've had moments where I feel really good about what it is about what I'm doing; but I haven't had any best moments. They're all good, and they're all positive, and they're all loving.

Dani: I had a question, which was, everyone's saying "The world is changing, the church is changing, no one's coming to church, no one even knows what the church is." So my question is, what is your vision for changing diaconate in a changing church?

Steve: Well we in downtown Stockton, we say that The Hub is a church. Where we are, and what we're doing three to five days a week, building bicycles and doing what we do, that is church every day. Because we're touching people, and ministering to them, and sharing the word of God, right there in that place, at that time, at that moment.

We're not really necessarily concerned about putting an ass in the pew. We're concerned about taking care of the people that are out there hurting.

Dani: Have you found folks in your church curious about the diaconate and have you started to meet more people who are interested?

Steve: There are a lot of people that will look at you and say, "You know, because of the kind of life you live, I may have to reflect upon myself and think about, should I go to church, or should I concern myself about more Godly things, should I make some changes in my life?" People come back to church, simply because they have been moved by the things that we're doing.

And they may not stay. But they're exploring, they're making that next [step] in their own personal journey. And if they happen to stay in the church for five minutes, and they hear [something] that speaks to them, or challenges them, then that's what we're there for.

The Ven. Canon Nina Pickerrell Diocese of California

The Ven. Canon Nina Pickerrell sits in a garage stuffed with baby bibs, diapers, toys, and several hundred towels donated by the Hilton. We're in a cleared out corner with a fridge, a rug, and two plastic chairs. The door behind us is open to the yard, with a sandbox and kids toys everywhere. Behind that is her house, in which, she tells me, she keeps it simple. Deacon Nina is firm. Deacons must model justice and compassion and live out the Good News in all aspects of their lives. Don't just serve in church on Sunday. Serve the people at all times. Don't take up too many resources. It's not about you.

Nina lives in Bayview, probably the most resourced starved neighborhood in San Francisco. I have heard reports that it, like the rest of the city, is starting to gentrify. But as I drive in past piles of trash and dozens of crumbling RVs where people shelter I think maybe not yet. The neighborhood is predominantly African American, with the most violence in the city, and almost entirely ignored. Nina directs Bayview Mission out of her home. "I don't have a permit" she says, uneasily. She's been operating for 15 years, running a weekly food pantry that also gives out diapers, and clothes, and anything else she gets donated. She never turns down a donation or a volunteer. She gets people

from Google volunteering and people who need the food pantry themselves. She finds projects that suit everyone. Every week people get fed and supported with other items. Last year she did a free summer camp for neighborhood kids. She did a Gun Buy Back. “We even got an assault rifle!” she exclaims “We’re going to do it again. Three times as big.”

Bayview Mission was founded in 1993. When Deacon Nina moved to the neighborhood, the violence and drug epidemic in the neighborhood were overwhelming. She got into it deep with her neighbors. She founded Bayview Mission at her home, pulling in every resource she could get. And she has a lot of supporters.

Deacon Nina writes “When I moved into the house my grandparents had purchased in the 1950’s, I began making big changes. I cleaned up the yard and replanted the vegetable garden to give the neighborhood children a safe place to play. I cleared the clutter from the garage in order to set up a food pantry that now serves over 400 families every Monday. I tidied up the old garden room in the basement to house a children’s library that includes over 2000 books. The next project is the renovation of the barn. It’s the future location of the worship space for The Bayview Mission, a ministry of Grace Cathedral that is supported by The Episcopal Diocese of California and nearby parish St. Gregory of Nyssa. The impact of the Bayview

Mission's food pantry, community garden, and free library may be in the bringing of hope and abundance to those who have only known want and isolation."

Dani: What drew you to the diaconate?

Nina: A priest came to me and said, "I feel that you have a calling to the diaconate." And I said, "No way, nobody would want me, nobody would want me."

Dani: You said that?

Nina: Absolutely. Cross my heart and all of that. I said, "No, no, no, no, no." And he said, "Nina, for me, would you at least go to the interview?" I said, "Okay, fine, I'll go for you." I went and interviewed with the very Reverend Judith Dunlap. When we finished the interview, she says, "Congratulations, I'll see you at school in August." And I looked at her and my little voice was saying, "You have got to be kidding me. You do not want me there." Then I had to go back to Father Cliff Blinman and say, "Well, they've accepted me. We'll see how this works out." I get to school and I'm waiting for someone to say, "You don't belong here. We've made a mistake." I had two teenagers. I had divorced my husband and I had this big blonde hair and these long red fingernails. I thought, once they get to know me, they're going to ask me to leave. Who would want

this damaged woman in her, what, her forties at the time.

Things kept going along and nobody asked me to leave and then I start getting comfortable and I was getting a little louder and louder. I was passing my classes and I had someone look over my papers when I submitted them because back in the day, there was no computer and all of this business. Some of my classes were honors classes, which was a first for me and then ordination, and I thought, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no." [Walking up the steps of the Cathedral] I had my spiritual director on one side of me and a friend on the other side for fear I'd turn around and bolt.

Dani: Seriously?

Nina: It's all true. So insecure, oh my gosh, insecure to the max. If they found out about my childhood, they'd ask me to leave because who would want someone so damaged as I? Then Rev. Judith Dunlop Dean of SFD came to me after ordination and said, "Grace Cathedral is looking for a deacon and I'd like you to interview." Of course they're not going to want me. I interview and "Yes, we'll see you in August." It was others who held me up. Other people could see it and I couldn't see it at all. To answer your question.

Dani: Thank you. That's a great answer.

Nina: It's been wonderful to be able to give back and overcome some of my own issues. It has enabled me to see [that pain?] in others, recognize it and have more patience with certain folks. I know what it's like to feel like you had gum on the bottom of a shoe. I do. [But] when Cliff Blinman came up and said, "Why not the diaconate?" And I thought, "Go talk to somebody else."

Dani: How old were your kids?

Nina: Teenagers. They were teenagers. 11 and 13.

Dani: Really? Mine are 11 and 13.

Nina: No kidding.

Dani: Yeah. No joke. Sam is 11, Maggie's 13.

Nina: Oh, for heaven sakes. Okay.

Dani: I'm going to take that right there as a really good sign.

Nina: That's a very good sign, there you go. For me, these 23 years has been years of healing, a lifelong process. I get to work with women who've been verbally and sexually abused. Women will recognize that in one another and they'll say, "I think we've walked in the same shoes." Yeah. It's been good. I've run a senior program, run the columbarium, done pastoral work, done funerals, weddings as a deacon. We've got it all in my book – I appreciate our role in the liturgy, our role in the

world. Priests can't be in the office and behind an altar and be out in the world. Our job is to bring the concerns of the world to the church and then take it a step further. Live out your baptismal vows, preach, Jiminy Christmas, everything. The priesthood seems so restricted.

Dani: It's funny because people have asked me things about like, "Well, don't you want to be a priest?" And I'm like, "Heck no. Absolutely not."

Nina: Well, back in the day they'd say, and I haven't heard it lately for some years, but they'd say, "When are you ready for the priesthood, Dani?"

Dani: I've heard people say, "Why don't you want to go all the way?"

Nina: Yeah. There's another one. I said, "No. Not interested." I'm here, you can ask anything of me. I'm here. You want to sell a columbarium space? I'm here. You want to do a funeral? I'm here, I'll support you, guide you, give you every tool you need. But priests tend to be in silos and that's unfortunate for the church because the church is drying up. So, who knows?

Dani: Why do we need deacons? Why? I heard the other day that someone was telling me that there was a diocese and the bishop was like, "Nope, don't need them. Not interested." Why, why do we need deacons?

Nina: There's dioceses where you get to wear your collar in church. The moment you leave that door, you take the collar off and you wear gray. You don't wear black with your collar in church in some dioceses. Yeah. Well, okay. Let me ask you, to turn the question around, what is the church lacking? [What do we need other than] a liturgy, nice music, nice words and all of that? At a wedding or a baptism we are asked to support those two loved ones or support that child or support that adult who's being baptized for the rest of their life. When the wedding [or the baptism is] over, [should] the doors shut and then we forget about them? No.

Why do we need deacons? Because we need deacons out in the world, to be models as we are to be Christ like. If everyone lived out their baptismal covenant, wouldn't we be in a good place?

Dani: We would be in an excellent place.

Nina: All right, I can turn around the question to you. Why deacons in the world? What do we need them for, Dani?

Dani: Well, you said it, the icon, right?

Nina: Mm-hmm.

Dani: Someone to look to as an example and someone to inspire. It's not just looking to and seeing what they do, it's like deacons are all in the business. You know what I mean?

Nina: Yeah.

Dani: [Say more about how you encourage others].

Nina: I've got one volunteer she doesn't like other people talking to her. She likes to do her own thing. I've got her doing the toiletry bags. That's her niche. Well, I've got someone else saying, "Well, Nina I like to do those consignment shops. Can I go have those designer clothes consigned? Can I do that? We've got some pretty good quality things here." And I said, "Well, let me talk to the folks who donate and say, if you give me a sequin dress, can I take it to a consignment shop?" They said yes of course. That volunteer has raised \$31,000 in 15 years just by taking things to consignment shops.

Dani: Nice.

Nina: That buys a lot of eggs. I have volunteers who are trying to make it from week to week, forget the month to month thing and this is their safety. I had a woman stop the other day. The garage door was open; I was doing something in here. And she goes, "Oh." She says, "I'm so glad to see the garage door open. I just want to say, Cindy is now five years old and raising her in this area, she said, I never had to worry about diapers or food for my daughter. And I thought, hot damn. And the thing is, I don't have a permit.

I've sat on the top of those stairs thinking, what if the city comes along and says, what in Sam Hill are you doing? Where's your permit? And let's say they closed it all up and people said, "Well, what would you do? What would you do?" And I said, "I'd give thanks for the people we have served."

Dani: What is your vision for a changing diaconate in a changing church and a changing world?

Nina: Wow. I'm glad you asked. We're on the same page. I'm glad you asked that question, Dani because [now that I'm retiring] after 23 years of doing all the diaconal things I'm asking the question, what can we do for our future deacons? [Let's make the diaconate more] multicultural. Let's say a new deacon's coming along and her name is, Sue. We say, "Sue, please come on board. We have Spanish speaking instructors, we have a support group, two other deacons that will support you through the process." Wouldn't that be nice?

Dani: It would be lovely.

Nina: I don't know about your life experiences. I've shared a little bit about mine and I'm guessing I'm not the only one in the boat.

Dani: No, you're really, really not.

Nina: I didn't think so.

Dani: No, but I don't talk about it. Yeah.

Nina: Okay. And, and I never pry.

Dani: No. It's really, really amazing to hear you talk about it though, because I always am like, there's that part of me that's still like, "Are the churchy people going to judge?"

Nina: Well, that was my big, big, big fear. But I think of it differently now. I've had women come up and say, "I heard you were divorced. You actually asked your husband to leave?" I say, "Yes." And Dani, he was just here. He's six foot six, came out of Vietnam, 160 pounds. We were both immature. We both didn't know what marriage life was all about. We played house there for a while and then had children. He's done a lot of healing. I've done a lot of healing. And if he needed something, I'd be there today as a human being, I'd be there. Becoming a little more comfortable with your life experiences will feed more into your ministry in many ways. Like I say, I know nothing and I would never pry.

Nina: At the same time, I've told people numerous times, like at Grace Cathedral my door opens and closes and opens and closes all the time. Because the rule is this. If the door is shut, anything that is said stays in that office. I've had clergy women come to me, lay women come to me and made accusations against another clergy person or another lay person. Now, I don't know if she's telling the whole truth or not, but what's my first thing to do? To be her advocate. You sit there, I'll be

right back. Bishop Marc available? No. When will he be available? Okay, I'll just sit here and wait and boom, and then the process. Bishop Marc knows if he texts me and he needs something, I'm there. Now, it doesn't happen a lot, don't get me wrong.

Nina: I've been in a position to help other women lay and clergy through some very delicate [things]. I know where to go for my support, and I'm sure you have a spiritual director.

Dani: I do.

Nina: Good. For a lot of us deacons, we need therapy hence, do you know?

Dani: I have that as well.

Nina: Good. [I went to start training as a chaplain and my therapist], this poor guy, he said, "You're going to start CPE?" And I said, "Yes." He goes, "Oh." He goes, "Okay. You don't see any problem with that?" And I said, "No, why would I see any problem with that?" And he says, "Well, I believe your sister died in that hospital." "Yeah." "And that's not going to bother you?" "No." "I believe your grandfather and grandmother three years apart died in that hospital." "Yeah." "That's not going to bother you?" "No, that's not going to bother me." He goes, "Now, okay." He says, "Okay, fine." He says, "Sometimes when people go to CPE, they need a little extra spiritual guidance. If you

need an extra time, another appointment," He says, "You just call and let me know."

Nina: Dani, I walked into St Luke's hospital, ended up in the same room where my sister had died. I went to the instructor and I said, "I can't do this. [This is] a mistake. And I said, "Judith has made a mistake." And [the director] looked at me, I will never forget. She looked at me right in the eyes. "Judith doesn't make mistakes. Sit down and shut up." I go, "Okay." And went through the classes and things. But the other class was a year ahead of me and there was one deacon who caught me in the parking lot that evening and said, "You're meant to be here."

Nina: Our insecurities, do they get in the way? Yes. Anyway, I think to go back to one of your questions to be a deacon is to be real. You can't be a deacon and not give of yourself to the point that you have turned your wounds in a way that assists other people. You have to be real. I cannot be with an alcoholic saying, 'I'm so sorry. I understand what you're going through.' No. Now, come to me as an abused woman or a child...

Nina: I'm there 100% and that person will know that our experiences are different, but I've been through it. I'm not there patronizing you are saying, "The most pastoral thing to do is ask how you're doing." No. No. No. Deacons are called to be real in the world and that's very, very hard because to be

real, you need to expose, you need to be vulnerable. And I'm not saying you go out there with a sign on, don't get me wrong, but just a little what you've heard today. That's this much.

Dani: Right?

Nina: But you get it?

Dani: Yeah.

Nina: We all react, respond differently. But if we have a safe place, then we don't have to go into the deep details, but just to say, "I'm not alone. There's another woman. There's another man that would understand." And you look at your congregation. You can't tell me [there's not] someone in your congregation [who has experienced abuse.]

Dani: I know. I am absolutely aware of that. Yeah.

Nina: Good. We all have to get to a point where we can say, "Yeah, I can understand some of that. I've had that experience." I don't have to go into detail. That alone says, "She understands, she's not going to judge me."

Dani: Right.

Nina: Yeah? And they're not going to turn away from you, and you can say to them. "I'm not turning

away from you. I'm here. I'll walk, crawl and run with you." Sometimes it takes all three.

Dani: Sometimes it does.

Nina: Yeah.

Dani: Can I ask you one last question?

Nina: Yes.

Dani: Let's say there's someone who's just starting to think, "I wonder if I might be called to be a deacon." What would you say to them?

Nina: The first thing I do is say, go to the Prayer Book and look for the different holy rites.

Dani: My mentor made me read those every day.

Nina: [Every day]?

Dani: Yeah. Every day.

Nina: That's good. Well, and you're darn sure, right?

Dani: Yeah.

Nina: I started off by modeling it. People inquire because they see that in you that they see in themselves. You can ask yourself the same question.

Dani: [Any other advice?]

Nina: A couple of years ago, I was made Canon at Grace Cathedral and it was a complete surprise. I thought, "Why would you want Nina Pickerel as a Canon?" It's an honorary Canon and I carry that title until the day I die. Once again, I didn't see it. I didn't go for it, I've never had an agenda. I've never had a ladder to climb. It's just a lot of it is giving, that's part of the diaconate for sure. Forgiving, giving, loving and serving. Very simple, piece of cake.

The Rev. Jess Elfring Roberts **Diocese of Chicago**

The Rev. Jess Elfring Roberts is talking to me with a four year old yelling in the background. She is a deacon in Chicago. She wants to be that bridge between young people who see themselves left out of the church and the church as she knows it to be: empowering, supportive, and liberating. When Jess was 15 she met her first deacon at summer camp. The deacon didn't talk down to the high schoolers and supported them in a genuine way. Jess thought "I want to be like that." She got more connected in the church. At 26 she was ordained a deacon. Her ministry now is to support young people in exploring their faith and to welcome LGBTQ+ people into the church. I spoke with the rector at Church of Our Saviour in Chicago where Jess serves and he shared "Since 1985 the Diocese of Chicago has been, I think, a national leader in re-nurturing the vocational diaconate. Back then I was brand new to the diocese but the then bishop whose name was Jim Montgomery asked every parish to do a reflection on how the diacones might be restored within that congregation. So it was of my first tasks as a young priest and curate to work on the diaconate so it's been exciting over the years to watch the diaconate truly re-emerge into the life of the church. I very much consider it an absolutely equal order with bishops, priests and lay people. I loved that it was a deacon who had modeled this

kind of ministry to Jess, and that this was who Jess had then gone on to become.

Dani: All right. So you told me a little bit about this, but what drew you, specifically, to the diaconate?

Jess: When I was growing up I went on this youth event, this diocesan youth event called Happening. It's like a Friday to Sunday retreat that's led by high schoolers for high schoolers and it's done by the Episcopal Church. And there was a woman, who I [at first] thought was a priest, who was there. She was a really good listener and she was doing her ministry with young people. And I had heard she was a deacon. I was like, I don't know what that is but I want to do that. Because I saw the way she treated high schoolers with respect and like they're human beings and not children and that resonated with me. Growing up I served as an acolyte and I loved doing that. We didn't have a deacon and so I actually got to set the table at my church. And I kind of liked being the behind-the-scenes kind of person, making sure things got taken care of.

And then after I came out I was struggling with the church and with my relationship to it but I still believed in God. I finally realized that I needed to change my mindset, that God didn't need to fix me [or change] who I am. I realized through conversations I would have with friends that a lot of people have been turned away from the church who

were under the queer spectrum somewhere and they needed someone to listen to them and talk about their faith. And I ended up just being that person and I felt like there was a ministry there that just kind of happened.

It turns out that a lot of young people, a lot of teenagers, who are struggling with their identity, especially if they're in the LGBTQ community [need that]. So for me, just being able to be sort of the person in between the church and the world, it says that "You are welcome here and you are beloved," has really drawn me in.

Dani: So what will it take to make the church truly welcoming?

Jess: That is such a great question and it's something I think every single church talks about. I've spent a lot of time visiting churches and everybody says "We're really great at welcoming." And I would disagree with that. It starts with when you walk in the door. Someone saying, "Hello." And people know within, I'd say, the first five minutes, if they want to come back to that church. Sometimes even before the service has even started.

I think that many churches are good once you've come a couple of times. But if somebody's walking through the doors who's a stranger, who doesn't know anything, it's a big step to walk into a church. They're looking for something. And to be

welcoming is to be at that door welcoming those people in, asking them questions: if they've ever been at church, if they need help. And then following up with them. Inviting them to coffee or talk with them.

A lot of people only see their friends at church every Sunday so they really want to catch up with their friends, which is great and we should do that. However, if somebody's taken the courage to step through those doors, who doesn't know anyone, we really want to be welcoming to them. And I think we fall short there a lot.

Dani: What has been a challenge for you, being a deacon?

Jess: When I was preparing for ordination, they were asking me all these questions and I thought they were going to give me a hard time about being gay, and that's not what they gave me a hard time about, it was that I was young. I was ordained when I was 26 and, to my knowledge, was the youngest vocational deacon in the church. And so for me it was hard to find peers that were like me because I was the only one.

I think deacons sometimes walk a lonely road. And it was hard for me because I didn't really have anybody that was around my age. Not that I don't connect with people of all ages. But it's getting easier. There's more young people that are getting

drawn to the diaconate and it's fun to be able to be there to support them. Because it was hard. People kept saying, "Why don't you go experience life before you get ordained?" And I thought, "why can't I do both?" So that's been a challenge. But it's exciting now to see more young people. I think we're making it easier to become a deacon, especially with people who aren't your cookie cutter typical elderly white person who has got lots of money and can volunteer their time because they're retired and they don't need to worry about it. So, you know, age.

Dani: Yeah. It's funny because I am having the same experience, even though I'm older. I'm 41, not 26, but in my diocese, I'm the youngest person by a lot. So I'm having that experience also.

Jess: Yeah. I'm 33 now and I'm still the youngest. But a friend of mine, she's 34 or 35, [has become a deacon] and so that's kind of fun to have somebody [in my age group].

When you think about it, when you're in the training, you have to go to school. Sometimes a three-year program. You have to pay for it. You have to do CPE and all of this stuff. And it makes it very hard to do if you have a full-time job. There's a lot of obstacles in the way. Our diocese had a school and it met on the weekends. And there was a guy who was in school with me who had a job on the weekends and he almost lost his job because he

wanted to do the school and work. They've changed a lot of it now so that we can work with people individually to figure out what works best for them with schooling, but it's taken a long time to do that.

Dani: It seems like you have been a part of that process.

Jess: Yes. The Bishop formed a group two years ago to look at the diaconate. Basically we went to the canons and we started there and [evaluated] the process. We don't have an archdeacon. We have a group of seven ... which is kind of funny. I like the seven deacons ... that oversee different aspects of the diaconate in the diocese. So there's a person who works on people in the process, there's a person who works on formation for people who are also in the process. There's a person who works with relationship building, with the deacon and the priest and the community. There's a person who just works with outreach, so figuring out what all the deacons and ministries are and how we can help each other. It's not perfect but it's getting better. We have 22 people in the process right now.

Dani: Fantastic.

Jess: Yeah. And I really think it's because we've started to make it an individualized process. And people still go on retreat together, so there's some community building. But there's lots of people who

have felt called but were constrained by what [the process used to be].

Dani: So what has been a joy for you, being a deacon?

Jess: Many things. I love working with young people. Trying to give back to to them [something] of how I found my way and my relationship with God. I get to live out my ministry daily. I work at a high school. I'm a high school theater teacher. And I can't talk about God and Jesus, I have to actually live it out, you know, being a public school teacher. So that's been a lot of fun, being there for young people daily. And then also this parish is wonderful. I have the unique opportunity at our 9:00 service to be the leader of that service...Our 7:45 service, it's very typical spoken-word service, and then our 10:45 is very typical organ choir and the deacon's roles are very traditional there. But at this 9:00 service, Brian, our rector, named me the lead pastor of that service because of my work with families and young people. So it's been really great to get to work with a lot of those kids I've known since they were little and now I'm doing a confirmation class [with them], and I teach junior high Sunday school. [A lot of these] kids I've known since they were little and so it's a very unique opportunity to be able to serve them in that way.

Dani: I think that's interesting that you are seeing serving the youth as bridging the church and the

world. I think that's really unique. I think a lot of people think it's one of the other. Like, you either have a ministry with youth within the church, or you're active in the world.

Jess: The church is dying, you know, and we need to rethink things. I think it starts with welcoming which is a huge piece of it, so how do we bridge that gap between the world and the church. And that's our job as deacons. So I have two ministries but they both have to do with youth. I get to do one out in the world and one here. A lot of my kids at school go to church and they come and talk to me or they'll ask me questions, so that's a really unique opportunity, as well. Yeah, it's pretty cool.

Dani: It's really cool. All right. So I have one last question that you touched on a little bit when you talked about the process that you went through and the diocese around the diaconate. But what is your vision for a changing diaconate in a changing world and a changing church? With all this change, what do you want to see happen with the diaconate?

Jess: I would love to see two deacons at every parish. Young, old, all different colors, all different walks of life, different socio-economic [backgrounds], who can reach all different groups of people. My ministry and my style of being a deacon does not work for everybody. I'm a lot more laid back and I go with the flow and some people don't like that. They like their schedules and all that

and that's fine. How cool would it be to have ministers who are out in the world and in the church, talking about what's going on in real life? And saying, like, "What can we actually do about this as a church?" And saying, "We need to do something about this in the church."

You know, in Chicago we have gun violence happening. It's happening every day to young people. So I'm making our church aware of it. And it's hard because we're in Lincoln Park and [people say], "Oh, well, that doesn't happen here." Well, it's like, "Well, then, who's your neighbor?" Because it's happening a mile away and we're not paying attention. So having more voices, more deacons of all walks of life, to be able to minister to the different [people] that come in our doors. Not everybody's going to resonate with your rector, or if you have an assistant priest. Not everyone's going to resonate with me. And so it would just be really cool to have a team of people doing that work.

Dani: Is there anything I've missed that you want to talk about?

Jess: Being a deacon...you're not limited like you are as a priest. A deacon can be out there. I can go out. I did the March for Our Lives. I went down to DC and did that. If I was a priest in a church, I would have to find a sub and do all of that. It's just this unique view of the church and the world that I think is so amazing. People just don't understand

until they've met a deacon or they've read about a deacon. And I feel special that I get to be a part of that ministry every day.

The Rev. Tracie Middleton
Vice President of the Association for
Episcopal Deacons

Tracie Middleton was ordained a deacon in 2009 in the Diocese of Texas, a graduate of the Iona School for Ministry. She currently serves at Trinity Episcopal Church in Fort Worth and as the Vice President of the Association for Episcopal Deacons. She has a particular interest in reducing barriers to younger people choosing a vocation to the diaconate. Tracie has worked as a newspaper reporter, public relations specialist, English as a Second Language teacher, college adviser, and communications specialist, among other things. When I met her, Tracie's excitement was contagious. She was immediately engaged, with a calm presence and an easy laugh.

Dani: What led you to become a deacon?

Tracie: Well, I've been kind of interested in some kind of service to the church for a while, off and on, since I was a kid. I didn't really become a clear arrow to the diaconate until after college...I did a discernment group, and most of the folks in the discernment group were saying, "Oh, this makes a lot of sense for you. We can see that type of thing making sense for you." I still wasn't really sure, and even through the formation process, I think I kind of had that imposter syndrome kind of thing, where

it's like, I don't know that I fit in here. I'm not sure. But after I got ordained, I started to see, oh. This really does make sense. There are some things that I'm able to do as somebody who's visibly connected to the church, that weren't really as easy when I was kind of incognito church person.

Dani: So what were some of those things?

Tracie: The instance, or the moment I suppose, when it really clicked with me, was I was serving as a chaplain for the fire department in the town where I was living. I had known the folks in the fire department for ten years prior to that, because I worked at the newspaper, and I had gotten to know them. We had talked about God, or spiritual things, every now and then. They knew that I was connected to our church, and that sort of thing. It wasn't until I got ordained that people in the fire department sort of saw me as...a way that they could access the church officially.

Dani: Why are deacons important?

Tracie: Oh, okay. Well, there is that linking function, of connecting. I feel like deacons help connect people to the church, help connect people to God, and help connect people to each other. Especially, I feel like, deacons are really good at making bridges and links between communities that wouldn't normally intersect. That, I feel, is

really valuable, but also in their going back and forth kind of function.

I mean, I think about...the Exsultet, and the idea that the deacon is the one that makes this sort of first proclamation of Easter, where it's like the very first sign that something has changed, or something is changing. I think that is a really powerful idea, for me, of what a deacon is. Deacons are going out to the places where...it's not already known that there is life there, kind of a thing. Just poking around, and getting involved, and digging in the dirt. Then they might be really well placed to notice the very first signs of new life.

To say, "Oh. Here's something poking up out of the ground. Oh my gosh, how exciting. There's something growing here." And then kind of run back and tell the community, "Hey! Come look over here. This is something that God is doing, and this is really cool. Let's try to connect with it."

Dani: What is the focus of your ministry right now?

Tracie: That is a good question. I feel like it's starting to shift, possibly, over into things related to trauma. That's really interesting to me right now, and I do have a little bit of background related to that, from when I served with the fire department, and that sort of thing.

I was listening to something on the radio yesterday, where they were talking about ecological grief...the sadness that people feel about losing environmental habitats. With climate change and all that sort of thing, physical places are changing drastically. Some of the attributes in those places are disappearing, and people feel grief about that, but it's really hard to kind of figure out how to articulate that, or process it, or what to do.

I think that might be something that the church could really be helpful in coming up with. I think the Episcopal church in particular is really great at liturgy, and helping people move through spaces of transition in an orderly way that helps people to process the change that they're going through. Also to have containers to put things that are too big.

Sometimes, one of the things that I've come across in some of my reading about how the body holds trauma, and how the mind processes trauma, it kind of says if you don't really have a category for something, then you don't really know what to do with it, and it stays sort of stuck. It's kind of like your brain is going, "I don't know where to put that."

Even just the process of putting words to an experience that people are having, or to a circumstance that people are experiencing. Even

just creating a category to put it in, that can be really helpful in part of the healing process. If you don't even know what to call it, it's hard to know to what you might do about it. Or what you could even pray about it, or ask related to it. I don't even know what it is.

I think deacons are out there on the edges of things, and running across people struggling with stuff that is maybe not already labeled. I was listening to something on the radio yesterday, too, about these two guys that were part of starting the hospital unit at San Francisco General that was specifically dedicated to patients with AIDS in the early eighties. They're just talking about the life cycle of that hospital wing, and how people were trying to figure out what is even going on here? What is this? We don't have a name for it.

I think deacons could play a part in helping identify things that the church needs to respond to, or could respond to.

Dani: How did the young deacons group start?

Tracie: In 2015 there were a few younger deacons who attended the triennial gathering in Minneapolis. There were, I think, six or seven of us who made it. In the process of meeting each other, we were trying to figure out how can we mobilize? We had met for lunch, and we had talked about

what are some of the barriers to younger people choosing the diaconate as a vocation.

We came up with a list of several that we had experienced, or that we had witnessed other people experience. Then we had a workshop the following day where a lot of other people came, and in that workshop we tried to brainstorm some solutions to some of those barriers. One of the ideas that came up that somebody...came up with, was, hey, we should form a task force, so that we have some kind of structure to keep working on these topics. I mean, we've identified lots of things, and brainstormed a lot of potential things to do about them, so maybe creating something structurally would keep our momentum going.

The Facebook group was something that we did while we were standing around in the lobby. We took a little group photo, because one of the things that we had identified as a barrier was, I mean, most people probably have never met a younger deacon, or even know that they might exist. One of those things that we thought we could more quickly do, is just take some pictures of ourselves and put them up on the web, and say like, "Look! Here's the deacons." So they can be young, you know, that's a possibility.

Then we thought we could make a Facebook group, and that way people could connect to it remotely, or

virtually, and even if, because our experience has been none of those of us who were there at that meeting had ever met another young deacon. By that time, I had been ordained already for seven years, and I hadn't ever met another deacon that was within 20 years of my age. That was the experience of everybody else too, so we were like, "How can we make it less likely that newer people coming into the deaconate have to wait such a long time to meet a peer?" We thought a Facebook group might be a super easy thing to do. It's grown quite a bit, and people are connecting on there and engaging a lot with each other, so it's really exciting to see that.

Dani: Two questions. How many folks on the Facebook group, and how many young deacons are in the Episcopal church?

Tracie: Not everybody on the Facebook group is in the category of young, but they're all trying to be supportive to younger folks. A lot of the people that are on there are young. 153.

And then how many young deacons in the Episcopal church? At the last count, the last time that we pulled that data, which was maybe a few months ago, it was fewer than twenty in the entire Episcopal church who were under the age of 45.

Dani: You know what's kind of amazing? Based on

my experience at this triennial, we could almost double that in a few years.

Tracie: I know, isn't that great?

Dani: That's pretty phenomenal. So what do you think is the key to recruiting more young deacons, in your opinion?

Tracie: I don't know that I've distilled it down to a single thing. One of the big things is just asking them. You know? That's part of it, but I think there is, realistically, there is an opportunity cost in accepting a non-stipendiary position. Especially when economics are kind of not real strong at the moment, and so I think it's a challenge for people to contemplate that kind of a role. One of the things that I think would be really important is to come up with some creative structures for people to be able to do diaconal work, and also potentially connect it to something that will allow them to make a living.

A lot of people have a totally unrelated job as their day job, and then they do their deacon work on a volunteer basis. Some people have a somewhat related job that they're paid for during the week. I just think that might be one thing that ... that would be a little bit of a more difficult challenge to work on, but I mean, I think there could be a lot of potential creative solutions.

One of the really important things for recruiting is for younger people who might have a call to the diaconate, or an interest in work that's basically diaconal, is to have some way of running across someone who is a deacon. Whether that's online, in a video, something that's written in a blog, just some kind of account or image of a deacon that they can more directly identify themselves with, and see themselves in some of those images. Say, "Oh, yeah. That's kind of like me. Maybe that's what I am, or who I am, or what I should do."

If you don't have very many images, or very many versions, of a deacon to encounter, then it might be a lot harder to realize that there's a connection between the things that you're passionate about, and the things that a deacon might do.

If you see a lot of representations of a lot of different kind of deacons, then I think it would be a lot easier to encounter one of those images that really resonates, and then maybe start to explore that question for yourself. Maybe that's what I'm called to.

Dani: What is your vision for the diaconate in the next ten years?

Tracie: Well, I would really love to see deacons out in the world, in the church, doing the things that they do, but trying new things, and inventing stuff

that maybe hasn't existed before in response to the needs that they're encountering, now that they're empowered by the church to go out into the world, and say, "What's going on out there? Come back and tell us about it." I would really love to hear what kinds of things deacons would get a vision for, that they could call the church to respond to.

Also, people who are really in touch with different communities, because there's lots of subcultures, and that's one of the things that I think is really exciting about the idea that deacons go out into the world, and they build bridges back to the church from the places that they hang out in. I don't know. Some of the things that are exciting to me to imagine in the next ten years are like, to empower people who are passionate about connecting people with God. To have the authority to build those sorts of bridges back into the church from the places where they already hang out. Then the church might more directly be linked to lots of new places.

Dani: What is your favorite part about being a deacon?

Tracie: I love having conversations with people about things that are really, deeply, important to them. I think sometimes that, you know, when I was a newspaper reporter, that type of job also gave you sort of a license to be curious about things, sort of an automatic "okay" for people to talk to you. I

think, in some ways, being a deacon, or being a visible church representative, gives people permission to talk to you about things that really matter to them. That's important.

I also like ... as far as liturgically, my favorite thing to do is read the gospel. I love to read the gospel, because part of my background is as an English major, and I really like poetry. I think the language in so much of the bible is just really beautiful, and I love having the privilege to interpret that with my voice, and just to try to make the story a little more accessible by voicing it in a way that people can more easily understand what's happening in the story.

I'll just add this other story in case I haven't told you this part before, because it was really helpful to me, in thinking, "Oh, maybe I could be a deacon." I went to this discernment conference in Diocese of Texas, when Diocese of Texas was just starting to create their vocational diaconate program. People were asking questions about "what are deacons," and "what would that be like?" Somebody asked, "What do deacons do?" And Mary McGregor, she's one of the canons in Diocese of Texas, I just loved her response, because she said, "Well...we feel like we know what deacons are, and so we need to find some, and ordain them, and then watch what they do, and then we'll know what deacons do."

Dani: That's so great.

Tracie: Yeah. It's like, we need to find some deacons, empower them to do their thing, and then watch them, and see what they do. And that will tell us what deacons do.

That was such a powerful statement to me, and so empowering. I was like, "Oh." I mean, it could be anything.

**The Rev. Liz Margarita Hernandez Martinez
and The Rev. Leticia Guevara-Cuence**

Every three years the Association for Episcopal Deacons (AED) hosts a Triennial. The “AED is a membership-funded association of persons and dioceses within The Episcopal Church whose mission is to increase participation and involvement of all baptized persons in Christ's diaconal ministry, especially by promoting and supporting the diaconate.” The Triennial is an amazing opportunity for deacons and supporters from all over the Episcopal Church to meet and learn together. I attended the 2019 Triennial in Rhode Island. At the Triennial I met dozens of inspiring deacons. Leticia (Letty) serves as deacon at Christ Church Episcopal, Norcross. Liz serves as the only deacon in the diocese of Cuba. Together they told me stories that re-inspired me and reminded me why I want to be a deacon. I was able to find a quiet corner of the hotel, in between workshops and services, and steal a few minutes to interview them. Letty translated for Liz and I.

Dani: What is it like being the only Deacon in Cuba?

Letty (translating):

She said it's very hard to be the only one for the last 11 years. And it's a little bit frustrating at the same

time, because she cannot share her challenge, her frustrations, her concerns with anybody else, because everybody who's trying to be a Deacon in the island, is because they're going to be a priest. So, nobody's quite interested to know what the ministry of the diaconate means, what the challenges [are]... She would like to have somebody, another Deacon so they can share experiences, somebody who shares the same reality she is living now. Unfortunately, no. She said that all women and men are called to receive some kind of ministry. We are universally priests based on our baptismal covenant. But nobody wants to take the challenge of trying to be a vocational Deacon in Cuba... Unfortunately up to now, that was impossible.

Dani: So, what drew you to the diaconate?

Letty (translating):

So, she said that the reason why she decided to be a Deacon is because she wants to be in contact with the people directly. For a priest, it's more the administrative and political issues that keep [them] away from direct contact with the people. She wants to walk in the street with the people, who need her spiritually and even materially, as much as she can. Cuba... is a country with a lot of deficiencies. And it's a fertile ground for a Deacon.

Dani: What is your main ministry and what does that have to do with the politics in Cuba today?

Letty (translating):

She is working as the secretary of the national convention in the island. She also is a researcher for the Evangelical Seminary in Matanzas and also she is a minister in a church. That's where she developed her job with the people, helping the community in Matanzas [with whatever] they need.

Dani: So, what kind of things?

Letty (translating):

She works mostly with people who have health issues. It's a rural church with people with a very low income. They are very poor. And she does pastoral care with most of the people, trying to reach out [and find out] what their needs are and, along with the rector of her church, they're trying to find the resources to handle all those...specific cases.

Dani: And what is it like for the church in Cuba with the political situation in Cuba?

Letty (Translating):

She said that they have a good relationship. The Episcopal Church in Cuba is a church that wants to walk along with the people. Along with the needy, the marginalized, the people who are separated for different reasons. The Cuban government lately has relaxed its restrictions on the church.

The first Episcopal Church established in Cuba was in 1883. No other religion was established in Cuba before that time, except the Roman Catholic Church. And the first church was founded exactly in her town, Matanzas. And now there is a monument, a national monument on the island. [That] gave us the chance to be the second largest religious community in the island. Many people are Roman Catholic, but after that, most of the Cubans are Episcopalian.

Dani: I did not know that. What is your hope for the diaconate in Cuba?

Letty (translating):

She said that her hope is help [get] more vocational deacons in Cuba. Of course, because she said that the diaconate and the work of the Deacon has to be visible to the world. The church cannot take care only of the spirit, but also of the Body of Christ. And the Body of Christ, you're talking about the physical body. And she means the marginalized, the excluded, the poor, the needy, the sick. All these

people have real needs and these needs have to be fulfilled, and that's where Deacons need to be there to help. To take care of the whole Body of Christ, spiritually and materially.

For her the diaconate is important, because she refers to Mark's Gospel, chapter 10, verse 45 when Jesus said The Son of the Man didn't come to be served but to serve. The whole Gospel shows that the mission of Jesus in the world was to be a Deacon, to serve others. So, she said that the diaconate is crucial in the formation of the Body of Christ, the community of Christians that Jesus commanded to be expanded all over the world.

The diaconate marks the values of the Word for a new [world]. So, it's absolutely a key point. A breakpoint between the spiritual and the material is important to create a new kingdom with the values of the diaconate.

Dani: What else should we know about your work in Cuba?

Letty (translating):

Besides her job as a missionary in the church and as a secretary of formation in the diocese and her historical research activity in the Seminary, she also has a very close relationship with the Bishop. And she thinks it is important because as a Deacon, she

has the chance to give her a vision of what's going on [outside], because sometimes...nobody tells the Bishop what's going on outside.

Dani: What is your relationship and your diocese relationship to the Episcopal Church in Cuba?

Letty: Atlanta has a very close relationship with the diocese of Cuba. The relationship between the Diocese of Atlanta with the Diocese of Cuba comes from 1904. So, this is not something new. The first Bishop in the Diocese of Cuba in 1904 was the Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta.

Dani: So, what is your primary ministry?

Letty: My primary ministry is immigration. I'm trying to help the Hispanic [community]. We have growing Hispanic communities in several churches in the Dioceses of Atlanta. We actually have right now...eleven Hispanic congregations in Atlanta. Bishop Wright is working to make this number grow as much as possible.

My church has a Hispanic congregation, which has a lot of needs. And I am trying to be an advocate along with the Archdeacon Juan Sandoval to work in the Sanctuary Movement...we are especially, especially preoccupied about the people with DACA. We have a lot of recipients in Atlanta that need our support...They came here because their

parents brought them and now this is their country. Many of them are trying to develop a career in colleges and universities. And they want to have a job. They want to have a family. And all these dreams.

My best friend came here when her son was three years old. If you send him now, he's 22. If you send him back to Venezuela, he's going to a strange country. He doesn't know Venezuela. What's he going to find out there? Nothing. So, it's a reality. Okay? And penalizing and punishing these people is not a solution.

I also work with Dr. Catherine Meeks...and the Absalom Jones Racial Healing Center. I'm helping to develop a curriculum, to develop a training that we can use in the Hispanic community.

Dani: What drew you to the diaconate?

Letty: I [started to work with] Fabio Sotelo. He's from Columbia. He's a former Roman Catholic priest. And one day he called me and said, "Would you like to be a priest?" And I thought for five seconds and I said, "No, Father. I think I would like to be a Deacon." And then we were in the process to call another rector to my church. And I spoke with the interim rector and she told me, "I can help you with anything you want. You want to be a priest? I will support you to be a priest." I said, "No. I have it

clear. I don't want a job. I want a ministry. I want to be a Deacon." So, she was my sponsor and that's when the process started.

I don't want to spend time dealing with the budget and those kinds of things, and fighting with the Diocese, or going to this meeting and this other meeting. I saw my rector and I said, "I don't like that job." And she looked at me and said, "I don't like it either." I like to sit down in the parish hall and talk to the people.

Dani: So, for both of you, what is your hope for the relationship between the church in the United States and the church in Cuba, and the relationship between Deacons in the United States and Deacons in Cuba?

Letty (translating):

Okay. She said that Cuba was always part of the Episcopal Church in the United States until 1966 when they received autonomy..based on the political situation on the island. And now, they are part of the Episcopal Church of the United States again, [since] last General Convention. So, she thinks we can do a lot of things together.

Yesterday we...actually met a group of Deacons who work with Hispanic communities here in the United States and we are trying to work and develop some

kind of resources...to engage more vocations. And I think for her, it's important that we work together, so the Episcopal Church in the United States can help the Diocese of Cuba to find resources, to engage the people and...find more vocations.

The Ven. Janice Grinnell
Diocese of Rhode Island

Dani: Why were you interested in the diaconate?

Jan: Actually, I came in the back door to the diaconate. I started my discernment in the early 1980s, and there weren't really deacons around, so I believe that I was called to the priesthood because that's the only option that was out there.

Rhode Island was the first diocese in province one to ordain deacons, and it happened in 1985. The school for deacons was already started in 1986, I guess. Our school was open to anybody who wanted to go to it. You didn't have to be approved. You didn't have to be approved by the Commission of Ministry or anything. A good friend of mine who was teaching in the school said, "You should come to the school."

When I got to that school, Dani, and I started hearing what a deacon is, and what a deacon does, and what the vision was for the diaconate in the future...it was like, "Thank you God, because this is me." Social justice, prophetic voice, out in the world, not worrying about boilers and basements of churches. It was like, "Now this is me." I was really blessed and obviously God was leading me.

Dani: What kept you on the path after you started?

Jan: Passion. Passion, because I mean everything back then, it was more than a hurdle to get over. They were huge blocks in front of us. Number one, and it could only be passion and the grace of God that got me through it, because I was working a 40 hour week job. The model of our school was the seminary model, so we went to school once a month, for nine months, one weekend a month, and then we read books and did all kinds of crazy things throughout that time.

And there was something that was just within me that said, "Don't give up. Just don't give up." And that has to be the Holy Spirit, grace, God, whatever. I'm a 43 years in recovery in AA. So I was also attending recovery meetings, trying to keep that part of my life in check, you know, while all this other stuff was going on and it was, it was this burning desire within me that said, "Just keep going. You will get through this." And I did.

Dani: So what is your favorite part of your work as a deacon?

Jan: Oh...proclaiming the unconditional love of God ... in whatever form that takes, whether it's preaching, whether it's working with college students on campus, whether it's talking to people in recovery, just proclaiming the unconditional love of God and watching people's lives transformed

through God's grace.

Dani: Can you tell me more about your work as a deacon?

Jan: So early on...I was like every other deacon, we had to declare what our ministry would be. So I'm sitting around thinking "I want to do it all." So the first part of my ministry was centered and focused on mental health and recovery. Ultimately...I became a substance abuse counselor for awhile, as a paid job. But by then I had gotten divorced and I needed more income so I have to go back into the workforce, and this is one of the issues with the diaconate. You know they, the church, and I know this isn't answering your question, but this is a part of my passion to the church is missing an amazing opportunity by having this as non stipendiary or missing people who do come into the diaconate and we're missing the power of a diaconate for those who are ordained that have to get 40 hours of their life a week to survive. And think if, Jan Grinnell back there in 1991 could have worked for the church instead of corporate America, it would have just been phenomenal, Dani. How restricted we are by this non stipendiary concept.

There are a lot of arguments for why deacons should be stipended, and why they shouldn't be stipended. But for me it's about the church and the church's mission, and we are the social justice arm.

We are the prophetic voice. We are the ones to be out in the world. And you're telling us, well, yes you can be out in the world and at your job. But I was in management and I was working at one point I was working for, the company I was working with had me working in California. So I was commuting back and forth across the country weekly and, and putting in like a hundred hours a week on my job. I had no time for the diaconate.

I would come back so I could be on the altar and I would come back so I could be with my family. But otherwise, I was not doing anything in the world other than being a deacon in my job. And I would have conversations with people and people knew that I was, you know, somebody spiritual that they could talk to and that kind of thing. But it's not the same as setting a deacon free to do the work of God in the world, in the social justice arena. It's just not the same to say, "Well, you know, you're deacon everywhere." Yeah, well you could be a priest everywhere too, but how's that gonna work out for you?

You know, I was in the IT business. I'm still in the IT business. And when you're working, you're working and you aren't creating programs. You aren't reaching out to people, you aren't organizing people, you aren't joining community organizers. You just can't do it all. So the church is losing so much by having people like myself that have these

passions, to do God's work in the world, and have to do something that generates an income. So part of the answer too is, well, why don't you be a social worker? Why? Because I'm not called to be a social worker.

In 2008...an interim priest came to my parish and I started working with him on interim ministry. And I was trained in appreciative inquiry to do interim ministry work. So one of the capstone phases of my diaconate, there are two, the one is being a priest, deacon interim team that would go from parish to parish to work with parishes who are in between Rutgers and spend two maybe no more than three years at a parish, putting them back on their feet, helping them find out who they are in the world. And it was such a beautiful blend of a deacon being able to do work inside the church to take the church outside. Because what I was doing was I was helping parishes identify their work in the community. But they needed to know what their gifts were.

They needed to know what their passions were, they needed to know [where] God was calling them. And that was an amazing, an amazing thing to be able to do. And I actually stayed with the same priest for 15 years. We had this, this ministry, and it was unique. I've never heard of it anywhere else in the country. And it was a beautiful model. He's retired now. I'm retiring.

I ended up instructing appreciative inquiry classes with parishes and any rate it was, it was a real, one of my capstone projects. The other was where I'm leaving now is I'm just finishing seven years at Saint Augustine's and for the last five years I was their chaplain to the University of Rhode Island campus. That's where I could have been called 28 years ago to college chaplaincy. And it could have been a paid position and I could have made a difference in the world, I believe as a college chaplain.

Because the last five years have been my most passionate work that I've done in my whole diaconate was college chaplaincy, because it brought all of my life experience into play with these amazing students and we were able to create what I believe is a sustainable ministry that the next chaplain now is picking up.

But I went to a campus where the chaplaincy was basically non-existent with the episcopal church on our campus and just walked out the door, sat down at Dunkin Donuts and said, "I'm here. Anybody want to talk to [me]?" You know? And I started meeting kids and I ended my tenure, well I'm ending my tenure on Sunday, as I said, but three weeks ago I was part of the university's commencement ceremony and able to give the, they call it a dedication, like an invocation at the beginning of commencement for 6,000 graduates,

and all their parents and just stand up there and look out over the sea of people. And it was the most beautiful thing to see. It was just like such a gift to be able to do that as kind of like my farewell to the university as well.

The other thing for me about deacons is we are the order, the one order that really needs to be given the freedom of discernment, for people to back in the first wave to say, pick something that you're going to do for your diaconate. Are you gonna do prison ministry? Are you gonna do nursing homes? Are you going to do hospital work? What are you going to do? It's like, really? I want to do God's work. I mean, I don't want to have to define that and put him in a box.

But that's what they were asking us to do and today to know that most deacons now have that freedom to be able to say, I'm going to listen to God and find out what, and in our school that I teach in our school for deacons here. That's one of the things we do in formation is trying to help people come to understand that this discernment that that you're in right now, Dani, is going to go on for the rest of your life as a deacon. Don't ever be settled with, oh, this is what God called me to, well maybe for today, but be open to what he's calling you for tomorrow because it will change. It will change. Even if it's under the same umbrella, it will change. And because what we need to do is we to raise people

up, organize them, get them motivated, inspire them, find their gifts, create the ministry with them and move on.

Because back in the old model, what they were doing, they were forcing Jan Grinnell to be one person to help maybe 10 people. Yay. Great, good. Yay. Transformed lives, awesome. Right? If Jan Grinnell can get 10 people organized to go out and work with 10 people each. That's 100 people that had their lives transformed. And if Jan Grinnell can lead those 10 people in place and move to the next parish or wherever she's going next and do that again, then we're going to have 10 people and 10 people...I mean that's how we spread the Gospel. But when you say, "Pick where your ministry is or pick what your ministry is." We're missing the boat, right? We're missing the boat. So, Jesus said, "Go to the ends of the earth." He didn't say, "Go find one thing to do and sit there." You know, no, be on the move.

Dani: So my last question is, how can deacons expand our ideas of what church is?

Jan: We should preach with the prophetic voice. We have to use our prophetic voice in the pulpit. It is not enough to stand up every Sunday and just do a night's [reflection] on the Gospel...[What if] in every sermon we challenged the congregation to identify...one action that they could take during

that one week to spread the gospel. Now, I mean this is all based on the Gospel itself, but to call people to action in our sermons, to use our prophetic voice in each and every sermon and there's a way you can do it.

Some might be a little bit harder than others, but...it's what I try to do all the time...to challenge people...

If you worship Jesus, then you're venerating him. You're raising him up. Your eyes are like looking at him as opposed to following him. And if you follow Jesus, he will take you right out the door and into the streets. And that's what we need to be challenging people [to do] every week or every time we have an opportunity to preach, challenging people to follow Jesus, however it is that he's calling them to go out into the world and make a difference. And it's going to be different for every person. But that's...how the church can transform the world, is if the people in the church leave the church, go out of the church and into the world. That's what we're supposed to be doing as deacons. Inspiring that to happen.

The Rev. Courtney Jones
Diocese of Northwest Texas

Dani: What drew you to the diaconate?

Courtney: Actually I was asked to pursue being a deacon and that kind of got a ball rolling that had been present in my young life as a kid when I was raised Southern Baptist. When I was in seventh grade, I told my youth minister that I thought that I was called to some sort of ministry, which if you're a woman and Southern Baptist and you say you're called the ministry that means either children's ministry or you're going to be a missionary. And so you know, neither of those things particularly appealed to me. But to my youth minister's credit he did try to make sure that I was exposed to some of those opportunities you know. And then when I got back into church as an adult in the Episcopal Church it was something that kind of, I don't know there was just something about watching what the deacons did that said hey maybe that's it. And then one day the now rector told me hey you really need to consider discerning for the diaconate and so that kind of brought the pieces together.

You know, I actually had a canon to the ordinary ask me when I came in for my first discernment interview almost an identical question. She said, "What is it about what the deacons do up there that interests you." And I said, "what do you mean by up

there?” And he said well you know up at the altar and such, and I told him nothing that they do up at the altar interests me. I said it's what they do outside of the church that interests me.

Dani: What is different about being a deacon than you thought it would be?

Courtney: How much people expect you to be a priest is the thing that has surprised me the most. You know, they either expect you to be about to be ordained priest, like “hey when is your next ordination?” that kind of thing. But they also sort of expect you to act in those same roles...I think that you can be a deacon in so many different ways...It turns out that I like words and I enjoy putting them together and I studied writing and I enjoy preaching. So does that make me a priest?... I realize [now] there is room at a pulpit for a deacon's voice. There is a certain style of preaching and in fact that is diaconal preaching and is needed and called for from time to time.

Dani: That's great. So tell me about the way deacons in your diocese work together.

So in our diocese we meet together relatively frequently. We meet once a year and have our own conference and then we also see each other at conventions. So twice a year all of us are together. But in my particular context we are all assigned to

the same parish. Everybody who's from around here. So Amarillo is kind of the big city in the Panhandle. Our diocese has Amarillo, Lubbock and Abilene...and so we've kind of clustered clergy around the large parish in Amarillo and a large parish in Abilene.

We split up responsibilities for being at the liturgy here. So on any given Sunday morning there will be one or two of us serving at the table and then there will be one of us doing supply officiating at the parish across town and then sometimes there is also one of us doing supply officiating at a small town about 50 miles from here...We're a hub.

If there are small parishes who can't afford to have a full time priest and there's not a supply priest available then they can ask to have one of the deacons come over to administer the reserve sacrament and preach. And so on any given Sunday that's what we're all doing and you know, we meet and we talk and we always try to include each other as much as we can. Like if the bishop is going to be here, we'll find absurd ways, absurd reasons for needing all five deacons [at] the altar.

And then each of us has a different ministry focus area that we attend to in the parish life...My ministry right now is the youth and we've...kind of done a diaconal focus with the youth for the past couple of years. Their youth specific service is called

Youth First Sunday and it's a service Sunday. And so they come in [during] what would normally be the Sunday school hour. And we have morning prayer and worship together. And I usually do a sermon with that service and then I have some sort of service project set up for them to do during the time when their parents are at the Eucharistic service.

We have another deacon who recruits people to the flower guild and to our hospitality group. And so he makes sure that every time we have a funeral or a wedding or a Sunday service that the church has been beautified and that you know there are flowers there are refreshments. There are those sorts of things. He also coordinates our breakfast ministries. We have an industrial kitchen here and we cook a buffet style breakfast for every Sunday. And so that the parishioners can fellowship together but also so that we can feed our homeless friends who come in usually hungry because on the weekends, on Sunday specifically our local services are almost all shut down.

We have a deacon who coordinates a lot of our pastoral care ministries and lay Eucharistic visits. So she's you know keeping track of who's in the hospital and in hospice and who is home-bound and making sure that they are visited by lay persons from the parish who are Eucharistic visitors...She

doesn't necessarily take it on herself, she trains and enables people to go do that ministry.

We have another deacon who runs a group called Community Company and they do a somewhat related thing but this is for people in the parish who are struggling for whatever reasons. And then we also have the Archdeacon, and he is mostly involved at the diocesan level but also coordinates.

Dani: You've got really great coverage going there.

Courtney: We do...we're all involved, getting parishioners out into the world, which is what deacons do. But you know we also then have secular jobs. And to a person, almost, those jobs are also...living our faith in the world.

Dani: Tell me a story about something you worked on together?

Courtney: So...there are two of us who are on this open and affirming congregation board and it's an ecumenical gathering of LGBT inclusive churches. We just want to make sure that everybody in the LGBTQ community has a place to worship. And so like it's cool if they want to go to the Presbyterian church but we want to be the ones that help them get there.

That's kind of a thing that we work on together. So in the context of that, we have been able to get our community involved in some events that they're not traditionally involved in. Like we got the parishioners this year to go to the Trans Day of Visibility March which is the first one we've ever had in Amarillo, Texas. [It's a] very conservative area of the country. And you know our trans brothers and sisters were telling us that they were kind of afraid to do the march, and would the OAC bring some people...Our parish turned out 50 people. We ended up being like half of the march, which was great.

We got two more Episcopal churches to be involved in that group. So the group has grown from six churches to nine churches since we've been involved in it together. And so you know part of that, is we have a relationship with these other parishes because we're going there. So we were able to present [it] to their vestries. And so we've been able to help that organization grow...through our relationships with the other parishes.

Dani: That is very cool how that ends up working.

Courtney: Having all these deacons together has kind of taught me that deacons are really evangelism officers because I think when the church is being the church, people are attracted to the church. So when we are going out and making

an effort to make sure that people have safe spaces to be themselves, that people have safe spaces to worship regardless of whether or not it's our space, [we're] living into our calling [and that] really is the kind of evangelism that deacons are capable of, and deacons are capable of spearheading.

I think that this is the time. We don't have to really do anything differently to be evangelists. Part of our whole calling is to train lay people to be the church and to...help them find what it is that is their vocation you know.

And when we start doing that the world is changed by it. I mean I grew up Southern Baptist, so for us evangelism was like, you need to go hand out this many tracts at the Fourth of July parade...or you need to knock on this many doors and invite this many people to church. And whereas those things ARE a form of evangelism, I think this is the time for this diaconal form of evangelism.

Because so many people see absolutely no reason to be involved in a church because it's like “well what is the church doing anyway?” There are some people who don't see the purpose of church and don't really see purpose at all in life. You know, we have this kind of existential crisis in our generation, and the one after us you know post Christian, post faith post you know whatever. I think now is the time that if we have people who are doing

purposeful living, and they're loving God and they're loving their neighbors, that is a much deeper form of evangelism than the one I grew up with and a much more effective one for the time in which we're living.

What is your vision for the diaconate?

So I would really love to see that the diaconate grow. I really do believe that what the world needs now is deacons. I think deacons are such important bridge people between the church and the world. You know, obviously as a Christian there's a reason that I come to this building, that I come to the church. I'm spiritually fed here. I find family here et cetera. The church feeds me, following Christ has centered my life, has given my life purpose.

But if you are not a person who is inclined to walk through the doors of the church the deacon can bring the door to you. And I think Tracie Middleton was the one who first used that analogy, that the deacon sort of takes the door off the jam and takes it out into their life so that people can walk through the doors of the church without having to get to the parking lot. It's one of those things where you're starting to lower the threshold energy that it takes to involve people in that sort of community.

Obviously getting people to church is not my primary concern. You know, I think that we're

supposed to be building the Kingdom of God and building the Kingdom of God does not necessarily look like your average Sunday attendance going up. Right. Building the Kingdom of God looks like people getting fed, and it looks like people being visited in jail, and it looks like people having their bail posted for them, and it looks like people being liberated from cages on the border, and the Kingdom of God looks like radical hospitality and radical inclusivity and people truly caring for their neighbors and so I think that deacons have such an opportunity at this moment to step into a void that's been left by so many people migrating away from the church.

You know, deacons can be everywhere, so if we have more deacons now we're everywhere.

Deacon Hal Hurley
Diocese of Southeast Florida

Dani: What drew you to the diaconate?

Hal: I've always been in the church, but only after I was married and was having our first child did I realize that there was a disconnect between what was going on on Sunday and the rest of my life during the week, so I started investigating more of that and then became more active in the church. As things progressed, I noticed that what I seemed to identify as my calling or those things that I was good at doing were more in terms of helping people get to what they need to do, so I started exploring that part of the ministry...

I didn't feel called to be a priest, although a lot of people thought that I should have gone on to the priesthood, but I don't think that's where my strengths and my gifts nor my passion really lies. So it was in that moment in the doctor's office as I was waiting for my wife to go through her examination that I realized that I was being called to do something different than what I was currently doing in the church. I began the process of investigating the diaconate.

Dani: Why do you we need deacons?

Hal: I think...you go back to the initial call of

Stephen, who we recognize as the first deacon. The apostles, they were busy with the word, explaining it to people. It was something new, a new understanding of God, and they needed more time to do that as opposed to servicing the practical needs of the individuals, the individuals who had accepted this and [were] working within the community. The development of the deacons were to provide that service of providing the food, and...all the practical needs of the people who were coming into the community who were unfortunately unable to provide those things for themselves.

Dani: Can you tell me a little bit about your work?

Hal: My first application of this understanding came when I began working at the seaport...visiting the seamen who were coming in to the port from various countries, and being alone and in a strange land, so to speak, they were here, they were doing something that we needed, but yet they were detached from us and detached from their natural environment, which was their community back home. So I kind of grew into that in the sense that it was understanding and helping them bring those services that the company and the country actually needed. At that time, this is now going back, 13 years or maybe more more than that, because it was part of my development, and I've been ordained now 13 years coming up in December.

Prior to that, there was some problems with the seamen in terms of the administration of justice along the lines of them being treated fairly by their employers. Over the years, they've had a history of nonpayment for services and for various reasons, so the old seamen's ministry developed as part of working with the owners of these ships to help make sure that the living and working conditions of the workers [were just]. We had kind of a double ministry in terms of the equity of employment and fair wages, or actually wages themselves, because sometimes they weren't paid, and making sure of that, and then providing the pastoral services that they would need being so far away from home.

Dani: What's the most unique experience you have had in your ministry?

Hal: I guess this sticks out in my mind. The very first day I was on a ship by myself, I had gone through training with being with more senior chaplains, but on the first day I was out there on my own, I boarded this ship, and unbeknownst to me, when it was time, after about an hour, hour and a half, it was time for me to go back to the base, I could not get off the ship because it had moved its position. Now I had to, instead of walking down a plank, the normal gangway plank that we had, I had to climb down what they call the ladder, and I had never done anything like that in my whole life, and

here I was dangling off the side of a ship going down a ladder.

Dani: Wow.

Hal: That has stuck with me as probably the most unusual thing that I have done. It was scary, but I made it.

Dani: So what do you love about being a deacon?

Hal: What do I love about being a deacon? There is a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment when you help someone and you could see that they are appreciative of whatever effort you give. Sometimes that's something practical like doing something for someone, giving them something. Sometimes it's as simple as just being there for them, not necessarily saying anything or doing anything, but just being there when they needed someone to look at and draw some kind of inspiration or draw some additional strength from, and you could see it in the response.

I say that because I was in the hospital one time, and I got a code blue, I think it is. That means drop everything, go to whatever room it was. The person was dying, and I did that. Unbeknownst to me the individual was, they didn't recognize me or see me, but the next day, the next day when I visited that individual to see how they were progressing, they

told me to leave. But the wife who was there said, "No, he is staying, because yesterday when you didn't know what was going on, he was here with me," and that stuck with me in terms of how we do things, and just being the presence there, because all I did with her yesterday was waited for the doctors to do what they had to do.

Of course they threw us out of the room, but we were waiting in the hallway, and I stayed there with her, and I talked with her. We talked about everything in life and nothing specific, nothing spiritual. Yes, I did respond, but I didn't drive anything into her. I just listened to her story, and we were able to develop a bond, the two of us, and the next day when...he saw me coming into his room, and I was just coming to check on him, he asked me to leave, but the wife stood up and said, "No, he was here when I needed him."

Dani: What's challenging about being a deacon?

Hal: Probably getting over the fear that you're going to be not needed or not wanted, that service issue.

The challenge is getting to offer someone something. They don't always tell you they need something. When you go to the hospital...it's kind of obvious that they are looking for something or they need something, but the average everyday person doesn't walk up to you and say, "Hey, I need

this. I need that. I can't do this. I can't do that." It's something you have to help them figure out...That's the challenge, where and how do you do these things and still maintain the distance that's necessary so that you don't get...into everybody's problems and then be of no use for yourself.

Dani: The church is changing and the world is changing. What are your visions for the diaconate?

Hal: I see it twofold, and I guess I'm going through this at the moment. I see now that there's a tremendous shortage of priests, the deacon's role in terms of that pastoral part of the liturgy is going to increase...I see that the deacon's going to have to step up and play a stronger role or bigger role in the administration of the Sunday service, and then try to maintain what was their primary calling, the service part, providing that service...If you're not careful, you could suffer burnout and become a hazard, a hazard to yourself, not just the people that you're working with.

So as the number of priests continue to decline, that's going to be our biggest challenge...Rising to that occasion and trying to maintain the primary call, which was working with the bishop and responding to the needs of the community in terms of service and providing for them and at the same time helping run the local parish church...We are in uncharted waters in the sense that we have never

gone through this in terms of a shortage of priests and how do we make better use of the deacons in the church and at the same time maintain their primary call of service.

Dani: So what do you love about deacons?

Hal: I get a sense of satisfaction from being a deacon...it doesn't always have to be announced and relayed that Deacon Hurley did this, Deacon Hurley did that the next day and so forth. You just go about your business and do it, and eventually your rewards will come some time as Jesus promised. That's what I like about it. I can get a sense of satisfaction from going out there and helping someone.

Dani: If someone was discerning a call, what would you say to them?

Well, what I would say to them is, it's not most likely going to be a megaphone telling you to do something, but it may be just subtle hints...It's an interior feeling that you go through and you recognize that, hey, as you sit down and later on at night you recognize it, where did that feeling come from? Then you start to explore these things, of course, in your scriptures, and you get to understand that not everything is a big megaphone that blows the world apart. Sometimes it's that still, small voice telling you something, and that voice is

interior, inside...

You kind of develop and go from there. So I would tell them to pay attention to...this dissonance in what they see and what they feel, and of course what they see and what they feel has to correspond back to scripture. You can't just get away from that. You can't get away from scripture, but you would feel and see some kind of dissonance, and you can move from there.

Dani: Thank you.

Hal: Whatever's needed, I offer my assistance. That's the way the deacons operate. Whatever they can do, they do, and I think it comes through not only in terms of our, what we would say, ministry, but we were all ministers at one point...we tend to think of ministry only in terms of church-related issues, but ministry is responding to whatever need is out there...We just went through the series in Luke of talking about the good Samaritan. You do what you can for who you can when you can, and you leave it like that.

Deacon Josephine Borgeson
Diocese of Northern California

Deacon Phina Borgeson is a firecracker. She has ideas bursting forth from her consciousness constantly. I have enjoyed working with her and being her student. Phina serves in the Russian River Deanery of the Episcopal Diocese of Northern California. Her current community work centers on food system ministries and related environmental concerns, including interfaith networking and consulting. Phina earned a Master of Divinity from the Church Divinity School of the Pacific and was ordained in 1974. She worked for the Diocese of Nevada, helping to pioneer the program known as Total Ministry, and then in the Diocese of Los Angeles as Christian Education Missioner. She moved to Sonoma County, California, where she now lives, in 2000, working with the Redwood Cluster for several years and consulting with other congregations and diocesan committees. Phina was president of the North American Association for the Diaconate from 1987-1991, and served NAAD and later the Association for Episcopal Deacons on various task forces concerned with the formation and lifelong learning of deacons.

Dani: So you're involved in a lot.

Phina: Yeah. I've wondered recently ... I know what my motivators are in some ways. I mean, I love

networking and I love learning, and I had a steep learning curve starting starting in about maybe '07 in terms of food system issues, but it's not so steep anymore. I don't know any other place where you have the intersection of environmental concerns, economic concerns, and human health concerns...food system work is an intersection of all those concerns and issues...But besides the fact that I love to eat, I like to grow things and I like to cook. I mean, it just is a natural place for me to sit with an environmental background, and then the diaconal emphasis on concern for those who are poor and those who have been pushed to the margins or disparaged in some way. It's just where I am. It may be where I die, with food system work.

One of the big challenges with gleaning programs is that you need somebody to coordinate the donors with the recipients and the volunteers. And one of the things we've been dreaming for is to have some money to hire some people 10 hours a week to do that in our various communities here in Sonoma County.

I'm not an organizer and I got really tired of it. And one of the things I learned in retirement is I'm a networker, which is different. I can organize and I will because very few people can and I can, but it's not a gift because it doesn't bring me joy to organize things. It brings me joy to be with people and to connect to people, and to have food.

Dani: Will you say a little bit more about gleaning, like explain what it is?

Phina: Yeah, sure. Gleaning's biblical. Ruth did it and met her second husband that way. But the whole concept of gleaning is harvesting food that is post ... it's sort of economic harvest. It's post- the harvest that is beneficial to whoever owns the farm or the orchard or the backyard fruit tree that you're gleaning, right? And you harvest it and you deliver it to those who don't have access to fresh produce. Now, what's happened is it used to be in many places, and biblically, it was like, okay, so we've done the commercial harvest of this apple orchard, now we invite people in. But nobody does that anymore because we live in such a litigious society.

And so instead what we do is we have all these intermediaries. So when I was gleaning in Sonoma, I would make connections with the donors. I developed a cadre of volunteers. We had some equipment, which we were then storing in the shed at the church there or in my car. And we would go and glean. And then we had a network of food programs that we would deliver it to.

Dani: So can you say why is this work particularly diaconal?

Phina: Well, I think because it's a connector for one

thing, but I think more than that, I mean, you can't belong to a community where a meal is at the center of your life and not give a damn about food, and food and community...I think there are some theological resources, and one of my concerns is that we need more theological resources...which means we need the kind of resources that can provoke theological engagement with a wide variety of faith communities.

Dani: Why did you want to become a deacon?
Where did that come from?

Phina: Well, I went to seminary on a dare because I decided I wanted to ... I started seminary in 1971. So I had decided that I wanted to continue my general education. The occupational paths for me, for a master's degree, all required organic chemistry, which is something I swore I would never do. I mean, if I wanted to go to medical school: organic chemistry; if I wanted ... I thought about oenology: organic chemistry. Psychiatry, oenology ... I wanted to be a forest ranger and discovered in 1970 that women couldn't be. My life has spanned that arc of all the things women couldn't do. So I went to seminary and it really ... I had a theology class in ecclesiology, which nobody does anymore, which is too bad because it's really the theology of how we live as church and how we do ministry. And we were reading the proposed ordinal, right? And I was sitting in my room at Parsons Hall and it just leapt

out at me, the phrase... "interpreting to the church the needs, hopes, and concerns of the world." And that was it.

Now what has happened, you'll die when I tell you this, is that I had been told if that I ever wanted to be a postulant, which I thought I did not when I started, I needed to go talk to the bishop before I started seminary. So it was Labor Day weekend of the fall that I started seminary. And I went to see Bishop Myers [Bishop of California at the time], and the commission on ministry and all that. And I said, "I don't want to be a postulant. I'm doing this now so that if I apply for postulancy, I've met this requirement."

And when the list of postulants came out, my name was on it. It was a lot easier in those days...I realized that there were theological issues and changes that were involved in women being ordained as presbyters and bishops. And I think a lot of people were campaigning for the ordination of women to the presbyter and the episcopacy, simply on a sociological curve, if you will: women need to be allowed to do this, or women feel called to do this, so we should say yes to them. And they hadn't thought about what the changes would be in terms of the symbology and just generally the functions of the church. So I had a lot of questions about it and I particularly had questions with the irregular ordinations to the priesthood...because I

was already a deacon when those happened in 1974. And I said, but they took a vow saying they'd behave, that they would obey the church tradition and canon, whatever that oath is, oath of conformity.

So I had questions about it, but everyone was so convinced that I really ought to be ... I had my seminary degree and I really ought to be a priest, and all this stuff. And there were people who yelled at me because I didn't want to be a priest.

Dani: Really?

Phina: Yeah. And I thought it's because they can only ... It was a parish priest who did that. And I thought he's doing it because he can only understand ministry in terms of his job. And there's so much more to ministry than being a rector.

Well, people still don't understand that. I have talked to plenty of people who don't understand why you wouldn't want to be a priest, like, "Why on earth would you not want to be a priest?"

Well, there are people who've been lost to the church's leadership because they didn't want to be a parish priest, and they were in a diocese that didn't have any other categories of understanding: oh, well maybe you could be a chaplain at a university or a hospital.

My nephew, who's now 53 or something ... Is he older than that? Anyway, when he was a young adult, he wanted to combine youth work in the church with work with youth at risk in the wider community.

And they saw this handsome, 30-year-old man and they said, "No, no. You must go to seminary and be a parish priest," in his diocese. And so he doesn't even go to church.

In '76 I'd been ordained a little over two years and the legislation passed to enable women to be ordained to the priesthood and episcopacy. I had a great sense of relief. I was happy for those who felt that that's where they were called to be. I was happy that they weren't going to be frustrated deacons anymore, but I knew I was going to be a deacon. That just was what I was called to do. And I've done a lot of church work, but it's often been with people on the margins of the church. So it's been supporting the ministry and the laity. It's been working with small, rural and isolated congregations. It's been ... What else? Well, the whole ministry development package is a lot of work that I've done.

Dani: The diaconate is changing. What is your vision?

Phina: My vision is still pretty much the same, because I don't think we've ever arrived close to where my vision is, in that we need much more advocacy ministries. We need many more connective ministries. It's not that there isn't a place for the curative and the handholding ministries, but it's just too easy to get stuck there or to get stuck in bureaucratic charting. And that interpretive piece is still not being done as well as it could be. And the church definitely needs a new face. And I don't mean a new person, I mean a new way of being in the community. And I don't know who's going to lead that if it's not the deacons...

And we're abandoning some of the programs that have worked to mobilize the church in terms of having the broadest base of people in the church understand that being a Christian is a vocation and that it has community dimensions. It isn't just about getting to church on Sunday. So in this diocese, they basically pronounced the death knell of the total ministry program. And I don't care if they change the name, but it's a serious transformational process for congregations to develop a broad base of leadership and ownership and not be dependent on paid ministry.

And listen, I'm one of the remaining people who invented it. So I'm a strong advocate of it. But there are other things too, like I notice we had this wave of we were going to have emergent churches, but

the rectors all knew what was going to emerge, and that's not emergent. You know what I'm saying?

Dani: Yeah, I do. I do.

Phina: So I don't want to abandon liturgical worship that has history and tradition, but I want people to recognize that that is not the only place it happens, and that we need to be talking about...the mission of Christ, is what we need to be talking about, which is much broader than just looking to Jesus as an exemplar for activism. It's broader and deeper, both.

The Ven. Janet Tidwell

Diocese of Atlanta

I could listen to Archdeacon Janet forever. What she has to say is compelling, engaging, and inspiring. She is clearly committed to learning as well as teaching. Janet was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. Following college, she became an elementary school science teacher. After years of teaching, she became a human resources manager for a media corporation, working for newspaper companies and television station. She was later employed as Deputy Secretary of Wisconsin's Department of Employment Relations. Janet was an appointee of Governor Tommy Thompson, who later became the U.S. Secretary of Health & Human Services. Janet was ordained in 2011 and became Archdeacon in 2017.

Dani: What drew you to the diaconate?

Janet: It was some time ago I lived in Wisconsin and there was a deacon at the church where I was. We thought, or I thought at the time, "That sounds pretty cool to be able to do what deacons do." I never wanted to be a priest. I didn't feel God was calling me that way. I was very active in the church, you know, choir. I was never on the vestry, but I certainly did a lot with them and all kinds of projects. I got involved in things. I thought about it and I talked to that deacon. She said, "Oh,

yeah...sounds [like] you might be interested in this field." At the time, I was working, had two children, married. Kind of said, "Well, I don't know if I can fit that in," so the idea sort of went away.

Then, some 20 years later, the children are educated, gone to school, graduated, working, my husband passed away suddenly and I moved to Georgia. We were in Wisconsin at the time. I moved to Georgia and I joined an EFM class. You do spiritual autobiography.

At the end of the first year, at the very end, I said, "I'm interested in pursuing the diaconate." That's all I said. About two years later, one and a half to two years later, it opened up in the Diocese of Atlanta. They opened the process up. I said, "Okay. I'll throw my name in the hat," so I filled out the application, threw my name in the hat. I was selected to start the process. Okay, God, my middle name is Ruth and I'll go wherever God sends me. I'm ready to go. That's how it started. That was... let's see, I've been a deacon for eight years, so it was three years before that. That process takes three years. One-year discernment and two years of actual formation. That's how it happened.

Dani: Tell me about your ministry. What's your work?

Janet: Right now, I guess I have a lot of ministry.

I'm an archdeacon and the archdeacons cannot belong to any one church. I'm not assigned to a church, so I'm kind of a free agent and I go around to different churches. When I first became a deacon, first ordained, I was very interested in children. I had been a teacher, I'd been a lot of things vocationally, I've been a lot of things. When I started out, right out of college, I was an educator in elementary school, so kids, I loved kids. Another deacon and I who had been in the same formation class, we said, "You know, there are a lot of children out there that could use mentoring, tutoring after school, especially disadvantaged children."

We got a program together. Lesley-Ann Drake, she's a deacon in the Diocese of Atlanta. We've developed a program called Path to Shine...It's an after school program. Volunteer, nobody got paid when it started. She started one in Atlanta, in Smyrna, which is a suburb. I was down south of her, in Macon, Georgia I started one there, so our ministry was really all about Path to Shine, getting people trained to do that kind of work. Basically, bringing the needs of the world, of these children, into the church and then, getting people involved in the church in that program, so they go out [of] the church. I eventually got an assistant to work with me. A lay person interested in the church and when I left, that particular church, and we do, we rotate our deacons every three years, and I stayed there probably a little bit longer than that, but when I left

that church, I was able to have somebody who could take over that program. That's what we're supposed to do. We're not supposed to take a ministry and be in it for life. It's still going on some seven years now. And 14 more have started up. I started one in the city that I live in. That one is right now on sabbatical, but another one started in Perry, Georgia, which is a little bit south still of Warner Robins. That one's going on. One is Columbus, Georgia, so in my area, which is middle Georgia, that there are three right now. That's there, okay? Then, when I became an archdeacon, I was not allowed to be in any particular church. I didn't have a particular ministry, but I feel I'm a trainer. That's what I do. Okay? I'm involved in Safeguarding God's Children, Safeguarding God's People training, Dismantling Racism training, and that I feel right now, that's really my ministry to go out and do this training, get people involved, make a safe place for people and children to survive in the church.

I mean, I think right now, we are not... the church can do more. We're not doing everything that we can do. There're so many unchurched people out there in the world I believe who need Jesus Christ. I model my life after him. We're doing some good things; it's just we've got to keep doing it and keep doing more. In the Safeguarding God's Children program and Safeguarding God's People program, we're now looking at the LGBTQ and all the other

letters that follow it now and saying, "Those people need a safe place, too." There's now going to be another training program kind of... Safeguarding the Binary. Okay? Kind of people that are in... It's even confusing to me right now, because I don't know a lot about it. I know what LGBTQ, but then there's a lot more and it was like, oh, Lord, I've got to educate myself before I can go out and talk with people about this huge group of people that have been under the radar for a long time and make it safe for them wherever they may be. Especially in the church.

Dani: That's beautiful. We appreciate that.

Janet: That program will be rolled out soon. The dismantling racism part, I've been doing that way before I was ordained. I was in private industry. I did a lot of diversity training. You know, you do that diversity training.

In the church, our program is now saying it's not about training. It really is about spiritual formation. We take the mind and we can deal with the mind, but this work involves the heart and the soul. You've got to be... all that has to come together before you can change anything. First, you've got to look at yourself and say, "How was I raised? What kind of beliefs and values that I have around racism?" Then, take that forward to be able to work with other people. That's where I am now in the

process and I'm very proud of the Diocese of Atlanta. We've got...the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing and it is about... it's not so much about training. It's about reconciliation, repentance, healing.

Dani: Are you involved with the center as well as the training?

Janet: Yeah. The center was opened about a year ago and even before that, before the center was open, in 2006 I joined a commission. It was called the Anti-Racism Commission at that time and I was involved in that. In addition to... that was even before I was a trainer. We met, we looked at the issues...within the diocese of our area, and said these are the needs of the church in our area. It was the training's not very good. A lot of blame, shame, and guilt. People walked out angry, people walked out sad, it was just not real good. Dr. Catherine Meeks and I lived in Macon, Warner Robins area, which is south. We used to travel back and forth to the meetings of the commission. We said, "You know, something's got to change here." Then, she literally took the whole thing over. Went to the bishop. We had a change of bishops at that time, too. She went to the current bishop and said, "We need to do this. We need to get money to do more training, we need to... awareness within the diocese of what the work that we are doing." She was a dynamo. I mean, really.

I've now done training in Kentucky, she has been all over Province four and Province nine, which is the Central America, the islands, bringing the work of reconciliation and healing to those areas. In October, there's going to be a sexuality, spirituality and sexuality conference at the center. There will be a wellness, women's wellness there, bringing people from all over those provinces to the area. We've had a pilgrimage, the Jonathan Myrick Daniels Pilgrimage where they recognize the martyrs of Alabama.

Okay, we used to go to that regular. Then, Catherine and I and three other people said, "Wait a minute, we have people who have been lynched in Georgia. Why don't we recognize those people?" We started a three-year project to find out the names of people who have been lynched in Georgia and we started out the first year in my area, Macon, Georgia, we found 17 people.

Oh, that was minuscule in terms of the number of people, but we had a plaque and the plaque with their names on it, had that plaque set in front of the Douglas Theater, which was a black-owned theater started by a man who was really a millionaire. He opened that theater because black couldn't go to the Grand Opera House which is a few blocks away. At the time, during that time, once they lynched a person in Forsyth, Georgia, brought his body back,

wanted to make a statement, threw his body in front of the Douglas Theater. That's why we chose that place for the location of the first plaque with the 17 names on it. That's there. Then, the second year, we went to Athens, Georgia and we discovered 53 names of people that have been lynched, so we have a larger, larger monument there. In the meantime, we were collecting and found names of more and more people who had been lynched in the diocese of... well, in Georgia period. Wasn't just the Diocese of Atlanta. We have two dioceses in Georgia. We found 600 names.

In the third year, we recognized all 600 names on a monument that's in front of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing. It was unveiled, Bishop Curry was there, Bishop Rob Wright was our bishop. We did a pilgrimage to Ghana three years ago. Three years ago. That bishop, Bishop Victor Atta Bafoe was also there for the opening of the center. He was there for the opening of the center and then we unveiled the monument last year...The very newest thing is a program that's been designed for youth, dismantling Racism for sixth through 12th graders.

Dani: I love listening to you talk and how everything you say is about connections.

Janet: Absolutely. If God wanted me to do one particular thing, I think that's what it is. To make

connections with people. It's all about relationship building. You cannot go into a neighborhood, a depressed neighborhood or whatever we in the church think that neighborhood is, you can't go in there and just say, "Well, we're going to start this program for you and we going to do this for you." ...when we wanted to get the Path to Shine program going, we started out with what we wanted to do a vacation bible school in a neighborhood. Linmoor Estates it was called. Depressed. I mean, really a depressed area. Mixed area, blacks, whites. What they had in common was they were poor. There was a tornado that hit that area, and we took some of the churches, the Episcopal Churches went in and stayed with the people, helped them in whatever way that we could. Got money from fiscal relief and development to get gift cards to give them for food. We brought in some food, helped them pack that food into bags to give to people, helped... The Red Cross came in, too, and helped to get trees off of houses and things like that. One of the questions that was asked of us at the time was, "Okay, you've helped us this far, are you coming back?" Because they were used to people coming in, do-gooders coming in, doing good, and the good was with all those do-gooders, and leaving. Okay?

We started relationships with the people in that area. Just go by, found out... One of the things you have to find out first is who the leader is. Okay? A lot of times, especially in African American

communities, who's the matriarch? You've got to find that person, talk with her, because she's going to be your in to the people because people, that first year that we tried the bible school, we had one child show up. The next year we tried it, we had 50-some. The next year we tried it, we had a hundred kids show up.

You've got to establish relationships with people, and they may be depressed monetarily, but ABCD tells you that all of us have assets, everybody. May not be monetary assets, but we can do something. We can cook, we can make things, we can sew, we can do art, everybody, so when you go into the neighborhoods and form relationships with people, you find out they have some talent. Now, how can we best use that talent. We talk about it. I mean, I've got some really good stories on that one. How people and they then discover that, okay, I am, I have some value. I may not have a lot of money, but I have some value. That's what God has put in all of us, that we do have value. Everybody has an asset they can share with somebody else. That's what asset-based community development is all about.

Dani: Okay, so here's a question. The church is changing, the world is changing. What is your vision for the diaconate?

Janet: Well, that there would be a true understanding among clergy as to what vocational

deacons do and are. There are a lot of misconceptions, we were talking in the elevator, a lot of misconceptions about deacons. I would want deacons to be totally accepted. I know there's lots of books out there about being an equal order, but there still are a lot of people out there who believe bishop, priest, deacon, lay. We used to talk about this in corporate, in a corporate setting where you start out with the CEO and then eventually you get down to the workers and how that needs to be turned around because there are more workers, there are more lay involved in churches. These people have value. It's not like they're at the bottom of the ladder. Okay?

Dani: My last question is, and this is kind of a fun one, why do we need deacons?

Janet: Within the church, we need deacons to be out there. To be out there in the streets, doing, as our bishop says, getting our fingers dirty, working with the people who need the assistance. I mean, that's what we do. The poor, the hungry, the incarcerated, the immigrants, that's what we do. The church, you have people, you have people out there who are counselors and social workers and everything. They're needed, don't get me wrong. They are needed, but who's going to bring the word of God, the good news of Jesus Christ to people out there? That's why we need deacons. That's why I think we need deacons, to bring that out there.

Then, as we say, we go out in the world, Lord knows there's a bunch of needs out there. There's a bunch of people sitting in the churches who think, "I'm doing real good because I come to church every Sunday, I hear the word. I can really feel good about myself." Not all, but a lot. There's needs out there, there's people here, there's money, you know, in this church there are, there are assets. Okay?

At this one church, you know, it's a big church. Big church. They'll write you a check in a heartbeat, which is needed. I'm not saying it's not needed. Church is needed, but what about being out there and getting a relationship with those people out there with needs? Our bishop is a super example of that. One of the first things he did after he was ordained, he went out and spent a day with the garbage workers, rode in the trucks, picking up garbage in Atlanta. I mean, he's a real example of getting out there, and he wants us to get out there, his deacons to get out there...there's work to be done.

Diakonia: Conclusion

This “Diakonia” project has taken me all over the country, and introduced me to deacons who inspired me on my own journey of discernment. Each one surprised me, and each one also confirmed what I knew in my heart to be true about deacons.

I have been an ordained deacon for 11 days. It has already been an adventure. I continue to learn what being a deacon means through living it, and I am ever grateful for the wisdom of the many deacons I have interviewed in the past year in helping me in my understanding.

I was ordained at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco by Bishop Marc Andrus on a rainy day. I think a poem captures it best:

ordination

peel back the layers
of skin and sinew
crack open the bone:
there
my shivering heart
bare to your breath.

then
a hand

a new layer of cloth
so many voices
promising to follow you
everything wrapped in
red.

the smoke does not
get in my eyes:
let us go forth
into the fog
like hot,
bright embers.

While the moment is seared forever into my heart,
what has happened since has also been
transformational.

Proclaiming the gospel for the first time and
preaching as a deacon for the first time reminded
me of one of the things deacons are primarily here
to be: a prophetic voice. We are here to serve, at the
table and in the community, but make no mistake
about it: we are here to articulate the needs and
dreams of the people and to encourage the church
to move in the direction of meeting and
encouraging them.

Throughout my interviews with deacons I was
struck by this prophetic voice. Deacons are practical
but also visionary. Deacons are strategizing new
ways to serve and voicing the reasons we need to

serve. Deacons are, as always, the link between the church and the world, making connections and offering insight. These interviews testify not just to the brilliance of the individual deacons but to the voice and character of the order.

Before I had even been ordained a week I found myself sitting on the altar with a bunch of children, piles of crayons and markers, and my evening prayer bulletin. I had the opportunity to lead a “Messy Vespers” service, and to connect with a group of toddlers through teenagers. They reminded me of all the reasons this work is important, and all the reasons we must continue to make accessible church spaces, and all the reasons deacons must continue to reach out and to raise our voices.

The interviews from this series are now available as an ebook resource on the Episcopal Cafe website for free. Please use them with curious congregations, with discerners, and with wondering newcomers. The more we understand the diaconate the more it will grow and help to build a vibrant church in a time when things are changing quickly and we need, more than ever, that prophetic voice.

Cover art by Jon White

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