De-Centred Ministry: A Diaconal View of Mission and Church

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Alison McRae
April 2009
Unless the diaconate enters into mission and ministry with the church rather than for it, I believe it will fall far short of its calling.

Dorothy McRae-McMahon
*Deacons and the Mission of the Church*, 1.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>UCA</td>
<td>Uniting Church in Australia.</td>
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<tr>
<td>DUCA</td>
<td>DiakoniaUCA, the national Association for the deacon community in the Uniting Church in Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCC</td>
<td>World Council of Churches.</td>
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<tr>
<td>BEM</td>
<td><em>Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry</em>, a publication of the World Council of Churches.</td>
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## Key Uniting Church documents used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document</th>
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<tr>
<td>Report on Ordination</td>
<td>Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church. &lt;br&gt;A report from the Commission on Doctrine. &lt;br&gt;Presented to the 1994 National Assembly Meeting.</td>
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All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.
Abstract

Drawing on the ministry experiences of deacons since the renewal of the Diaconate in the Uniting Church in Australia in 1991, this thesis contends that the church’s diaconal ministry is essentially an ecclesial concept, representing to the church that *diakonia* is at the heart of its identity. Using key Uniting Church reports which suggest that deacon ministry is a ministry on the margins, the thesis concludes that diaconal ministry can be seen to be a de-centred ministry. It invites the church to embrace the contributions that deacons make to the mission life of the church and to discover how, in their representative capacity, deacons embody the *diakonia* of the whole church.

The research emerges from the experiences of deacons in the UCA. It used a Grounded Theory approach to gather data and invited deacons to reflect on their ministry with people on the margins, drawing out their insights on how their ministry informs our understanding of mission and church.

It uses the research of scholars such as John Collins and Sven-Erik Brodd to explore recent ecumenical insights into the interpretation of the biblical term *diakonia*. It outlines how such insights might help us move from the ministry of Deacon being seen merely as one of humble servanthood and to embrace a more sophisticated appreciation of the term, one which affirms an essential ecclesial identity for this ministry.

On the basis of the research some conclusions are drawn about the ministry of Deacon in the Uniting Church being one which invites the church to be intentionally aware of the variety of contexts in which God’s church is found. It challenges the church to free its representative expression of *diakonia* to help lead it into renewed expressions of faithfulness, for the sake of the gospel. The thesis concludes by offering some challenges to the church and to deacons about how this might be enabled to happen.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

This thesis deals with one particular expression of diaconal ministry within the church, that of the ministry of Deacon within the Uniting Church in Australia. The research is based on an understanding that the ministry of Deacon is essentially an ecclesial concept. Drawing on the manner in which the Uniting Church in Australia has recently developed its renewed diaconate, and on the experiences of deacons currently in ministry, it highlights how the ministry of Deacon within the UCA is best understood as being directed towards the needs of the wider community and operating on the margins of church and community. The thesis suggests that the ministry of Deacon in the Uniting Church can be understood to be a ‘de-centred ministry’. It challenges us to move away from understanding diaconal ministry as a ministry of humble servanthood, and to see it as an ecclesial concept that helps us understand more about the nature of the church and what is at the heart of its own diaconal mission.

1.1 Background comments

It is more than sixteen years since the formal renewal of the Diaconate in the Uniting Church in Australia. Much has happened in relation to the ministry during that time affirming the contribution made by deacons and the diversity and challenge they bring to the life of the church. The journey has not always been easy and there remain significant challenges for the church to address. These include how the diaconate is seen within the life of the church, including outmoded perceptions carrying
inappropriate historical baggage which limits the church as a whole coming to a fuller theological appreciation of the ecclesial nature of this ministry.

In 1998 Dr Catherine Ritchie authored a book called *Not to Be Ministered Unto* tracing some of the story of the Presbyterian Deaconesses in Victoria up to the formation of the Uniting Church in 1977. The Rev Bev Fabb contributed the concluding chapter, outlining something of the journey towards a renewed diaconate in the Uniting Church and reflecting on many of the debates and insights of various Assembly committees charged with bringing recommendations to the church about a renewed diaconate. Bev Fabb’s overview of these debates concluded with the 1997 Assembly. There is scope to go beyond the story told by Cath Ritchie and Bev Fabb and begin to trace some of the story of the ministry beyond its renewal in 1991.

### 1.2 An international and ecumenical conversation

While the Uniting Church was engaged in its discussions and debates about the renewal of the diaconate, other churches, both in Australia and overseas, were engaged in similar debates, and many also moved to renew their diaconate. They did

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1. Catherine Ritchie, *Not to Be Ministered Unto ... The Story of Presbyterian Deaconesses Trained in Melbourne* (Melbourne: Uniting Church, 1998). This book was produced by the Diaconate Association of Victoria to coincide with the celebrations marking one hundred years of the beginning of training and the appointment of women to serve as Deaconesses within the Presbyterian Church in Victoria. Catherine Ritchie was a leading Deaconess within the Presbyterian Church before the union that formed the Uniting Church in Australia. For many years she was Principal of Rolland House, the church’s training institute for deaconesses and women missionaries. She was a theological leader and visionary teacher within the church and in 1994 was awarded the degree of Doctor of Sacred Theology (honoris causa) by the Melbourne College of Divinity in recognition of her work in this area. She is fondly remembered by all who came within her sphere of influence.

2. Bev Fabb, ‘Into the Uniting Church in Australia: The Renewal of the Diaconate’, in *Not to Be Ministered Unto ... The Story of Presbyterian Deaconesses Trained in Melbourne* (Melbourne: Uniting Church, 1998): 235-53. Bev had been a Deaconess within the Presbyterian Church and then the Uniting Church, and was one of the first to be recognised as a deacon within the renewed diaconate. She had been involved in many of the debates and was a member of various Task Groups leading up to the renewal of the diaconate.
so within the parameters of their own denominational structures and understanding of church, and the position that the Uniting Church has taken is no different. There are some interesting similarities in the way in which different churches have renewed the diaconate that are indicative of a shift in thinking about the understanding and place of diaconal ministry within various denominational traditions. One of the most significant shifts was to ground this ministry more concretely within a theological understanding of what it means to be church, and particularly how this ministry might carry a representative function on behalf of and for the sake of the whole church.3 There was growing recognition that the changing context of church and society meant that any previous notions of this ministry being merely of humble servanthood were no longer credible. A more sophisticated approach was required, one which placed an appreciation of this ministry firmly within an ecclesial understanding of the ‘worship’, ‘witness’ and ‘service’ life of the church. Deacons, thus, were seen to embody the diakonia, or service, to which the whole church is called. Moreover, there was to be a more critical analysis of what this ‘service’ was to mean and how it would be carried out.

The Australian Roman Catholic theologian Dr John Collins has played a significant role in informing this shift in thinking about diakonia, particularly through his ground breaking research into the diakon group of words.4 Collins’ work is internationally recognised throughout the ecumenical church, and within diaconal communities in particular, as having made a significant contribution to the manner in which we are to

understand *diakonia* and consequently the ministry of Deacon.\(^5\) Also influential has been the work of the Swedish theologian Sven-Erik Brodd, who argues that because *diakonia* is to be understood as an essential component of what it means to be church, the ministry of Deacon must serve a representative function for the sake of the whole.\(^6\)

For Brodd, the mandate for a deacon’s ministry is to be seen within the church’s act of ordination, and not essentially through any of the various functions a particular deacon may undertake, important as they are.

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1.3 Uniting Church position and developments

The position the Uniting Church took in renewing its diaconal ministry reflects something of this understanding. The two documents that are important in this respect are the Report on Ministry presented to the 1991 Assembly and the report Ordination and Ministry presented to the 1994 Assembly. These reports outline an understanding of the representative function an ordained diaconal ministry would play within the life of the church, describing a ministry that would hold ‘before the church the model of service among those who suffer, and call the members to engage in such service’. Moreover, this was to be a ministry grounded within the mission response of the whole church, giving ‘leadership to the community of faith in its dispersed life’, being especially aware of those marginal places in the wider community ‘where people are hurt, disadvantaged, [and] oppressed’.

1.4 A personal and collegial journey

Most deacons in the Uniting Church are committed to the vision contained in the various reports regarding their ministry. Having witnessed this renewed ministry settle within the life of the church I wanted to offer some of my own reflections and canvas other deacons working ‘in the field’ in order to ascertain whether this vision was still a key part of their day-to-day reality. I also sought to explore how their experience in ministry affected their understanding of the church and its mission and what insights this might offer to the wider church as it explores its own diakonia. The research is as

7 See ‘Report on Ministry in the Uniting Church in Australia, Report of the Task Group on Ministry of the Church to the Sixth Assembly’ (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia, 1991); and ‘Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church: A Report from the Assembly Commission on Doctrine for Study and Comment’ (Sydney: UCA National Assembly, 1994).
9 ‘Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church’, 22.
much a personal journey as it is founded on a hope that the findings and reflections will offer to the church and its deacons additional insights about our collective diaconal identity. No other research of this nature has been undertaken within the Uniting Church since the renewal of the diaconate so it was an opportune time to take a closer look at how this ministry is understood and experienced within the life of the church.

The research has been undertaken primarily for the benefit of the Uniting Church, and in particular the deacon community. It is my hope that it may be of some value within the ecumenical diaconal community as well. Within the world church there are a variety of understandings of the form and function that the diaconate may take and inevitably our understanding of another position is likely to be coloured by our own denominational background and experience. For instance, the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions have traditionally understood the diaconate as the first of three steps in a hierarchical order of ministry,\textsuperscript{11} whilst the Reformed tradition has been heavily influenced by developments in the 19\textsuperscript{th} Century German Motherhouse traditions, often leading it to see deacons as part of its ‘servant’ response within its social welfare provision and response to human need. We need to take account of these differences, whilst at the same time not be too timid about taking steps which may forge new or different directions in either our diaconal structure or practice.\textsuperscript{12} If

\textsuperscript{11} This is now changing for both of these denominational traditions. Since the Second Vatican Council the Roman Catholic Church has made significant changes in its understanding of the diaconate to the point where there is now an increasing number of men who offer for membership within the permanent office of the diaconate. Likewise, in the Anglican tradition an increasing number of men and women understand their diaconal ministry to be most helpfully expressed within a permanent order.

\textsuperscript{12} An example of this is the position the Uniting Church takes in authorising its deacons to preside at the sacraments. At their ordination Uniting Church deacons are vested with the rights and responsibilities of celebrating the sacraments. This is, in part, in order to enhance the practice of their ministry as they embody ‘church’ in the varied marginal locations of their ministry. For a fuller explanation of this see ‘Protocol for Baptism and Holy Communion (Approved by Eighth Assembly,
this thesis can shed some light on the UCA position within this wider ecumenical context then it will have served a valuable purpose.

1.5 Reflections from deacons

This research is centred on insights from the experiences of deacons and does not address insights that might emerge from reflection on the practice of other orders of ministry, such as the ministry of the Word. There is no attempt to set one ministry over against another, or to suggest that one ministry has a monopoly on mission. The insights that arise from reflection on the practice of the ministry of Deacon within the UCA could equally apply to other ministry expressions. I have deliberately not attempted to draw conclusions for any ministry other than the ministry of Deacon, as it is this ministry with which I am most familiar and towards which I have a primary responsibility. Moreover, it is this ministry that the church, through its act of ordaining deacons, intentionally entrusts with the commission of representing the diaconia of the whole church. Therefore this research, and the conclusions drawn from it, specifically focuses on the reflections of deacons in the church in an attempt to enhance our understanding of how the ministry of Deacon might shed more light on our collective ecclesial identity.

1.6 The structure of the thesis

Beyond this introduction (Chapter One), there are four major chapters and two smaller concluding chapters.

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July 1997’) (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia, 1998). This is a position and practice that is somewhat different to most expressions of the diaconate in other denominations.
Chapter Two introduces the ecclesial context for the ministry of Deacon and outlines something of the Australian social and cultural context that the Uniting Church lives within. It deals with the theological and ecclesial basis for a renewed diaconate within the UCA, drawing on key reports presented to various national Assembly meetings. This chapter also canvasses some international and ecumenical insights in relation to *diakonia*, and the ministry of Deacon in particular, and suggests that by taking the diaconate seriously our understanding of church will be enhanced. This ecumenical context is important for the development of the renewed diaconate within the UCA, and particularly for this study. It is not possible to come to an accurate assessment of the ministry of Deacon in the UCA without proper attention being paid to the wider international and ecumenical context. Thus the development of the research and the conclusions drawn within the thesis are dependent on an informed understanding of the ecclesial context coming from these and other sources. This chapter provides an important backdrop for the direction of the research.

Chapter Three moves on to the findings of the research. It outlines some methodological approaches to the research, presents some of the findings, outlines an analysis of these findings and offers the beginnings of some conclusions arising from the research. The two major approaches used within this research were those of canvassing the UCA deacon community by the use of a questionnaire and forming a Focus Group made up of local deacons.¹³

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¹³ The members of the Focus Group were made up of deacons from metropolitan Melbourne, primarily for ease of meeting and because this was where the researcher was based at the time the data was gathered.
Based on the analysis of the findings Chapter Four explores their consequences in relation to an informed understanding of the church and its mission. From this theological basis it is then possible to move on, in Chapter Five, to explore some of the specific implications for the ministry of Deacon concluding that one of the ways in which the ministry of Deacon could be viewed is that of being a de-centred ministry. This chapter explores some of the mission implications for the church if it is to take seriously this de-centred ministry, which focuses on and is informed by the exercise of an intentional ministry on the margins.

Chapters Six and Seven offer some conclusions to the research. Firstly, some challenges for the church, and the Uniting Church in particular, are put forward in Chapter Six, encouraging the church and its deacons to look beyond any simple notions of humble servanthood in relation to its diaconal ministry and challenging it to take more seriously the theological principles upon which this ministry is based. Chapter Seven draws the thesis to its conclusion and contains some possibilities for further research and attention.
CHAPTER TWO

AN ECCLESIAL CONTEXT FOR THE MINISTRY OF DEACON

2.1 Introduction and background

Not long after the renewal of the diaconate in the Uniting Church the following challenge was put to deacons: ‘Unless the diaconate enters into mission and ministry with the church rather than for it, I believe it will fall far short of its calling’. Here is a reminder that the diaconate is to be a ministry concerned primarily with mission, a mission that is intimately connected to our understanding of God’s calling-out of the church in order that it might live as God’s people in the particular social reality with which it shares its life. Thus diaconal ministry is as much an ecclesial concept as it is an enabler of mission and it is important to explore the manner in which the ministry of Deacon, in its representative capacity, highlights the mission responsibility of the whole church. This chapter outlines something of the development of the renewed diaconate within the Uniting Church. It refers to some social and ecclesial contexts that influenced this renewal in the UCA and highlights key elements to the ministry, locating it within the wider ecumenical and theological contexts of other denominational expressions of the renewed diaconate.

An understanding of mission is at the heart of how the Uniting Church understands its diaconal ministry. Questions such as how we are to respond to the world around us and how ‘church’ is understood and experienced as a result of our engagement in

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mission are critical ones to address. Diaconal ministry is often described as being a ‘ministry on the margins’, working for the most part outside the institution of the gathered faith community. It is to be a ministry that is launched from the presence of God in the community among disadvantaged people, a presence that expresses itself in new and surprising communal life.\footnote{15} The Uniting Church commissions its deacons to be in those places in the community where ‘the scattered people of God join together in new community, breaking old boundaries, enlivening old forms, generating new networks of church life, and enriching society’.\footnote{16}

At its best, diaconal ministry does not only engage in ministry on behalf of the church but more importantly with it as it seeks to enable the church to be a more truly missional church. It mirrors for the church something of its true nature and holds before the church renewed understandings and possibilities for mission and service. Of course, this task is not the work of deacons alone because mission and service is the responsibility of the whole church as all Christians are ‘sent from their gathering points into the world’.\footnote{17} However, in its representative capacity, the ministry of Deacon takes on a particular responsibility in order that the whole church may embody its calling within God’s mission.

\footnote{15} ‘Report on Ministry, 1991’. See especially pages 40-45. This 1991 report became the defining document for understanding the nature and place of the renewed ministry of Deacon within the Uniting Church. It outlined an ordained, representative ministry that was designed to move deliberately beyond the gathered faith community. It was to be seen as a sign, both for the members of the congregation scattered as they go about their daily life, and the presence of God in the world. At the following Assembly meeting in 1994 a report that further spelt out the location of this ministry within the Uniting Church’s understanding of Ordination was received. This too is an important document in relation to understanding the ministry of Deacon, although not all recommendations regarding the diaconate made within this report were accepted by the Assembly.

\footnote{16} ‘Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church’, 24, para 40.

2.2 A historical and social context for the diaconate in the UCA

The journey of the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia into the Uniting Church in Australia in June 1977 is significant in understanding the place of the diaconate within its structures. One of the hopes of those who dreamed of the formation of the Uniting Church was that this new church would be one that reflected more truly the church’s place within a contemporary Australian setting.

The denominations moving into Union all had their heritage in another part of the world and they recognised that their experiences in what had become their new home called for a renewed understanding and expression of church. There was growing recognition that the church which now existed in this new land had to take seriously both the history and context of Australia, especially its increasing secularism, the suspicion with which organised religion was viewed and the effects of a displaced indigenous existence.

Further, the renewed ecumenical movement of the mid-twentieth century underlined that the denominationalism of the past was a severe limitation to what was needed in order to sustain the church moving into the future. A new faithfulness was called for, a faithfulness which would enable the church to find its own centre in this place called Australia, to discover what it would mean to be defined more by faithfulness to the gospel and the Christian heritage than by a particular expression of
denominationalism. Questions such as how we were to be Christians in this land, were we merely visitors here, what weight did we place on our ties with the ‘homeland’ churches, and what was our relationship with the indigenous peoples of the land were all of vital importance as this new church took shape. David Gill, the first General Secretary of the Assembly following Union expressed the challenge facing the Uniting Church in the following way:

What does it mean for us to have that cultural mixed grill known as Australia as the context in which, for which, we are called to be the church? The Uniting Church has no monopoly on that question; it may, however, be freer than some other denominations to set about finding answers. Those answers need to be sought with care. For one thing, we find ourselves in a rapidly changing culture of elusive identity. For another, we want to see the Uniting Church earthed in Australia, not captive to it.

The Uniting Church was thus seeking to discover its own sense of location, founded on the assurance that we are ‘in Christ’, and to discover what a ‘faith-in-location’ meant for living in Australia. In an attempt to move away from the constraints of former denominational ties, and drawing on the insights of some other ‘Union’ churches, there was a recognition that this new church had no claim to make for the allegiance of this country, and that new forms and images were called for.

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18 Inevitably, some of the practices and structures from the former denominations came into the UCA, and strong links are maintained with both Methodist and Presbyterian traditions (in particular) in other countries.
20 Ibid.
22 For example, in Canada, a similar union in the 1920s resulted in a denomination called the United Church of Canada. In its movement towards Union the UCA borrowed from the experience of this denomination, along with the experiences of the Church of South India. Within its title the Uniting Church in Australia wished to underline that it was but one of the many expressions of church in Australia and not the only one as the term ‘of’ might suggest. Further, the use of the word ‘uniting’, rather than ‘united’, underlined its commitment to ecumenism and the possibility of further union with other denominations.
The influence of the Basis of Union

This context is important for understanding the development of a renewed diaconate in the Uniting Church. Whilst each of the Union churches had a well-established form of diaconal ministry, the writers of the Basis of Union recognised the need to reconsider traditional forms of ministry, a consideration that could include a more contextual understanding of the existing ministry of Deaconess and foreshadowed the possibility of a renewed form of this ministry in the Basis of Union.

The Uniting Church recognises that at the time of union many seek a renewal of the diaconate in which men and women offer their time and talents, representatively and on behalf of God’s people, in the service of [humankind] in the face of changing need. She will so order her life that she remains open to the possibility that God may call men and women into such a renewed diaconate: in these circumstances she may decide to call them Deacons and Deaconesses, whether the service is within or beyond the life of the congregation.

In his commentary on the Basis of Union Davis McCaughey points to the significance that this part of the Basis of Union may have on our understanding of the diaconate and of our understanding of mission and church. Seeing diaconal service as being one amongst a number of expressions of ministry, he affirms that the church is to see it

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23 The Basis of Union is a key document within the life of the Uniting Church. It acts as an identifying statement and seeks to outline the manner in which the church understands itself. It is not a doctrinal document in that it does not purport to be a full confession of the Christian faith. Rather, it is intended to act like a covenant that provides a basis of identity and belief for those who adhere to it. It is ‘intended as a call to the Church to renew her commitment to the faith by which she lives and to go out boldly in mission’. (See Davis McCaughey, Commentary on the Basis of Union, Melbourne: Uniting Church, 1980, 5). It affirms that the Uniting Church is to seek to “serve the present age” and does not exist to merely to keep alive the traditions of either Calvin or Wesley (tempting as this may often be!). See comment by D’Arcy Wood in D’Arcy Wood, Building on a Solid Basis: A Guide to the Basis of Union (Melbourne: Uniting Church, 1986), 5.

24 The Presbyterians from 1898, the Methodists from around the 1930’s (although a group of young women known as Sisters of the People, established by the Wesleyan Central Mission in Sydney in 1890 was a forerunner for the Methodists here. See Ian Breward, A History of Australian Churches (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1993) and the Congregationalists from a similar time. At that time these ministries were only exercised by women, and these women were called Deaconesses.

that those people with the charismata, or gifts of grace, for diaconal service are trained in and for the sake of the mission of the church.

The gifts are not identical with those of other ministries: indeed it is part of the theological principle underlying our understanding of the church that they should be different, distinctly characterising particular people.26

These gifts, bestowed through the work of the Holy Spirit, and recognised as such by the church, underline that ministry in its various forms is to be constitutive of and not merely derivative from the church’s being and identity. The church orders its life so that some of its members take on representative functions for the sake of the whole. It is part of the ordering and functioning of the church as it seeks to be faithful to God’s calling-out of the community. Moreover, this representative function of the ministry of Deacon is in order to help identify the nature of the church’s own mission and thereby enable the mission response of the whole. As Benjamin Hartley reminds us, ‘the ordained person’s representative ministry is intended to focus attention on God and to represent the ministries of all Christians’.27

Here is recognition that for the church to be church it must be focused on mission, responding to God’s calling-out of its people to life and witness within and for the sake of the world. In order to be witness to the world the church must be what it is called to be, a community of baptised believers sharing in the eucharist (leitourgia), the common faith (martyria) and common social solidarity (diakonia). Together these three motifs are the foundation of Christian life with the vocation of the church expressed in both its local and universal sphere and derived from the charismata of its members. The Basis of Union affirms that this witnessing church will need to find a

26 J. Davis McCaughey, Commentary on the Basis of Union (Melbourne: Uniting Church, 1980), 77, 78.
true rhythm of Christian involvement in the world both as a community of faith which is gathered for worship and as the people of God scattered for everyday life in the world. Its service is rooted in worship and as the Body of Christ it is to be a sign and instrument of God’s grace available for the whole of humanity. It reminds the church that its ability to be a living koinonia determines the manner in which it is possible to be Christ’s diakonia in and for the world.

2.3 Moving towards a renewed expression of ministry

The basis for a renewed understanding of diaconal ministry was therefore the church’s commitment to mission. Moreover it meant an approach to mission that had at its heart an appreciation of the new context of the church and recognised that, in order to faithfully respond, some revised approaches and structures were called for.

Because the possibility of a renewed diaconate was left open within the formulation of the Basis of Union it was to be the subject of much study, discussion and debate at all national Assembly meetings during the first fifteen years of its life. Each three-yearly national Assembly meeting from 1977 onwards considered various reports and resolutions on whether the church would establish a renewed diaconate, and if it did, what form such a renewed diaconate would take.28 It was at the 1991 Assembly that the form of the renewed diaconate was formally approved and this renewed ministry could finally emerge. For potential deacons in the UCA the journey appeared to be a

long one, although perhaps not so long when compared to similar journeys of renewal within the international and ecumenical diaconal and church community.

The turning point was the 1988 Assembly where it was resolved to establish a Task Group to ‘conduct a study of the changing patterns of ministry and what will be required to equip the whole people of God for their ministry and mission in a changing world, in the light of the gospel’ (Resolution 88.27.5). Whereas previous task groups commissioned by the Assembly had been required to look only at the possibility of a renewed diaconate and the shape it might take, this Task Group was to look at ministry needs across the board. It was required to undertake a more substantial study of ministry, including that of the diaconate, the ministry of Word and a variety of existing lay ministries. It subsequently brought a raft of recommendations to the 1991 Assembly meeting aimed at enhancing an understanding of all ministries within the life of the church.29

The 1991 Report on Ministry reaffirmed that the church is to be a church engaged in mission. It also highlighted that the church must be responsive to the necessity for change if it is to remain faithful to the calling to be the people of God in the world. The changing nature of the church had already been recognised by the Church in its Basis of Union with the paragraph dealing specifically with the ordering of ministry acknowledging that the Uniting Church

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29 This was a wide-ranging report. It not only dealt with the ministry of Deacon and ministry of Word; it also dealt with a raft of specified lay ministries in the church, including a more formalised place for a Specified Ministry of Youth Worker, a clearer understanding of the ministries of Lay Preacher and Lay Pastor and a new form of ministry called Community Minister (a completely new concept for the UCA). It decided to drop the term Deaconess to describe those called to the diaconate and to call all those ordained to this ministry, whether male or female, Deacons. At the Eleventh Assembly meeting in 2006 the church further refined most of its specified lay ministries into the one ministry to be called the Ministry of Pastor. An understanding of the ordained ministries of ministry of Word and ministry of Deacon remained unchanged.
comes into being in a period of reconsideration of traditional forms of ministry, and of renewed participation of all the people of God in the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, the building up of the fellowship in mutual love, in commitment to Christ’s mission, and in service of the world for which he died. 30

It was a reminder that the church is ‘to be alert to the moving of the Spirit and to the renewal of the life of the church and that this renewal may well mean changes in the shape of ministries’.31 The Report acknowledged that its work was set within this changing context and affirmed that within its brief it was to take into account the possibility of a renewed diaconate and its relationship to the role of the local congregation in mission.

The Report also recognised that any restructuring of ministry will not in and of itself make the church vibrantly alive but that this is only possible through

the work of the Holy Spirit who brings the gospel to life in the church and gives life to forms of order. Because we are part of God’s new creation the gospel of Jesus Christ invites us to become co-workers in the mission of God to transform and gather up the whole creation into the fullness of the promises of Christ (Ephesians 1:10).32

The Report envisaged a renewed diaconate whose members, to be known as Deacons, would be a ‘sign for the congregation … of the presence of God in the world’, holding before the church the model of Christ’s service as being central to all Christian ministry (Mark 8: 34-38; Luke 3: 16-30; John 13: 3-15; Philippians 2: 7; Matthew 20: 26-28).33 Further, it affirmed that deacons in the Uniting Church are called to

• be, along with the scattered members of the congregation, a sign of the presence of God in the everyday world,

30 Basis of Union, Uniting Church in Australia (1971 text, approved by the uniting Churches). (Melbourne, Uniting Church Press, 2001) #14, 15.
31 Wood, Building on a Solid Basis, 43.
• be especially aware of the places in the community where people are hurt, disadvantaged, oppressed, or marginalised and to be in ministry with them in ways which reflect the special concern of Jesus for them (Deut. 15:7-11; Matthew 25:31-46),
• recognise, encourage, develop and release those gifts in God’s people which will enable them to share in this ministry of caring, serving, healing, restoring, making peace and advocating justice as they go about their daily lives,
• serve in the manner of Christ alongside marginalised people in solidarity with them as they struggle for human dignity and justice (Isaiah 58:1-12; Isaiah 61:1-3; John 8:2-11; Hebrews 13:1-3),
• be a sign, in the church and in the community of the kingdom of God in which all things are made new (Revelation 21:1-7).34

In an attempt to move beyond some of the constraints which existed for many engaged in previous expressions of deaconess ministry the Report contained a theological and ecclesiological outline for a renewed understanding of diaconal ministry and provided a much firmer basis for the exercise of ministry than had previously been the case. Aware of some of the international and ecumenical discussions about a renewed understanding of diaconal ministry and conscious of the need for a more contextual form of ministry, the Report reminded the church that ‘Deacons represent to the church its calling as servant in the world’ and that ‘by struggling in Christ’s name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in the Church’s life’.35 Thus the renewal of the diaconate within the Uniting Church was put within the context of diaconal renewal happening in other sections of the world church.

Both the 1994 and 1997 Assemblies subsequently made some adjustments and reaffirmations regarding the ministry.36 At the request of DUCA37 the 2000 Assembly

35 ‘Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry’, 27.
36 The major adjustment here at the 1994 Assembly was in relation to the structure of ordained ministry. Instead of the one Ordination with subsequent Accreditation to either ministry of Word or ministry of Deacon, as accepted by the 1991 Assembly, the church moved to two equal and
resolved that a review of the church’s experience of the ministry of Deacon be undertaken. The results of this review were presented at the 2003 Assembly meeting where the place and the ministry of deacons within the life of the church were strongly affirmed.

2.4 Deacons as sign and contextual witness

The images of ‘sign’ and ‘gathered and scattered’ appear throughout both the Report on Ministry and the Report on Ordination. They are used to underscore that the primary sphere of a deacon’s ministry is also to point to the intrinsic connection that their ministry has with the life of the worshipping community. The use of these images ground the ministry of Deacon firmly within the life and mission of the whole church and reinforce the conviction that such ministry does not exist apart from the church which God has called into being. Moreover, the language of sign becomes a helpful image for understanding the context and activity of the church’s mission and service and reminds us that

complementary ordinations, that is, ordination to ministry of Word and ordination to ministry of Deacon. At this Assembly there was also an attempt to remove the ability of Deacons to celebrate the sacraments within the context of their ministry and in their own right. The Assembly did not agree to this and voted to re-affirm the sacramental component of a deacon’s ministry. A move to change the terminology of minister of the Word to that of ‘Presbyter’ was also not accepted. See ‘Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church’. At the 1997 Assembly in Perth a document outlining Protocols for the Celebration of the Sacraments by both deacons and ministers of the Word was accepted. See ‘Protocols’.

37 DiakoniaUCA, referred to as DUCA, is the national body of deacons and deaconesses within the Uniting Church. It provides the opportunity for a gathering of deacons and deaconesses every two years where it also meets as a formal body to determine issues relevant to its work. It organises a national Continuing Education event for deacons every two years and offers some leadership and collegial support to deacon candidates within their national Presessional (Intensive) program. It is a member of the World Federation of Deacons and Diaconal Workers (World Diakonia) and is part of the Asia Pacific region of World Diakonia.

38 The membership of the Task Group set up for this review consisted of deacons, ministers of the Word and lay people drawing representatives from four Synods with corresponding members from all others.

the church is called into being to serve and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to be a sign and instrument of the reign of God which has come among us in the ministry of Jesus and which will come in its fullness at the end of the age.\textsuperscript{40} Sign here is understood to be pointing towards something beyond itself in such a way that it ‘participates in that reality to which it points’.\textsuperscript{41} The Prologue in the Gospel of John illustrates something of this point. Here the ‘sign’ of the incarnation is, in reality, making visible the glory of God (John 1:13,14). The announcer becomes the announced and Jesus is seen not simply as the announcer of good news, but in bearing the reality of that which the incarnation embodies he actually becomes the good news.

If the church is a ‘sign’ of the kingdom of God it must order its life so that it might participate more fully in the mission to which God calls it. Giving attention to the \textit{diakonia} of the church as expressed in part through the ministry of Deacon will help the church to better understand the manner in which it is to understand itself as a ‘sign’ which is both transformative and calls for response. Through \textit{diakonia} the church becomes a community existing not only for the needs of the gathered faith community but reaching out in its ‘scattered form’ in order that it might encompass the entire human community and created order. Under the headship of Christ, the church as sign then becomes the bearer of the divine-human relationship and

\textsuperscript{40} ‘The Church and Its Ministry: A Statement Made for the Uniting Church in Australia by the Working Groups on Doctrine and Christian Unity’ (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia, Assembly Standing Committee. 16-18 July, 2004), Para 2.

participates in ‘the transformative event of new life, a new way of being in the world that is grounded in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth’.42

This language of sign in relation to the diakonia of the church becomes important in any understanding of the place of the ministry of Deacon within its life. As one of the ordained ministries of the church its ministry is not the same as the general ministry to which all Christians are called through baptism, even if some of the tasks may appear to be similar. Rather its shape and expression is to be determined by the nature of the church itself and its authority and accountability differs from that expected of all Christians.43 Because ordination exists in and for the church the ministry of Deacon has no existence apart from the church. It is thus understood to be part of the ordered structuring of the church because ‘it is … the nature of the church rather than a perceived need which determines the nature and form of ordained ministry.’44

As ordained ministers within the church, deacons are accountable to the church and required to provide appropriate theological leadership to the church consistent with their calling. Along with their ministry of Word colleagues and other members of the faith community, deacons seek to highlight the intrinsic expression that all ministries have in the body of Christ; that is, to symbolise the presence of the church in what God is doing for the whole world. In this sense, deacons are ‘representative’ and act on behalf of the church in all that they do. Moreover, through their ministry with those in the community who are marginalised or whose lives are compromised by unjust

social structures, deacons lead the church into mission and represent something of the essence of the church. They represent the servant ministry of Christ within the world and the focus of their ministry is to move deliberately beyond the gathered faith community. This does not mean that such ministry leaves the gathered community behind, or indeed does the mission work for it. Instead, the outward-directed focus of diaconal ministry is to model the way in which the full expression of the gathered faith community is to understand its own calling to worship and service within the world.

The primary sphere of diaconal activity is the dispersed church with an explicit orientation to the wider society. Its primary concern is to embody in service the truth and justice of God. Thus diaconal ministry, grounded as it is in the worship life of the church, exercises its own particular leadership as it moves out from the faith community, witnessing to the myriad concerns God has for the world. It is itself a sign of the fullness of the loving reach of God into the whole creation, providing leadership to the community of faith in its dispersed life and representing the way of being church in dispersed form. As ‘a sign of the presence of God within the everyday world’45 the deacon’s ministry is oriented towards the coming kingdom of God.

2.5 A representative ministry

Because diaconal ministry is a representative ministry the importance of deacons lies in who they are as well as what they do. The deacon is to be present in places where people of all sorts live their daily lives, as a sign of the presence of God particularly among people who are marginalised and oppressed. As a sign of the justice,

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compassion and forgiveness of God diaconal ministry points to the future possibilities of God’s purposes for all creation. Deacons will constantly remind the church of the serving dimensions of the ministry of Christ, and identify those areas of community life where new needs are emerging, challenging the church to effective action. Within their being and their ministry, in their connection with the worshipping community, and through the celebration of the eucharist deacons hold up service as an inescapable response to the gospel and remind the church what it is called to be.

Through the ministry of Deacon the presence of God will often manifest itself in new and surprisingly different expressions of communal life. In these places the scattered people of God join together in new community, breaking old boundaries, enlivening old forms, generating new networks of church life and enriching society. In this way deacons participate in a gathering of a new people of the coming kingdom. Deacons therefore are engaged in the proclamation of the gospel of Christ and the coming kingdom through word and action. This is a reminder that whilst the church lives under the Word of God, this word is not restricted to a more narrowly defined task of preaching; Andrew Dutney reminds us that ‘theologically, the renewed ministry of Deacon is clearly a “ministry of the Word”’,

46 ‘Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church’, 24.
47 Andrew Dutney, Where Did the Joy Come From?: Revisiting the Basis of Union (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 2001), Note 17, 44.
48 ‘Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church’, 23.
2.6 A ministry on the margins

A key notion for diaconal ministry within the Uniting Church is that it sits very much on the boundaries of both church and community. Its task is to live within the tension that the marginal offers and be open to engage in a journey wherein we might live in what Edward Schillebeeckx calls ‘boundary experiences’, those experiences which call forth fundamental questions of human life and existence and which ‘cry out for integration’. In this sense it takes on something of the character of liminality, those threshold experiences which call for an entry into a transformed understanding of identity and reality.

Deacons, therefore, are amongst those people who ‘dare to stand on the margin’ and to offer a form of theological leadership which will enable the church to ‘lead into a new future’. A sustained reflection on what it means to stand on the margins will enable deacons to bring a renewed understanding of the mission of the church, an understanding which will often challenge those who sit more comfortably within the structures of the institutional church. Deacons point to the reality that if we are willing to live with this critical edge we will come to understand more of who we are called to be as God’s people within the world.

Thus the task of deacons is to bring an understanding of an alternative reality and help the community of faith in the development of their identity as an ‘alternative

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people’, a people whose worldview is defined ‘not simply through the optimistic eyes of those who think they are at the centre of the (social) system, but through the eyes of those who are pushed to the edges and who live their lives on the margins’. They are to be a symbol of the transformation that the Word of God offers to both the church and the community. In many ways, the deacon is to be a prophet and a destabilising presence, working within those systems that seek to maintain the status quo of the powerful and helping the church to recognise that God’s Word ‘does not leave one at rest in a safe place, but drives one outside to the other place where God dwells’. Within their person, and in the practice of their ministry, deacons point to the possibility of a different reality existing within God’s realm.

Deacons are interpreters of both the church and the wider community and part of their calling is to ‘highlight the questions and concerns that the present brings to bear in the ongoing life of tradition’. This means that an essential part of their calling is to live within the interpretive spaces so that together we may risk the tradition we are part of in order to move into the fuller, more fruitful possibilities emerging in front of us. Many in the church will see this as a risky endeavour as it ‘asks us to step outside our

52 Larry Miller uses the term ‘alternative peoplehood’ to underscore something of the otherness and solidarity which a messianic community is called to. This ‘alternative peoplehood’ is for the sake of the local faith community and for the sake of the wider world. Whilst not used by Miller specifically in relation to the diaconate it is, nonetheless, a theme that could well be picked up by the church as it seeks to understand the role that deacons could play within the formation of the church’s identity. See Larry Miller, ‘The Church as a Messianic Society: Creation and Instrument of Transfigured Mission’, in The Transfiguration of Mission: Biblical, Theological and Historical Foundations, ed. Wilbert Shenk (Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald, 1993): 138.


comfortable and ordered lives and experience a different reality’. For this reason many may resist this alternate direction that the ministry of Deacon calls forth within the life and witness of the church. Yet it is through encounter with this different reality that we learn something more about the identity of the church and the future into which we are all called.

Both the Report on Ministry and the Report on Ordination hold up this inescapable connection with the margins as being central to the ministry of Deacon. In a deliberate movement beyond the gathered community of faith deacons embody an ‘expression of solidarity with oppressed and marginalised people’ holding before the members of the congregation the needs of ‘the oppressed, suffering, the forgotten, the unlovely’. This is not a new direction for the Church as a concern for the marginalised is reiterated throughout Scripture. However it does seek to embody within a particular expression of ministry the long-held Christian conviction that Jesus had a preferential option for the poor, outcast and oppressed and the affirmation that the incarnation ‘expresses God’s particular solidarity with the voiceless and the powerless’ and is therefore good news for ‘those who are living on the edges of God’s household and [the] margins of today’s societies’.

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57 McRae, ‘Hope in Ministry’, 231.
58 ‘Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church’, 23.
60 This is not to suggest that other expressions of ministry within the Uniting Church do not also carry this responsibility.
This is a significant challenge as the conforming tendencies of much of western culture will frequently seek to distract the attention of the church from attending to the realities of its own social situation. Therefore understanding the contextual reality of ministry engagement is critical and we are reminded that social location ‘shapes, in central ways, the method of proclaiming the good news as well as the content of that message’. It is not merely attention to a generalised understanding of marginality that deacons are concerned with as the calling of the church is to engage in an intentional mission response emerging from the particularity of a given social location. This intentional mission response must involve a critical analysis of the social location in which ministry is undertaken and be open to the possibility of moving the church into a transformed understanding of where God is to be found and the future into which God call us.

Defining margins

Understanding the social and contextual particularity of marginality is important. Not only does it ensure that the reality of social location is taken seriously but it also becomes determinative for the manner in which mission engagement is undertaken. Most of us would be aware that there are a number of different ways of understanding marginality and we will all find ourselves in a variety of places of marginality at different points during our life. Therefore, defining marginality in absolute terms becomes problematic because identifying a margin assumes a centre and our response and understanding are often limited by matters of perception or experience. Our experience of location is never static and we know the reality of a ‘continuous journey

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to and from margins and centers\textsuperscript{64} as we engage with those around us. We are reminded also that there are multiple margins from which the centre can be challenged and transformed.\textsuperscript{65}

Margins can come about through a variety of reasons, including social, economic, cultural, gender and geographical realities. On a variety of levels margins pertain to individuals, communities, nationalities, races and religions and can develop through a number of circumstances, including choice or social stigma. Often we tend to talk about margins in pejorative terms, forgetting the richness of the alternative view that will come to us through encounter with difference.

Margins can also have double meanings. For instance, in Australia the bulk of the population live around the edges of the country and thus on the geographical margins of the continent. But it is here that they share in the centre by virtue of social and economic wealth and ready access to services. Conversely the centre of this country is often seen as being marginal in relation to climate, the productivity of the land and the social and economic location of its members, particularly the indigenous population who see this geographic centre as being at the heart of their identity. Many of those who live in the geographical centre know themselves to be amongst the most socially, economically and politically marginal people of the nation. Conversely, those who live geographically on the edge of the country share in most of the wealth, have access to the majority of services and seek to define the nature of life for all in this country.


\textsuperscript{65} Dharmaraj, ‘Women as Border-Crossing Agents’, 56.
based on their own identity and experiences. For many within the western world, becoming marginal is a choice freely made and it is easy to move between different modes of marginality. This is not the case for many of the people and situations where deacons are called to minister.

It is often suggested that the nature and heart of a society can be determined by the manner in which it treats its most vulnerable members. ‘So too the nature of … God’s people can be determined in large part by the manner in which it views the most marginal in the community of which it is a part, along with its own ability to be shaped by engagement with those on the margins’. We are to remember that not only did Jesus draw his disciples from the fringes of society, but also that these disciples were then commissioned to follow him to the margins. It was these marginal people and communities who would become the centre of God’s activity.

**Biblical and theological insights**

The theme of marginality runs throughout both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. In the Hebrew Scriptures the people of God are presented as a marginal people, called out to be an alternative people, to stand apart from the power structures

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66 For a very helpful discourse on the implications for this ‘centre and edge’ dynamic for the Australian church see Denham Grierson, *Conversations at the Edge of the Raft: Proclaiming, Liberating, Healing within Australian Society* (North Blackburn, Victoria: Collins Dove, 1993). In this small book, based on his Burns Lectures delivered at the University of Otago in New Zealand in 1992, Grierson explores the metaphor of a raft in order to offer a challenge to the church and suggests that Christians should be willing to place themselves at the ‘edge of social experience’ so that they are in a better position to ‘critique and evaluate current social practice and trends’ (back cover). See also a short article by Elaine Lindsay in, Elaine Lindsay, ‘Marginalizing the Centre (or Centring the Margin)’, in *Dangerous Memory: Feminist Theology through Story*, ed. Keryn Hassall (Clovelly West, NSW: Australian Feminist Theology Foundation, 1995), 68-79. Here Lindsay explores some of the implications for developing an alternative spirituality identity that takes account of ‘place’ within the experiences of some women in the Australia.


and the unjust social systems of the day. They were to remember themselves as being a ‘people of the exile’, an inclusive community formed and sustained by God. In this new community no-one was excluded and neighbourly love meant that attention to the needs of the weak was to be paramount. This is brought into sharp focus by the prophet Isaiah when he reminds the people of God of the relationship between their life as a worshipping community and the wider contextual questions of their social, political and economic responsibilities and entitlements:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
   to loose the bonds of injustice,
   to undo the thongs of the yoke,
   to let the oppressed go free,
   and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
   and bring the homeless poor into your house;
   when you see the naked, to cover them,
   and not to hide yourself from your own kin?    (Isaiah 58: 6-7)

This renewed community was mandated by God to ensure that distorted patterns of power would be broken down and to realise that they were to now embrace radically transformed patterns of social relationships and responsibilities.  

Attention to the social location of the margins was a message the early disciples were also asked to embrace. Jesus’ mission, and thus the mission of the disciples, extended beyond the boundaries of confining social and religious structures and expectations and embraced those who were considered least within the community. This is particularly highlighted in the passages surrounding the inauguration of Jesus’ ministry in Luke, in his association with women (e.g., Luke 7:36-50; Luke 8:1-3; John 4:7-30; Matthew 15: 21-28; Mark 7: 24-30), with tax collectors and those considered


\[70\] See my argument already outlined in: McRae, ‘Hope in Ministry’, 226-229.
to be on the outskirts of the community (e.g., Luke 19:1-10; Luke 10:25-37; Luke 14:1-24), with his concern for the ‘little ones’ (e.g., Matthew 18:1-14) and with the directive to care for the poor, the stranger and the prisoner (e.g., Matthew 25:31-46). Thus the experience of marginality, and attention to the needs of those whose lives were lived on the margins was to become formative for the people of God and provided a basis for the manner in which their life and faith was to be defined.\textsuperscript{71} In modern parlance this means taking particular account of the social location of engagement. Moreover, as Linford Stutzman points out, it was this deliberate identification with particular social groupings within his society which affected the way his ministry was perceived, the impact of his words, the way the Good News of the kingdom was communicated, to whom it appealed and to whom it sounded threatening\textsuperscript{72}

which was to be at the centre of the life of the emerging Christian community, providing the lens through which discipleship was to be viewed.\textsuperscript{73}

### 2.7 A theology for the diaconate: ecumenical influences

The French theologian Henri De Lubac has observed that ‘the twentieth century is destined to be seen as “the century of the church.”’\textsuperscript{74} Some in the worldwide diaconal community suggest that it can also be regarded as the century of ‘diakonia and ecumenism’.\textsuperscript{75} Birgitta Laghé, a deacon in the Church of Sweden, identifies that there is a growing awareness of the need to research the role that diaconal ministry plays

\textsuperscript{71} Christine D. Pohl, \textit{Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition} (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), 105.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 37.
within the life of the church. She further notes that, whilst there are a variety of understandings about the structural place of deacons within the various church traditions, there is now a new willingness to come to some mutual agreement about how the term *diakonia* can impact on our ‘understanding of what the basic essence of the church is’.\(^7\)

Movement towards a renewal of the understanding of the diaconate has been growing since the 1960s. By the 1980s and 1990s many denominations were either moving to a renewed form of diaconal ministry or examining what it might mean for both the order and exercise of ministry within their churches. Sven Erik Brodd, a priest in the Lutheran Church in Sweden, suggests that the diaconate is an ‘escalating phenomenon’.\(^7\) In the foreword to a recent publication from the United Methodist Church in the USA, the impact of this escalating phenomenon is affirmed in the following way:

> In all communions that have chosen to establish a permanent diaconate, emphasis has been exerted in interpreting the meaning and influence of the new orders and offices to the total ministry of the church … how the very nature of the diaconate can lead the Church in renewal.\(^8\)

This position is re-enforced by the work coming out of a variety of ecumenical conversations regarding the renewed diaconate where there is an emphasis on how the ministry of Deacon can help shape the church’s renewal within our own context.\(^9\)

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\(^7\) Laghé, “Diaconia”, 48.

\(^7\) Brodd, ‘An Escalating Phenomenon’, 12.


Much of the impetus for this within many of the Protestant Reformed denominations can be traced back to the World Council of Churches’ 1982 *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM) document, where it was observed that ‘today there is a strong tendency in many churches to restore the diaconate as an ordained ministry with its own dignity and meant to be exercised for life’. The BEM document goes on to affirm that

deacons represent to the church its calling as servant in the world. By struggling in Christ’s name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in the Church’s life.

There is now an attempt to express this renewal in terms of re-orienting diaconal ministry away from understanding service as something that is located within an individual charity response towards seeing the diaconate as an essential expression of the life of the whole church. The BEM document encouraged a theological and ecclesiological shift in thinking and approach in relation to the way in which the ministry of Deacon should be understood. Deacons were not to be seen as the ones to ‘do the charitable work of the church, rather to act as a focus for that of the whole people of God’. The church, as a community of faith, is to be the primary form of *diakonia*, rather than *diakonia* arising out of and being restricted in its understanding to the context of individual initiatives. Along with worship and witness, *diakonia* is to be seen as central to any understanding of church.

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80 ‘Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry’, 27.
81 ‘Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry’, 27.
Understanding the nature of the relationship between the function of the ministry of Deacon and that of diakonia as being a central component of what it means to be church is critical. James Barnett, a priest in the Episcopal Church in the USA, suggests that the renewal of a true diaconal ministry will inevitably enhance the other ministries of the church. He holds up the representative nature of the ministry as being at the heart of this belief when he affirms that deacons are ‘not ordained essentially in order that they may perform the distinctive functions of their order but to hold up diakonia as central to all Christian ministry’. Thus the issue is much more about identity, both for the church and for the ministry of the individual deacon concerned, than it is about a particular role being carried out, important as that is.

It is clear that the attention given to understanding more of what is at the heart of this representative ministry within recent ecumenical discussion has enriched this discussion, as has an honest appraisal of the differences in denominational ordering and understanding of this ministry. Through such a conversation we come to appreciate that much of the boundary-setting approach to determining who is authorised to do what, existing within many discussions about ordering of ministry, is counterproductive to the enabling of all expressions of Christian ministry. Rather, an approach which establishes that first and foremost diakonia is of the essence of the church enables us to move forward in a much more liberating fashion. It places an understanding of ministry and church within the context of mission and helps us understand more fully what is needed in order to give expression to that which God calls us all: to be an incarnational church which exists for others.

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2.8 Interpretations of diakonia in the church: A short word study

In order to develop a sustained approach to diakonia as an integral component of the life of the whole church it is necessary to look at the notion of diakonia apart from any understanding of it being contained only within a particular expression of ministry, such as the ministry of Deacon might suggest. Frank Hughes, an Episcopalian priest in the USA, suggests that it is romantic to draw any conclusions about a ministerial office based on a supposed ‘relationship between the diaconate and diaconal ministry using the semantic field diakonia/diakonos/diakoneo as found in the Bible’.  

He urges us to look behind the meanings of these words and the variety of ways in which they were used in the New Testament in order to ‘identify something of the diversity of images contained in diakonia so that we do not waste time trying to put the diaconate into the pigeonholes of the past, either from the nineteenth century, or for that matter, the first century’. Nonetheless, the Early Church understood some particular roles as pertaining to an office called deacon (e.g., 1 Timothy 3:8-13; Philippians 1:1) and it is clear that various functions associated with the verb diakonein were central to Jesus’ self understanding of ministry and his subsequent call on individual disciples and the wider community of faithful followers.

The Greek word diakonia and two of its cognate forms, the verb diakonein and the noun diakonos, together occur about one hundred times in the New Testament. They

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85 Ibid., 29.
86 I will use the transliterated Greek words throughout for ease of expression.
are generally translated into English by words such as ‘ministry’ or ‘service’ and refer broadly to the ministry of Jesus and what is to be at the heart of the work of his followers. They could also be used to variously describe ministers or servants within the church before the office of deacon was more formally designated.

Most of what we have come to understand about the meaning and function of diakonia comes to us through various writings of the New Testament. The Greek word diakoneo, meaning ‘to serve’, or literally, ‘to wait at table’, has a particular quality of indicating the loving service rendered to another. Whilst not used widely in the Old Testament, the term grows out of the Old Testament command of love for one’s neighbour and reminds us of many of the ethical commands found in the Hebrew religion (Exodus 3:7; Deuteronomy 15:7-23; Leviticus 19:18b: ‘But you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord’). Moreover, Jesus sees within the concept the attributes and approach which make a person his disciple. For example, Jesus’ response to the lawyer in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-33) and the parable of the great judgement (Matthew 25:31-46) serve to make it clear that loving God and loving neighbour were one and the same thing. In addition, Jesus’ teaching on table fellowship and his persistent practice of associating with those who were considered outsiders make clear where the focus of a disciple’s diakonia was to be found. Both diakonia and diakonos are used in the New Testament to denote the action of diakonein and the person who performs it.

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88 Collins, Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources, 3.
89 Olson, One Ministry Many Roles, 22-28.
In the pericope about the question of greatness in Luke 22:24-27 and Mark 10:35-45 Jesus reverses the expectations of what it means to serve and to be great. In the Lukan account he points to the reality that he is amongst them as servant (Luke 22:27) and is bringing about a new understanding in the pattern of human relationships. This is supremely clear in the footwashing incident recorded in John 13:1-15 and reiterated through the teaching in John 15:12-17. The disciples are expected to understand that they are to serve as Jesus serves, and further, to know that this service ultimately leads to the cross. What is more, their relationship with Jesus and others was to overturn accepted patterns of relationships in a way that transcended a master-servant interaction.

In Acts 6:2 diakonein suggests ‘to supervise the meal’ but it has a somewhat broader meaning than this. It embraces the concept of the provision for practical love. Martha’s care for her guest is described in this way in Luke 10:40, as is the care shown by Peter’s mother-in-law in Mark 1:31 (cf. Matthew 8:15; Luke 4:39). Here the activities described as diakonia are meant for the building up of the community, a similar meaning to that found in both Ephesians 4:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 12:4. We see this connection to the wellbeing of the community also in Acts 6:4 where the diakonia is intended to be understood as ministry, and ‘in the context of the whole sentence a ministry of the word (diakonia tou logou)’. In the diakonia entered into serves not only Christ, but also the whole Christian community and is to be oriented towards the gospel. Within this context diakonia can also mean the discharge

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of certain obligations within the community or can denote an apostolic office, as in 1 Corinthians 4:1 or Romans 16:1.\(^9\)

It is not easy to form an outline of the exact meaning of the *diakon* group of words and there is debate about the manner in which they should be used, either broadly within the life of the church, or more particularly to denote a particular expression of ministry within denominational church order. Martin Robra, a pastor with the Evangelical Church in Germany notes that the ‘biblical basis and the understanding and interpretation of diakonia were reduced in many respects as a result of historical developments in Europe at the time of the Reformation and during the nineteenth century’.\(^9\) Robra cites individual response to the poor and the rise of institutions of service as contributing factors here.\(^9\)

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\(^{92}\) Whilst there is debate about whether Phoebe should be referred to as a ‘deacon’ or a ‘deaconess’ it seems clear that she was trusted by Paul to be a significant leader within the Christian community at that time. In this sense the functions and what she represents for the church are more important than the debate about appropriate terminology used to describe her function.


The Roman Catholic scholar John Collins, considered to be the most influential interpreter of this central term in recent times, agrees and suggests *diakonia* is not an entirely happy word’.\(^9^5\) Collins advises caution about the manner in which it is used. One of the reasons for his caution lies in what could be seen as a tendency to flatten the various nuances found in the term and to equate it only with acts of lowly service, such as that extended to those less fortunate than yourself, or for it to be understood narrowly through particular expressions and experiences of denominational church order. He suggests that whilst the significant influence of the linguistic research that began to appear in Germany from the mid 1930s onwards\(^9^6\) served to enrich the themes and theological conceptualisations of this term, nonetheless it also distorted the manner in which the term was meant to be understood\(^9^7\) and limited the approach and scope of its interpretation.\(^9^8\) He suggests that an understanding of *diakonia* as expressed, for example, through a number of church orders such as that of the Kaiserswerth Deaconess Motherhouse movement\(^9^9\) contributed to this distortion.

**The Kaiserswerth influence**

It is worth making short comment about the Kaiserswerth Community of Deaconess Motherhouses, and the pioneering work of Theodor Fleidner, as the influence of their work and interpretation of service becomes significant in Collins’ critique of the use of the term *diakonia* and the manner in which deaconess ministry in particular has evolved since the end of the nineteenth century.

\(^9^5\) Collins, *Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources*, 4.
\(^9^7\) Collins, *Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources*, 5.
\(^9^8\) Ibid., 8.
\(^9^9\) A movement begun by Theodor Fliedner and his wife Fredericke in the Germany in the 1830’s. For a good overview of the impact of Theodor Fliedner and the Kaiserswerth communities, see Olson, *Deacons and Deaconesses*, especially 210-229.
The Kaiserswerth movement developed at a time when the nineteenth century saw the ‘rise of new institutions in response to the rapid social changes taking place’ and where alleviating the ‘misery of the poor masses was seen as a missionary task’, an activity which was often separated from acting for structural social change. Diakonia was understood to be expressed within the realm of loving service directed towards one’s fellow man or woman and took on a predominantly Christian charity model of engagement. Moreover it tended to be expressed through a model of ministry and service deemed to be appropriate for women to engage in at a time when they were excluded from broader leadership functions within the life of the church.

Whilst noting that ‘Fliedner shared many of the chauvinistic attitudes of his generation, and did not liberate women in the current sense of the term’, the American Lutheran scholar Gerald Christianson, provides a generally more positive reflection than Collins does on the role that the Kaiserswerth model of diakonia played during the difficult social period of the Industrial Revolution. He noted that Fliedner saw ‘little difference between serving Christ and serving the needy’ and that his understanding of diakonia was one of ‘direct engagement with, not ascetic withdrawal from, the world where care for the sick and suffering is a thankful response to Jesus’ own diaconia’. Moreover, suggests Christianson, Fliedner believed that the church had a responsibility to not ‘wait for people to come to church; the church must go to the people’.

100 Robra, ‘Theological and Biblical Reflection on Diakonia’, 277.
102 Ibid., 24.
103 Ibid., 25. Italics and spelling follow Christianson.
104 Ibid.
The Kaiserswerth model was to become very influential within Europe, and in Germany in particular, significantly defining the way in which diaconal ministry developed in the later part of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century. Many Deaconess Motherhouses across Germany were based on the Kaiserswerth model, as were other orders of deaconess ministry in the some of the Scandinavian countries and eventually in both Britain and North America.\textsuperscript{105}

The Kaiserswerth model existed as an order of ministry and opened up the possibility for women to be engaged in caring work within the life of the church. It attempted to revive what many then considered to be a ministry based on an ancient order of deaconesses believed reflected in scripture. Fliedner saw within this development an opportunity to involve women in charity and other areas ‘where he felt they had been wrongfully excluded from the work of the church’.\textsuperscript{106} The primary focus of the Kaiserswerth community was that of training women for ministry, particularly within the fields of nursing, teaching and some early expressions of social work, and became influential for those women engaged in ministry within the church.\textsuperscript{107}

There is no doubt that the Kaiserswerth Communities had significant impact on the manner in which diakonia and service has often been understood within the life of the church and influenced the development of some modern expressions of diaconal ministry. They opened the way for many women to find a more formal avenue for

\textsuperscript{105} See Olson, \textit{Deacons and Deaconesses}.  
\textsuperscript{106} Olson, \textit{One Ministry Many Roles}, 202.  
\textsuperscript{107} This was also true for other significant women during that time. For instance, whilst never officially joining the Kaiserswerth Motherhouse order, Florence Nightingale is said to have been heavily influenced by the work of the Fliedners in the development of her nursing profession. See Christianson, ‘Lutherans Face the Industrial Revolution’; Collins, \textit{Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources}; Olson, \textit{One Ministry Many Roles}. Elizabeth Fry’s pioneering work in the area of prison reform was also influenced by the Fliedners’ contribution. See, for example, McKee, ‘The Diaconate and Diaconia in the Western Church’, 55.
officially recognised ministry engagement than otherwise might have been possible. In this sense they were pioneers and we should celebrate the valuable role that they played in enabling the significant caring ministry undertaken at that time, and the ongoing impact such pioneering work has on our current understanding of ministry, and of *diakonia* in particular. However, it is certainly true that for many decades the interpretation of this ministry hindered the movement into a more rounded participation in ministry for many women within the life of the church, a distortion that the church is only now beginning to address and from which modern diaconal ministry expression continues to suffer. If the research of Collins can assist in the development of a properly focused and more nuanced understanding of *diakonia* then diaconal ministry within the life of the church will be richer for it.

**Collins’ contribution**

Drawing on the results of his research on the use of the *diakonein* group of words in both Christian and non-Christian sources, Collins concludes that to restrict their understanding to that of ‘lowly service’ or ‘servant’ does an injustice both to their meaning and to the way that ministry is currently understood within the church. Whilst not denying there are elements of this understanding in the interpretation of the word, he argues that understanding *diakonia* as being something that implies the notion of ‘agent’ or ‘emissary’ and ‘go-between’ would be a more accurate reflection

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109 Most of the Motherhouse Movement was focused particularly on the service ministry of women. There is also significant evidence to show that communities of men, or ‘brotherhouses’ (*Bruderhaus*), apart from those of the Roman Catholic male orders, existed at various times throughout the period of the Reformation and beyond. The ministry undertaken by these communities was similar in kind to those exercised by the women of the ‘motherhouses’ and was directed primarily at alleviating the suffering of the lower classes, thus taking on something of the charity and service model of the *diakonia* of the day. See Olson, *Deacons and Deaconesses*, 209.
of the way in which the term was used by the society of the time.\textsuperscript{110} Benjamin Hartley supports this understanding when he reflects that ‘the term\textit{ emissary} is gaining recognition as a complementary interpretation of the traditional “servant” designation for\textit{ diakonos} and related terms’.\textsuperscript{111} He reminds us that ‘Paul’s use of\textit{ diakonos} to refer to himself (1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 3:6; 6:4; 1:23) is one of the obvious pieces of evidence for a more nuanced understanding of the term’ and where ‘Paul emphasises his authority as God’s emissary, or\textit{ diakonos}.’\textsuperscript{112} Moreover, he suggests that ‘this does not negate the translation of\textit{ diakonos} as servant, but it helps to give a more complete understanding of the terms as they are used in the Bible’.\textsuperscript{113}

Anthony Gooley, a Roman Catholic deacon in Australia, takes the argument a little further in a short commentary on Acts 6:1-7, a reference which is often used to justify the office of deacon as a ministry of servanthood. In respect to what he calls the ‘servant myth’ Gooley argues that in the context of Acts 6:1-7 Luke does not use the title\textit{ diakonos} to describe any activity of charitable service in relation to the Seven. Rather, he suggests that ‘proclaiming the word, leading communities, representing communities and taking messages between communities and other forms of ministry are associated with those who are called\textit{ diakonos} in the New Testament’.\textsuperscript{114}


\textsuperscript{111} Hartley, ‘Deacons as Emissary-Servants’, 375. Hartley is here using some of the material presented at a Symposium of the North American Association for the Diaconate (NAAD) held in 1992, and in particular on the work of Taussig, ‘Diaconal Special Agents’ and Hughes, ‘\textit{Diakonos} and\textit{ Diakonia}’

\textsuperscript{112} Hartley, ‘Deacons as Emissary-Servants’, 375. Italics follow Hartley.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 375. Italics follow Hartley.

\textsuperscript{114} Gooley, ‘Deacons’, 4.
Birgitta Laghé, a deacon in the Church of Sweden, also agrees with Collins and suggests that this renewed interpretation leaves open the possibility of understanding ‘deacons’ as being able to communicate an important message by way of an authorisation, or acting as a mandate from or on ‘behalf of God or his authorised representatives.’ Laghé identifies this interpretation of ‘go-between’ or ‘emissary’ as reinforcing Jesus’ self-understanding and his commission of reconciliation of the world with God. She welcomes the contribution made by Collins and sees within it a necessary exploration ‘of what the term really means’ and as a correction regarding ‘a matter of definition’.

Collins has left us with the opportunity to engage in a healthy, if not ‘unsettling and intriguing’, exploration of what this term means for diaconal ministry within the life of the church, most particularly for the manner in which we might understand the diakonia of the church. In reflecting on the implications of Collins’ research for the diaconate in the United Methodist Church in the USA, Benjamin Hartley suggests that whilst not abandoning ‘ministries for the poor’ the diaconate’s identity is not to be defined in terms of social welfare roles alone. It is, he suggests, defined more by a relationship which ‘necessarily flows from the ecclesial nature of ministry itself’, one which is to be ‘more kerygmatic than caritative’ and which points ‘to a completely different set of Kingdom values that drastically reconfigure traditional notions of status’. Thus what becomes clear in any word study of the diakon group

116 Ibid., 54.
118 Collins, Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources, 259.
120 Ibid., 371.
121 Ibid., 368.
of words is that, notwithstanding Collins’ criticism of the manner in which service and ministry have come to be understood, *diakonia* must be identified as an essential mark of the church\(^\text{122}\) and remains ‘one of the dominant motifs in all Christian discipleship within the exercise of authority and understanding of ministry’.

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### 2.9 *Diakonia as an essential expression of church*

This renewed interest in *diakonia* and the ongoing ecumenical discussion about the nature of the church and its mandate for mission is resulting in a more liberated understanding of the role of the diaconate within various church structures. The World Council of Churches has been instrumental in this shift in understanding. It affirms that Christian *diakonia* is ‘rooted in the Gospel teaching according to which the love of God and neighbour are a direct consequence of faith’\(^\text{124}\) a position reflected in the Orthodox Churches’ understanding of *diakonia* as being a component of that divine liturgy which flows over into daily life as a result of our worship of God.\(^\text{125}\) Further, *diakonia* is ‘an expression of the unity of the Church as the Body of Christ’\(^\text{126}\) and is ‘an indispensable expression of that community’.\(^\text{127}\) Its witness and prophetic action is ‘therefore an essential element in the life and growth of the Church’.\(^\text{128}\)

Over the last twenty years or so there has been a convergence in ‘the understanding of *diakonia* (service to the poor, political action on behalf of justice, renewal through


\(^{123}\) Breward, ‘Bishops and Deacons’, 186.


\(^{125}\) Within the Orthodox Church this is often referred to as ‘the Liturgy after the Liturgy’. For a fuller treatment of this see Ion Bria, *The Liturgy after the Liturgy: Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective* (Geneva: WCC, 1996).

\(^{126}\) ‘Contemporary Understandings of Diakonia’, 13.

\(^{127}\) Ibid., 13.

\(^{128}\) Ibid., 14.
action) as consciously and intimately linked with *koinonia* (community, fundamental unity, the call of the church to be church’

129 a linking which suggests a ‘significant evolution in ecumenical thinking’. 130 This linking of *diakonia* with *koinonia* is at the heart of Brodd’s assertion that *diakonia* is an ‘indispensable element in ecclesiology and a necessary function of the Church of Christ’. 131 For Brodd it belongs to the essence of the church because as an embodied community of servants, the ‘church [itself] is *diakonia*’. 132 The Orthodox theologian Ion Bria puts this connection between *diakonia* and *koinonia* firmly within the context of the worship and mission of the church when he affirms that an ‘ecclesiology of communion’ is at the centre of the typology of the “liturgy after the liturgy”, and further, that the ‘ecclesiology of communion or koinonia is a critical principle for understanding the nature and mission of the church’. 133

Thus much of the ecumenical thinking regarding the modern diaconate now focuses on this ecclesial function of *diakonia*, and the ‘conscious linking of diakonia and koinonia’ 134 in a renewed attempt to affirm that those who are called to be deacons ‘embody a truth about the whole church and about all its ministries’. 135 Through their ministry deacons hold before both the church and the world ‘something about the nature of the Church as Christ’s body, becoming indeed a sign of what the Church is

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130 Ibid.
132 Ibid., 240.
135 ‘For Such a Time as This: A Renewed Diaconate’, 36.
called to be’\textsuperscript{136} and demonstrating that \textit{diakonia} is not a ‘means towards another end but [is] itself an essential dimension at the very heart of the church’s being as the body of Christ (2 Cor:8,9)’.\textsuperscript{137} As such the deacon embodies the incarnational and missional character of the whole church, as the report \textit{For Such a Time as This} suggests:

> A renewed … diaconate, operating as a catalyst for Christian discipleship, in the mission space between worship and the world, can help the church to become more incarnational. In worship the church gathers to receive and to celebrate its identity, to be renewed in the Spirit, and to be sent forth in the name of Christ and in the power of the same Spirit to bring God’s reconciling, healing grace to a world full of brokenness.\textsuperscript{138}

The implications of this connection between \textit{diakonia} and the mission of the church and the manner in which it is enhanced by the representative function of the ministry of Deacon, particularly within the Uniting Church in Australia, will be further explored in the following three chapters of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} Robra, ‘Theological and Biblical Reflection on Diakonia’, 278. Here Robra is reflecting on W.A. Visser’t Hooft’s contribution to a meeting of the WCC in New Delhi in 1961 where he called for a shift in how the mission of the church was to be understood. Robra identifies that for Visser’t Hooft the three interrelated manifestations of the church’s mission were \textit{kerygma} (preaching), \textit{koinonia} (sharing community/unity) and \textit{diakonia} (sharing and healing).
\textsuperscript{138} ‘For Such a Time as This: A Renewed Diaconate’, 30.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

3.1 Preliminary contextual comments

Because the Uniting Church describes the ministry of Deacon as a ministry that operates on the boundaries of both church and community, and frequently outside the institution and day to day functioning of the gathered faith community, the church is affirming that the diaconate is to find its true nature in places of marginality. Within this understanding of church, the ministry of Deacon is a ministry representing to the church something of the nature of this witness, and therefore where the church is to be found. This Research Project uses the experiences of Uniting Church deacons in order to explore how their ministry enhances the church’s understanding of its own diakonia.

The boundaries of this topic are set by the manner in which the Uniting Church has defined its understanding of the renewed diaconate. The research was limited to relevant expressions of this ministry operating within the Church since the processes for the formal renewal were completed at the end of 1992.\footnote{Whilst the decision to renew the diaconate was made at the 1991 meeting of the National Assembly it was not until the end of 1992 that all legal requirements had been put in place and the renewed expression of this ministry could proceed. The first ordinations and accreditations to this renewed ministry took place in Victoria in December 1992. Some existing deaconesses in Western Australia and Queensland had also been accredited as deacons. In February 1993 there was a national gathering in Melbourne of the newly ordained deacons and existing deaconesses culminating in a celebratory service where those deaconesses who felt called to the renewed diaconate were accredited as deacons. Some ministers of the Word who felt their calling was more consistent with that of the renewed diaconate were accredited as deacons soon after. See Fabb, ‘Into the Uniting Church’, 251.}
Whilst the research was aided by insights from the wider ecumenical church, particularly the international diaconal community, its conclusions relate specifically to the Uniting Church’s understanding of this ministry and the questions and challenges this ministry offers to the Church and its deacons. It explored how reflection on the ministry experiences of some deacons since the renewal of the diaconate have challenged and affirmed the manner in which we understand this ministry as an essential expression of the life and *diakonia* of the whole church.

### 3.2 Resources used

As well as some stories that deacons have told about their ministry there are a number of relevant Uniting Church documents essential for this research, including:

- The Basis of Union of the Uniting Church (in particular Paragraph 14 c which deals specifically with the possibility of a renewed diaconate in the Uniting Church).
- Report on Ministry in the Uniting Church, presented to the Sixth Assembly meeting (1991).
- Commission on Doctrine Report to the Seventh Assembly meeting (1994).

The international and ecumenical deacon communities influential in informing the research included the United Methodist Church in the USA, the Anglican Church in England, the Methodist Church of Great Britain and various dialogues between the Anglican and Lutheran communions, particularly in Britain and Sweden.

Although the Uniting Church, like many other denominations, has a long tradition of various expressions of diaconal ministry our contemporary expression of the ministry of Deacon is relatively new. Continuing challenges to define this ministry remain, as
do establishing those localised ministries that allow the voice of deacons to speak to the wider church. It is critical that sustained reflection on the practice of this ministry is undertaken so that the ministry of the whole church is enhanced.

3.3 Introduction to a methodology for research

The desire to engage in any form of research suggests there is something that has caught our interest and we want to ask questions about. Because I am a deacon and was looking at the experiences of deacons in ministry I inevitably bring some degree of bias and subjectivity to the research process. Therefore I chose to employ some of the principles of qualitative research methodologies that are multi-method in both focus and practice. This enabled me to use a variety of tools and approaches.

The research process relied primarily on a Grounded Theory approach and a Community-Development-Informed method of Theological Reflection that takes account of the interrelationship between Christian tradition, social context, culture and personal lived experience. These qualitative methods enabled me to confirm my present understanding of the place of diaconal ministry within the church and offer additional insights into the nature of this ministry as a result of the research. This multi-method approach also enabled me to use elements of both qualitative and

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quantitative research to flesh out insights and strengthen overall findings and analysis. This multi-method approach, or triangulation,\textsuperscript{141} works to ‘enhance understanding both by adding layers of information and by using one type of data to validate or refine another’.\textsuperscript{142} The social researcher Norman Denzin suggests that a basic feature of triangulation in qualitative research is the ‘combination of two or more different research strategies in the study of the same empirical units’.\textsuperscript{143} It leads to greater credibility of findings\textsuperscript{144} as multiple sources of data allow for the possible shortcomings of one method to be checked by the strengths in another. By ‘combining methods, observers can achieve the best of each while overcoming their unique deficiencies’.\textsuperscript{145} Triangulation in research technique simply asks that the researcher be ‘aware of the multiple ways in which phenomena may be interpreted’\textsuperscript{146} so that findings, analysis and subsequent conclusions may be enhanced.

Because the deacon community is diverse in terms of geographic and ministry placement location I believed that more than one method of gathering data was needed to ensure that individual differences within the deacon community could be respected.\textsuperscript{147} This enabled a more contextual analysis of the data putting ‘texts or people in context, thus providing a richer and far more accurate interpretation’\textsuperscript{148} of


\textsuperscript{143} Denzin, \textit{The Research Act}, 244.


\textsuperscript{145} Denzin, \textit{The Research Act}, 244.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 246.

\textsuperscript{147} Reinhartz, \textit{Feminist Methods}, 208.

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 213.
deacons’ understanding of their ministry regarding questions of the church and its mission. It allowed for the possibility of many facets of understanding to emerge, based on the variety of lenses deacons use to view their approach to ministry. This broader approach is consistent with Valerie Janesick’s suggestion that the term ‘crystallization’\(^49\) instead of triangulation may be more useful for those engaged in qualitative research. Using insights from Richardson,\(^50\) Janesick suggests that crystallisation ‘recognizes the many facets of any given approach to the social world as a fact of life’ and that ‘what we see when we view a crystal … depends on how we view it, how we hold it up to the light or not’\(^51\). This enables different pictures to emerge, suggesting that the interpretation of ministry insights and the value given to these insights do not all need to be consistent in order to carry legitimacy as ‘each picture yields a different picture and slice of reality’\(^52\).

**Relationship between theological reflection and qualitative research.**

Within this qualitative approach I found it helpful to engage in a process of theological reflection that took seriously the relationship between experience, culture, community, the impact of personal lived experience and the Christian tradition.

It is natural to ask ‘why’ about the nature of human existence and experience. Theological reflection therefore becomes an intentional and disciplined process where we allow ourselves to enter more fully into the experience, to notice new perspectives

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on life and faith and to leave ourselves open to the possibility of being ‘unbalanced’ by the process in order to be led into a new experience or understanding. In that sense theological reflection is a process of discovering where the ‘disturbing’ parables of life and faith intersect for us. Over recent years feminist and liberation theologians have highlighted the importance of what this process might mean for us. They invite us to look at the possibility of a process of theological reflection which deconstructs our present worldview, encouraging us to take risks and be surprised by the process, and in so doing question the manner in which we try to hold to any preconceived certainties about life and faith. It is a deconstruction that leads to a reconstruction of our understanding of who God is and how God is present within the world. Through this deconstruction-reconstruction cycle we discover different understandings of experience and find new truths in order to understand something more about what it means to be God’s people. Theological reflection is largely about forming a narrative around an experience in dialogue with a number of key parameters of the Christian tradition and different dimensions of our lived experience in order to discover more about God and God’s will and action in the world. At its best it leads to greater personal and communal action and insight.

In his book Living in the Margins Terry Veling offers helpful insights into how this may relate to any research seeking to construct meaning and theory as a result of reflection on lived experience. For Veling, part of the task of hermeneutics is to be

153 Killen and De-Beer, The Art of Theological Reflection, 10-12.
154 See, for example, Reinhart, Feminist Methods; and Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, eds., With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988), a publication which provides a series of essays from women theologians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The publication James R. Cochrane, Circles of Dignity: Community Wisdom and Theological Reflection (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress, 1999) shows how encounter with marginalised people and their ‘local wisdom’ can offer new insights on power, traditions and God, and can thus impact reflections on our ministry engagement.
engaged with a past and a present in order to shape a future. The past can be understood as ‘text’, that is, anything that claims our interpretive attention such as the written word, reflected experience, symbols, events, beliefs or practices. The present involves the ‘reading’ of these texts, written or otherwise, and a reading of our present reality. The future involves writing, or the act of constructing something new through our present reading of what is given in the past.\textsuperscript{155} This suggests that the researcher is engaged in a bi-focal phenomenological approach during which a person can reach ‘into themselves and others and draw forth meaning’\textsuperscript{156} and ‘make connections with the empirical realities around them and … their internal meanings’.\textsuperscript{157} It means that a hermeneutic of suspicion is employed in order to enhance the interpretive task required of the theologian who is concerned with the question of the nature and will of God in this time and place.

Reflection on both personal and practical ministry experience was an important component of the research. The research methodology assumed that because we bring much of ourselves and our encounter with the world when we engage in ministry, this will inevitably impact on the nature of our experience of that ministry and subsequent reflections on it. As this research was based on the reflections of deacons on their own ministry I looked for, and assumed, an ability on the part of the deacon to ‘bring the integrated understanding of a trained practical theologian, and an informed critique’\textsuperscript{158} to their reflections on their experience.\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{155} Veling, \textit{Living in the Margins}, 28.
\textsuperscript{156} Moore, \textit{Teaching from the Heart}, 93.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{159} This was a reasonable assumption because most deacons involved in the research would have recently been students at a Uniting Church Theological College where their Field Education Placements would have introduced them to a disciplined approach to a variety of methods of theological reflection.
Tools used for the research.

The key tools used for the research were those of a questionnaire and the development of a Focus Group.

A questionnaire was sent out to randomly selected Uniting Church deacons across the country. The responses enabled me to map something of the breadth of their experience and understanding of ministry. The Focus Group was made up of a locally selected group of deacons who were engaged in ministry, enabling me to use the tools of various methods of theological reflection as part of the process. In order to allow easy access to the Focus Group meetings the members of the Focus Group were selected from those involved in ministry within Melbourne. This meant that the voice of a number of deacons currently engaged in ministry in rural and remote areas was not heard within the Focus Group meetings. This was a disadvantage, but many of these voices were heard through responses to the questionnaires.

3.4 Questionnaire

I used information in the UCA Deacon Directory to determine the number and location of deacons in recognised placements. Returning a completed questionnaire indicated a willingness on the part of the respondent to take part in the research project, and gave permission to use the data contained in their responses for the

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They would have also been introduced to some current social analysis methodologies of reflection thus encouraging them to give appropriate attention to the voices which come from the margins, and would have thus been encouraged to reflect on any of their own life experiences to give added insight.

160 The use of a questionnaire is usually seen to be part of a quantitative approach to social research methodology. It is used here as part of a bi-focal approach, thus allowing insights emerging from various methods to enhance overall findings.

161 This Directory is a yearly publication and is freely available to members of the deacon community. The information in this Directory was up to date at the time the questionnaires were sent out in October 2003.
purpose of writing the thesis. There was opportunity within the questionnaire for deacons to reflect on all their placements and respond accordingly.

Deacons received questionnaires on a structured random selection process. The range of existing placements for deacons was categorized, with each placement assigned to one of the categories. These categories were:

- Frontier Services
- Presbytery/Synod/Assembly related placements
- Mission Outreach
- Agency
- Congregational based placements
- Chaplaincy

A further random selection process was employed for each of these categories, with selected deacons being sent a questionnaire. This ensured a targeting of as wide a range as possible of types of ministry placements. Some of these categories identified, such as Frontier Services, had only a few deacons within them and where this happened all deacons in the category received a questionnaire.

Questionnaires (Appendix One) were colour-coded according to the ministry category in order to aid the collation process. There was no difference in either the format or the questions asked with the different colours. An unnumbered self-addressed envelope was provided to encourage return. Envelopes were separated from the returned questionnaire and discarded before any coding or analysis was undertaken, thus ensuring that it was not be possible to easily identify any responding participant. However, because I am familiar with where most deacons are in placement it was not entirely possible for this process to be completely anonymous and it was sometimes
possible for me to know who was responding. In these cases I was careful not to impose any preconceived notions onto what was being said in the returned questionnaires.

Fifty questionnaires were sent out to deacons in Placements. As there were seventy deacons in recognised ministry placements as of October 2003, this represents coverage of 71% of deacons in placement at the time of the survey. Out of the fifty questionnaires sent out twenty-five were returned, giving an overall return rate of 50%. At the time of the survey the researcher was in placement in the Presbytery/Synod/Assembly ministry category and did not complete a questionnaire. Within the Frontier Services ministry category two deacons were in the process of moving placement during the time the questionnaires were to be completed and returned. Their personal circumstances contributed to their inability to fill out the questionnaire. In addition, one deacon in a Synod ministry category indicated that he was not able to fill out the questionnaire but was willing to make available some written material based on reflections he had developed during his time in ministry.

Structure of the questionnaire

In the introduction to the questionnaire I indicated that some of the questions would assume a working knowledge of the Report on Ministry presented to the 1991 Assembly, and the Report on Ordination and Ministry presented to the 1994 Assembly. This was a reasonable assumption given that all deacons responding would have attended National Diaconal Ministry Presessionals, National Continuing Education events for deacons or National Deacon Conferences where these reports
would have been discussed. Respondents were asked to contact the researcher if they needed additional copies of these documents.

The questionnaire was divided into three different sections with respondents being asked to answer all questions in all sections. The first two sections of the questionnaire were designed to elicit background information and initial interpretive responses to the ministry that deacons engaged in. These sections included questions such as describing the essential nature of the ministry placement, the main tasks undertaken within the placement and the manner in which the placement is seen within the overall structures of the church. Section One contained questions around a deacon’s placement and ministry experience since ordination. Deacons were asked to outline the location of their ministry by indicating whether their placement carried Presbytery, Synod or Assembly responsibilities or was with a Congregation, in Outreach Ministry, within an Agency, in Chaplaincy or within Frontier Services. They were asked to indicate where the lines of accountability were within their placement. Deacons were also asked whether they considered their placement to be located primarily within the structures of the institutional church or directed to ministry outside it, whether they were in a team ministry and what their responsibility was within the worshipping life of the church.

Section Two introduced some initial interpretative questions regarding ministry. This section asked deacons to respond from within their knowledge and understanding of recent documents of the Uniting Church regarding the renewed diaconate. In the light

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162 These events are held every two years, rotated around the different Synods (based on state boundaries) and all deacons are encouraged to attend. Deacon candidates are required to attend the Presessional/Intensive as part of their degree and ordinand course.
of their knowledge of these documents they were asked to outline how they understood their ministry relationship with the wider community, particularly as it related to some of the themes of ‘sign’, ‘kingdom’ and ‘ministry with the marginalised’, found in the *Report on Ministry*. Deacons were also asked to outline whether they believed their ministry was one which located them on the ‘margins’, and if so, how that was expressed. Another question asked here was that of the place and understanding of the sacraments within the practice of their ministry.

Section Three of the questionnaire was designed to elicit a more intentional hermeneutical response, including an invitation to comment on various challenges and possibilities for new directions within ministry placements. It also sought to explore some statements about deacons’ understanding of church and mission which underpin the practice of their ministry, along with any theological methodologies or images which might best describe approaches to ministry, for example, liberation, feminist, ‘orthodox’, evangelistic, missional, social analysis, pastoral, prophetic, servant, or other. In order to get more than a basic answer to these questions respondents were invited to explain the reasons for their choice based on their understanding of diaconal ministry and their own experiences in ministry.

The responses to questions relating to deacons’ understanding of mission and church, along with the images they found helpful in informing their ministry, were to be key indicators for the direction of the research providing the opportunity to move beyond simply a theoretical understanding of the ministry of Deacon. Significant within this section was an exploration of the specific ways deacons saw their ministry as a

ministry ‘on the margins’ and whether they understood themselves as operating primarily ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the institutional church. These questions were asking deacons to be more intentional and reflective in their responses.

This third section of the questionnaire also assessed what deacons perceived to be the understanding of the congregation or agency regarding their ministry. They were asked what impact they thought their ministry had on the congregation or agency’s understanding of its own mission. The concluding question then invited deacons to offer their thoughts on some of the challenges and possibilities for new directions for their ministry, and specifically for their dreams and hopes about how the ministry of Deacon might be further enhanced within the life of the Church.

The information gained from responses to this third section of the questionnaire helped with an exploration of some of the narrative and text surrounding deacon ministry. This enabled me to then highlight the importance of developing the theological, missiological and ecclesiological basis for the practice of the ministry, both for the Church and for deacons.
Response to questionnaire

The following table outlines the number of questionnaires sent and the return rate for each of the six different ministry placement categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministry Placement Category</th>
<th>Number of deacons in placement</th>
<th>Number of q’aires sent</th>
<th>Number of q’aires returned</th>
<th>% rate of returned q’aires</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frontier Services</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbytery/Synod/Assembly</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission Outreach</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregation</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaplaincy</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of responses from across the Synods varied. Ten deacons responded from the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, four each from the Synods of Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia and three from the Synod of New South Wales. Included in the numbers from the Synod of South Australia were responses from two deacons who had placements with UCA Partner Churches overseas. There was no response from any deacons in the Northern Synod (Northern Territory).

The difference in the number of responses from each of the Synods reflects the difference in numbers of deacons in placement in each of the Synods at the time the

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164 Synods in the Uniting Church in Australia are determined along state boundaries, with the exception of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania that is structured as the one Synod. The ACT is part of the Synod of New South Wales.
questionnaire was sent out.\textsuperscript{165} The Synod of Victoria and Tasmania has traditionally had the largest number of deacons in placement since the renewed Diaconate began. More questionnaires were sent to deacons in Victoria; therefore, there were more responses from this Synod.

\textit{Responses from the six ministry categories}

The identification of the six major ministry categories was intentional and covered the breadth of ministry placements of most deacons. Some of the placement categories overlapped and deacons could respond from within a different category if appropriate. This was particularly so for the chaplaincy and agency ministry categories. For instance, in some of the agencies deacons are asked to carry out ‘chaplaincy’ roles and they specifically identified their role as such. However, for the purposes of this research they were invited to respond out of the broader ministry category of the agency. Likewise, some deacons in congregations described their role as being that of outreach ministry. The identification into the different ministry categories was a judgement made by the researcher prior to questionnaires being sent out.

The responses from within these six categories covered a broad range of ministry experience (Appendix Two). The Frontier Services category elicited responses from deacons in the Synods of Victoria and Tasmania, and Western Australia. They represented four different Patrol ministries, including both four-wheel drive and aerial patrols. These deacons found themselves ministering in small congregations and to remote and isolated families and communities in Australia’s Outback.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{165} For an outline of the number of deacons in placement at the time the questionnaire was sent out, see ‘Review Report’, 10.}
The Presbytery, Synod and Assembly category had responses coming from the Synods of South Australia and Victoria and Tasmania and represented placements with UCA Partner Churches overseas and a Mental Health appointment.

In the Mission Outreach category responses came from deacons in the Synods of Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania and Western Australia. Here deacons were involved as a second agent in a congregation with specific outreach responsibilities, as a sole ministry agent working with a cluster of congregations in outreach work into a specific area of a large regional city and with the task of trying to establish ‘church’ for ‘non-churched’ people in a rapidly expanding growth corridor. This category also included responses from a deacon who was the co-ordinating minister of a team in a large city mission and another who carried the dual role of being a congregational minister and the chaplain to a drop-in centre catering for people living with mental illness.

The Agency category elicited responses from a prison chaplain, a deacon who described his role as being that of an agency minister to a large UCA Community Services agency, another who described her position as that of being a ‘deacon’ within a child and family services agency and another who was identified as a chaplain in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre. Responses in this category came from the Synods of Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria and Tasmania.

The type of ministry contexts identified within the category of Congregation covered roles in worship leadership and pastoral support, leadership of the congregation as the
sole agent, worship leadership and mission outreach, and minister of the congregation using community development skills in order to enhance mission outreach. These contexts covered both city and rural congregations and represented deacons from the Synods of Victoria and Tasmania, South Australia and New South Wales.

Responses in the Chaplaincy category came from the Synods of Queensland and Victoria and Tasmania and included deacons serving as chaplains in various Aged Care facilities and a General Hospital.

3.5 Coding and analysis of the questionnaire

The results of the questionnaire yielded basic information about the six different placement categories. All responses to key questions from each of the different placement categories were collated into a single document before being combined into an overall response.

Beyond a collation of the Background questions in Section One regarding placement locations the other responses were collated into two further categories representing Sections Two and Three of the questionnaire. The collated responses provided some basis for determining the questions and reflections the Focus Group might engage in and offered key insights into how theories about mission and church were developing from a reflection on experiences in ministry. The qualitative questions within the questionnaire, particularly from Section Three, were further coded line by line in order to identify key words or themes contained within the answers. This provided a further basis for determining the direction of the research beyond the initial questionnaire.
The themes from the returned questionnaires were put alongside the themes emerging from the Focus Group meetings. Given that the Focus Group meetings were continuing beyond the return date of the questionnaires I was able to check how these emerging themes might be consistent with the responses offered by members of the Focus Group.

The responses to the questionnaire gave basic information about the breadth of deacon ministry throughout the country and enabled me to begin building a picture of possible themes, experiences and reflections on ministry. Given that this renewed expression of the ministry of Deacon was relatively new, I expected that most of the deacons responding would have experienced only one, two or, at the most, three placements. I also expected to discover that a range of ministry experiences would be highlighted in the responses. This proved to be the case.

**A basis for diaconal ministry: understandings of mission and church**

At the heart of the questionnaire was an invitation for deacons to respond to two basic questions, being:

- What is the understanding of church that informs the practice of your ministry?
- What is the understanding of mission that informs the practice of your ministry?

Responses to these questions provided an essential basis for understanding the approach to and practice of ministry for deacons as they engaged in ministry. These
responses also linked with the question regarding the images that were most helpful in informing different approaches to ministry.

Mission

The findings indicated that the understanding of UCA deacons is that the church is a missional church called to share in God’s work in the world. They recognise that God is at work transforming the world into a community of love, justice and peace and that we are all invited to participate in this missio Dei. Most affirm that their calling as a deacon means that they have an intentional focus of concern for people outside the institutional church and that Christian witness is our daily responsibility expressed within the local context. They understood that their task is to walk alongside those who are most vulnerable within our communities, proclaiming the Good News of the gospel, befriending, offering support and care, making possible encounters of grace, and pointing to and naming the many ways God is already at work bringing wholeness and healing to a hurting world. Some of this is expressed in an understanding of hospitality wherein the forgotten people are brought into God’s banquet of love that is offered unconditionally.

The notion of the Incarnation as an embodied expression of the intimacy of God being present unconditionally in the lives of all people comes through very strongly in many responses, especially in those which affirm the importance of meeting people where they are, a willingness to walk alongside people with support and care, and of befriending and ‘showing the face of Christ in and through me’. Some responses underlined the importance of connecting people to the reality that they are loved by God and therefore offered the invitation of living life as abundantly as possible, both
physically and spiritually. Other respondents affirmed the evangelical nature of their ministry as being one of holding up the calling to witness, service and proclamation of the gospel in those acts of solidarity and care which point to the compassion of God experienced in real terms and in particular situations. There was awareness that mission is an ongoing process and that God is always drawing us into new territory, beckoning us beyond our own limited understandings and actions into a future defined by a resurrected Christ. For many respondents this meant being alert to the leading of the Spirit in ways that can help us discern where we need to be and, importantly, how we need to be there.

Most responses affirmed the expectation that a deacon’s ministry would have a primary focus outside the gathered body of faith and would be oriented towards the wider community. This meant that ministry is expressed through concern for God’s people in the ‘furthest and darkest places of our cities and isolation of our country’. Those who are on the margins are of particular concern for deacons as they seek to give expression to the ‘invitation of Christ to go into all the world’ and to gather people from the lanes and alleyways. One deacon described her\textsuperscript{166} ministry as being one of ‘working the jagged edges’. Another spoke of needing to be prepared to see the face of God in the people he is in ministry with in the following way: ‘When I sit down on the yard steps (seat) I must first look to see no-one has spat there … then I look up and find the image of God in the face of the person who may have done the spit’.

\textsuperscript{166} Throughout the Research Report, when offering a reflection on a deacon’s response a gender terminology will be used for ease of expression only. This is not intended to indicate the actual gender of the respondent.
There is an understanding that this outward-facing focus is also the calling of the whole church because the ministry that is being engaged in is for the sake of the gospel. Thus a deacon’s ministry is to give expression to the reality that the church can only be church if it understands itself as a church at mission, a church that participates in God’s *missio Dei*.

*Church*

The responses here highlighted a variety of understandings of what it means to be church. Most deacons see themselves fitting comfortably within an understanding of the church as the gathered community of faith, understood within a variety of denominational expressions. They would, nonetheless, understand that what identified church was not merely a structure or organisation but rather the people of God gathered together in order to worship God and to enter into both a personal and communal relationship with God. This can happen in a variety of ways. For some deacons it is broader than any congregational gathering as they seek to find the God who has gone before them into the scattered and isolated communities served by, for example Frontier Services. For others it is found within a community of people living with mental illness and who seek to engage with their ‘priest’ in an environment that is familiar and safe. Others find it among the homeless whose gathering place is the kerbside on a busy city street. For some there is tension involved in experiencing the church in a traditional or institutional way whilst at the same time exploring openings that might offer new ways into the future.

Deacons recognise that the church exists for others and is the body of Christ, showing the various ways God is working with and through others. There is both an inward and
outward direction to the church’s identity and most deacons indicated that they operate through these two modes of the church’s life, often on a daily basis. They affirm that the church is one of the primary vehicles whereby God’s ‘Good News’ of liberation is realised and where we are called to proclaim the gospel in both word and deed. Whilst most respondents affirmed that the church exists in a variety of expressions and was broader than being merely a congregation gathered for worship on a Sunday morning they nonetheless point to the importance of intentionality in any understanding of church. They affirmed that within any expression of church the worship of God was central, as the community gathered together in order to equip itself to go into the world to proclaim a loving, inclusive and just God reaching out to all people.

**Deacons and sacraments**

The place of the sacraments\(^\text{167}\) was integral for many deacons in their understanding of church because through the sacraments we celebrate God’s grace and affirm an understanding of Christ and his life and death being for all. Deacons believe that the ability to preside at the sacraments gives an extra dimension to how they engage within their ministry, supporting and strengthening the bringing together of word and deed. For those deacons who work in various agencies or places of isolation, such as the outback, prisons, mental health facilities, and even some hospitals or schools the ability to preside at the sacraments means that those who cannot gather with others

\(^{167}\) The Uniting Church recognises two sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist. At their ordination deacons within the Uniting Church are authorised to preside at the sacraments. This authority is given in order to free them to offer the sacraments within the context of their ministry with marginalised people, although it is not restricted to this context. See Protocols for Baptism and Holy Communion in ‘Uniting Church in Australia: Affirmations on Ordination (Approved by Eighth Assembly July 1997)’ (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia, 1998).
because of distance or other circumstance are connected with the wider Christian body.

For a deacon who works with people living with mental illness, creating a worship space where the sacraments can be shared is acknowledging that those on the margins are also part of the life of the wider community of faith. They are offered the opportunity to ‘commune with Christ and the whole church in a way that would otherwise not be possible’. In this way they can feel that even though they live in places that society often defines as marginal they are served by the church, connected to it and incorporated within it. One respondent expressed this by suggesting that within the context of her ministry with people living with mental illness the deacon is seen as the bearer and interpreter of ‘the word from Jesus (for) today’, thus underlining the incarnational nature of her ministry. Another deacon working in a similar situation identified the importance of the ‘angel gear’ and ‘God’s food’ for the community he works with, seeing within this image a form of security, belonging and hope for those people who choose to take part in the worship opportunities he offers, a belonging he believes they would not sense within the parameters of traditional congregational life.

For most deacons there is an integral connection between the church and the mission of God. It is not possible to have one without the other. We are called to be a church at mission, and with a concern for the poor and marginal. Moreover, suggested one respondent, ‘the gospel imperative calls us to serve as Christ served and to love all people without judgement’.
3.6 Collation of images

Within the general framework of an understanding of mission and church, an exploration of how deacons might ‘image’ their ministry became helpful. Through this process we begin to understand the wider narrative and text that different deacons use in order to further explain and give expression to their ministry.

To varying degrees most of us tend to identify with different labels, emphases or images in our approach to ministry. Often this is based on our ministry context, the manner in which our faith has been nurtured or even a particular theological ‘school’ that is important in our formation. Frequently these images will change depending on our context and life situation and they should not be seen as definitive markers for an approach to ministry for all time. They do, however, provide an indicator to how we see ourselves in ministry. In the questionnaire a variety of images were offered as possible aids to theological reflection and in order to reflect different approaches to ministry. The images offered were not intended to be the only ones relevant for deacons but were offered on the basis of a good working knowledge and experience of the ministry of various deacons. They reflected a number of images outlined in church documents regarding the ministry of Deacon,168 and suggested ministry as: liberation, feminist, missional, evangelical, social analysis, pastoral, ‘orthodox’, prophetic, servant, companion and ‘other.’ These images invariably overlap and it was recognised that respondents should be free to interpret them in different ways.

Respondents were invited to select up to four images, along with a sentence to explain their choice. Most selected four, but some only one, two, or three. Not all respondents

included an explanation for their choice. Respondents were also invited to offer another image not contained in the suggested list if these images did not reflect their experience or understanding. Images offered within this ‘other’ category included: unorthodox, grace, storyteller, political mystic, advocate, earthed, solidarity, hospitality, theologian, expansive theology. There was no expectation that the images offered were to be ranked in any order of importance. Appendix Four outlines the total number of images offered, along with a breakdown according to ministry category.

**Emerging images**

Recognising that this research is set within an exploration of mission and church from the experience of deacons in ministry the following section outlines the five major categories of images offered. These categories come under the headings of Companion, Servant, Liberator, Pastor and Prophet. They were determined by numerical response only, with no attempt being made to prioritise the categories in any way.

One of the limiting factors in asking for responses in this way is that not all people will interpret an offered word in the same way. For instance, during the analysis process it became obvious that there were limitations in the way these images had been presented. Some images were visually stronger than others, some were nouns whilst others were adjectives, and there was overlap in the way that the offered images were interpreted. However, during the analysis process it was often apparent that the same or a similar image was meant, as became clear through the explanations offered for words chosen. Therefore, some cross-referencing was applied where the intention of offered images was deemed as being similar. In order to underline this cross-
referencing I grouped the ‘other’ images within the five major categories identified. Some of the choices for these sub-groupings grow out of the explanations offered against the image, and some reflect my own judgement, with some appearing in more than one category. The table in Appendix Five sets out these five major image categories, along with the linked images for each.

Companion

In this section phrases such as ‘journeying alongside’, ‘being present with’ and ‘sharing in life together’ were common. So too was the notion that we are on a common journey with those we are in ministry with, a journey where we are often invited to break bread together. The significance of the Incarnation was identified as important here and respondents affirmed that they believed that because their ministry pointed to the reality of God becoming human in Christ we were all called to offer and receive as Christ did. Thus the linked images of ‘incarnational’, ‘hospitality’ and ‘solidarity’ were included within this category.

Servant

Within this section phrases such as ‘enabling’, ‘leading from within’, ‘serving others and not self’, ‘giving and receiving’ and ‘meeting the needs of the marginalised’ were offered to explain the choice of the servant image. These needs are not only physical but also spiritual and emotional needs. There was an awareness of the mutuality of ministry and the importance of both serving and of being served. The notion of ‘hospitality’ is a suggested linkage with this servant image.
Liberator

This was understood as enabling people to be free in a variety of ways, of pointing towards the liberation that Christ offers and of working towards justice for the oppressed. Among the reasons offered for this image were working towards a new freedom, the giving of hope when despair seems possible, and breaking bonds that oppress in order to see the liberating power of God. There were also the notions of encouraging growth towards wholeness, standing with and alongside the other, advocacy, identifying and hearing the unheard voices, empowering people and teaching about basic human rights. The linked images identified for this category were ‘feminist’, ‘solidarity’, ‘social analysis’ and ‘advocate’.

Pastor

Explanations for the choice of this image included a willingness to listen to the deeper issues of life, offering care in times of crisis, attending to the spiritual dimension of the lives of the people we are in ministry with through standing with people, offering friendship and hospitality, as well as giving something of your time and self to the other. The ability to sit with and allow people to be themselves was identified as important, as was the ability to help people understand and interpret their lives and discover their own connections to God. Again, the notion of the Incarnation as a reality which continues on in us figured strongly here, as did an awareness that within our ministry we are operating within a wider history of faith. There was an understanding that within our pastoral response we are to extend unconditional love to all we encounter. The subsequent images of ‘hospitality’, ‘companion’, ‘story-teller’,
‘grace’, ‘incarnational’, ‘orthodox’, and ‘solidarity’ are linked with this broader pastoral motif.

**Prophet**

The desire to look for a different operating paradigm figured strongly in the reasons offered for the choice of this image. So too did the importance of challenging injustice, of seeking an alternate vision and of being a voice to the church that highlights the various issues and needs regarding the place of the marginalised in both the church and the community. Respondents indicated that being able to critique and expose individual oppression that is backed by societal structures was an important component of their ministry and that it was their task to call the church to be an inclusive and just community. Other components of the prophetic image included identifying and hearing the unheard voices, pointing towards the Incarnation wherein we see the humanity of God, offering a ministry which empowers people and engaging in a ministry which is drawn to the homeless, the hungry and the poor in a variety of contexts. The linked images within this category include ‘social analysis’, ‘advocate’, ‘feminist’, ‘incarnation’, ‘solidarity’ and ‘earthed’.

**The place of images**

The images offered for the way that deacons understand their ministry are very helpful, providing a good indication of both the theological and practical underpinnings of ministry. It is clear that whilst some images carry more weight than others for different individuals and will thus influence their approach to ministry, most
deacons operate through a variety of images that have emerged as a result of an intentional reflection on their ministry context.

Whilst images can be very useful in informing an understanding of and approach to ministry, this research is largely dependent on how deacons’ understanding of both church and mission influence the manner in which these images are formed. As members of an ordained ministry this research indicates that UCA deacons are conscious of the responsibility to ensure that an appropriate understanding of ecclesiology and missiology undergirds the practice of their ministry. The interrelationship between these two theological concepts becomes critical to ensure a sound understanding of diaconal ministry that will serve us well as we move into the future. The influence that some of these images can have on our understanding of the ministry of Deacon will be further explored towards the end of Chapter Five of this thesis.

3.7 A ministry on the margins.

Through the Report on Ministry the Uniting Church affirmed that, amongst other things, deacons were called ‘to be especially aware of the places in the community where people are hurt, disadvantaged, oppressed, or marginalised and to be in ministry with them’ and ‘to serve in the manner of Christ alongside marginalised and impoverished people in solidarity with them’. Deacons were therefore asked in what ways this ‘ministry on the margins’ was an accurate description of their ministry. Responses varied, ranging from those deacons who spend the majority of their time working with people who are considered marginal within the community for whatever

reason — such as those with mental illness, prisoners and the homeless — to those deacons who, because of the nature of their placement, struggled to give what they felt was an authentic expression to this calling. This was particularly true for deacons who operated as the sole ministry agent in congregational-based ministry. However one deacon described her ministry as being marginal in the following way: ‘I live in a mining town which does not function like a ‘normal’ town. There are marginal issues relating to all that I do.’ This sort of response is also reflected in the answers from other deacons involved in Frontier Services ministry who spoke of the loneliness brought about through isolation and the paradox of geography whereby those who live in the defined geographical centre of the country become marginal to both the political and social landscape of the country.

Another deacon described ministry with the rural poor in Thailand as being with very marginalised people who are being forced to move further away from the ‘centre’ as Thailand becomes wealthier and more developed in a globalised world. The marginal nature of ministry was seen by this deacon to be very prophetic and critical to maintain for the sake of the integrity of diaconal ministry. Another deacon wrote of how a passion for working with those living on a ‘jagged edge’ has become a reality, partly due to political climate, a clash of cultures and an uncertain future for people in the Third World country where she is working. Another spoke of how he works away from the institutional church with people who have not had contact with the traditional church for many years, and yet another of how her ministry within a drop-in centre meant that she was working primarily with people who are generally socially isolated, either because of mental illness or some form of physical or intellectual disability.
Some deacons working in either church or community agencies saw their ministry as being marginal because they were not primarily in the church but rather working with people who were on the margins and for whom church or religion meant little, but where faith and the search for connection to community and a spiritual heart meant a lot. Others spoke of feeling ‘marginal’ within the institutional church where a search for new ways of doing things or the offering of a different paradigm placed them on the edge of what might be considered comfortable or the norm. Thus the expression ‘ministry on the margins’ could sometimes be used to describe the people whom deacons’ work with, or to describe how deacons see their ministry in relation to the institutional church. Here a couple of deacons expressed the thought that anything outside the gathered congregation was frequently seen to be on the margins. Therefore the challenge for these deacons was to help members of their congregations become more aware of the people ‘on the margins of their doorsteps’ and to know how to help the congregation respond.

Most deacons were drawn to the notion that their ministry is one of being ‘on the margins’ however that is understood. They also acknowledged, however, that there is a constant tension involved in meeting the necessary demands of the institutional church through attention to congregational life or an agency’s administration, along with recognising the importance of developing relationships with various community groups and being free to be present for people whose lives are lived in marginal places. Some deacons saw the reality of this tension as being very important and prophetic, especially if the insights gained from living in and working through this tension can help the church understand more of its own marginality. However others identified potential dangers, warning that if some of this tension, especially around the
place of the ministry of Deacon within the church, was not dealt with creatively and with an eye directed primarily towards the needs of those on the margins, it could ‘make us institutionalised and ineffective’.

3.8 Challenges for the future

At the end of the questionnaire deacons were asked how they would like to see the ministry of Deacon further developed within the UCA and what their ‘wish list’ was for future placements. The responses to these questions fell within six overall categories covering issues relating to the theology of the church and its mission, finance availability for ministry, appropriate placements for deacons, personal and professional identity issues for deacons and the diaconate, appropriate education and formation of deacon candidates and the education of the church as a whole, and responding to a ministry which is directed primarily to those on the margins. During the collation process it became obvious that some of the issues raised under one category could also be cross-referenced to another. These categories are outlined in Appendix Ten.

Finance

One of the major issues raised within this category was that of finding appropriate funding that would enable ministry placements to go beyond an initial three-year period. Many deacon placements rely on funding grants from Synods that are usually limited to three years in the first instance, with some not funded beyond this initial period of time. This has significant consequences for individual deacons who often find it difficult to live with the uncertainty that the ministry that they are undertaking
may not develop over a longer period of time. One respondent suggested that because most expressions of diaconal ministry are essentially relational in character the reality of the limitations of funding ‘means that you are pressured to “get runs on the board” in a limited time’, thus impacting on the effectiveness of this relational ministry. Often it is not until a deacon has been in the one placement for a significant period of time that the real impact of his or her ministry is realised and becomes effective for the church.

*Theology, church and mission*

Within this category deacons suggested that there needed to be a broader understanding of the ministry of Deacon, and that we needed to look beyond the ‘norm’ and take more risks so that deacons could minister in those areas where there is real marginalisation so that we can discover more about the nature of the God whom we worship. The relationship between the church and its mission was central within this category of response. One respondent suggested that her hope would be that the whole church would become truly diaconal as ‘this is the only way that the church can be viable’. Some deacons saw the need for their ministry to be connected closely to the life of the congregation in order that the church could be led into new forms of mission and thus further enable the ministry of the whole church. The danger identified here was that within the church placements processes deacons are often used to merely fill vacancies in congregations, a practice which runs the risk of ‘sustaining a Christendom model of doing things’ rather than freeing the deacon ‘to help take the church into a new era, into a new way of being’. Respondents called for more intentionality in the way ministry was undertaken within the life of the church and underlined that it was important that their ministry was to be ‘not simply servants
of the marginalised’ but rather one that ‘helped move the church into new forms of mission’. These themes were repeated within both the education and placements categories of responses.

Placements

The importance of intentionality in the way ministry is to be viewed and carried out was underlined within the placement category where it was suggested that because deacons are sometimes asked to fill ministry of the Word roles their distinctive diaconal calling could be compromised. Many responses affirmed the necessity of allowing deacons time to engage in ministry beyond the congregational model, to be free to respond to their core calling and to ‘focus in community and work with marginalised, rather than congregational ministry’. Some deacons wanted more work done on developing team ministries and recognised the importance of ‘greater opportunity for ministry of Word and ministry of Deacon mixes in teams in congregations so [that] the balance of functions is more truly represented’. Again, the issue of length of placement was significant within this category; time is needed for relationship to develop and to express the intentionality of the church’s mission.

Identity and formation

Issues of identity and placements are closely linked for deacons, as is the intentionality of the church in relation to its response to deacons in diaconal ministry. Some respondents pointed to the difficulty of living with the uncertainty regarding length of placements, and specifically about being able to find placements with the necessary support to allow scope to truly express their diaconal calling to work with
the marginalised. Whilst most deacons are comfortable with the notion of their ministry being focused on the margins, with some suggesting that they should ‘be recognised as outreach workers assisting the church in a difficult time’, their connection to the institutional life of the church was seen to be critical. This was to ensure that they were given the opportunity of being diaconal agents of the church, and so that the church could properly care for those deacons who ‘are tired and burnt by the edgy work’. There is a link here with the education and formation category as some deacons suggested that additional work needed to be done to ensure more appropriate and distinctive formation for the ministry and the need to educate the whole church about ‘what deacon ministry had to offer’. One respondent suggested that in her experience there was ‘still a stigma associated with being a deacon’ and that the ‘church needs more education about this ministry and is still unaware of the possibilities and uniqueness of the diaconate’.

Some conclusions

Many of the responses affirmed that ministry at the margins was an important way of defining a deacon’s ministry. Issues of identity, placements and understanding of mission featured within this category of response, with responses calling for deacons and the church to be courageous enough to take more risks and look beyond the norm, to focus ministry in community and among the marginalised, to be an alternate voice and to become more prophetic. One deacon suggested that it might now be time to consider ‘going down the “order” track’ as he thought this might help deacons be ‘more where the marginalised are and not be so caught up in structural issues within the church’. One deacon indicated that he wished to ‘be involved in ministry outside
[the] walls of the church building’ and another called for a ‘stronger emphasis on deacons working in alternate programs … [as the] missional focus of those on the edges is important at this time’.

These responses regarding future challenges are important within the overall context of this research. They draw on some of the current experiences of deacons in placement and tap into their future hopes regarding the ministry into which the church has called them. There are some challenges for the deacon community as a whole to take account of, especially around issues of accountability, support and the intentional focus of their ministry. There are also significant challenges for the church as it continues to work towards becoming a church that has at its heart a ‘diaconal nature’.170 Some of the issues alluded to in these categories also appeared in the discussions of members of the Focus Group and they will be further explored in Chapters Four, Five and Six of this thesis.

### 3.9 Focus Group

Seven deacons, apart from the researcher, participated in the Focus Group meetings. The Focus Group met on three separate occasions. Because of ministry and placement commitments not all members were able to attend all meetings although all members were provided with the transcripts of each meeting, my running analysis of the meetings, an outline of the questions (Appendix Three) for each session and any additional suggestions for further discussion within the group. Those who could not

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170 A recent publication coming out of the United Methodist tradition in the USA seeks to pick up on the image of a church with a ‘diaconal heart’ when it explores what it might mean for the church to take seriously the representative and bridging function of its diaconal ministry. The term used to describe the communal and justice oriented nature of diaconal ministry is a ‘deacon’s heart’. See, Crain and Seymour, A Deacon’s Heart.
attend meetings were encouraged to offer feedback and comments. Members of the Focus Group were asked to fill in and sign a Melbourne College of Divinity *Informed Consent Form* and were informed of the number of meetings and the manner in which the findings would be reported. Agreement was sought from the participants for the taping of the meetings and a written transcript was provided to all members for verification before it was used within the body of the research. A copy of the questions for discussion at the Focus Group meetings was made available to participants. These questions were designed to follow the pattern of the questions contained in the questionnaire, allowing a parallel process to be used, but also providing opportunity for members of the Focus Group to explore some of the questions in more depth. It also allowed for an easy comparison of any key themes emerging throughout the process.

The membership of the Focus Group was as representative as possible, coming from a variety of ministry engagements. These included chaplaincy and Synod appointments working with people with disabilities, community outreach ministry, mental health ministry, establishment of church in a new housing area, chaplaincy in a drug and alcohol agency, parish mission with focus on the homeless and people with mental illnesses, and congregational ministry. Some members of the Focus Group had also returned questionnaires.

This Focus Group was in place from the beginning of the research process and ran in parallel to any analysis of returned questionnaires. This analysis was shared for discussion and critique with the Focus Group which in turn suggested possibilities for future discussion and exploration of the topic. This process was based on my own
developing methodology of theological reflection as well as that of other members of the Focus Group, and took into account reflection on ministry experience from a variety of sectors, including cultural and community context, lived personal history and experience, and church tradition. Attention was given to developing a text around these reflections in order to give meaning and insight for future reflection and action. The social researcher Max Van Manen underlines the importance of giving attention to the place of lived experience in research when he suggests that ‘lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research’ as the aim of such research is ‘to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence’. He further suggests that this can allow for a certain amount of ‘bias’ as there is no neutral text because ‘we encode our experience of the world in order that we might experience it’. Thus I expected that members of the Focus Group would bring their own ‘text’ or story to their work within the group and would be free to offer differing insights on their ministry. This approach allowed for their stories, insights and bias to be acknowledged along with my own and became an important component of how any reflections of the de-centred nature of church and mission can be enhanced by an informed insight into diaconal practice.

Ongoing discussions with members of the Focus Group helped identify key issues that needed to be tackled and some of the boundaries required for the research itself. This included deciding what material was central to my current research project and what

172 Ibid.
173 Ibid., 185.
175 Kathy Charmaz points out that it is normal for Grounded Theorists to use the stories of their respondents in order to illustrate points in any developing theory as a result of the research. Ibid., 43.
was not. As I expected I ended up with more material than I could reasonably use and I needed to exercise some discernment about what was most helpful for immediate use. The criterion used here was that of what material most clearly focused questions of mission and church, with particular attention being paid to questions of the *diakonia* of the church. Members of the Focus Group were key contributors in this discerning process.

**Boundaries**

One of the boundaries I was aware of was the collegial relationship I already enjoyed with those deacons who were part of the Focus Group. I needed to take care that the environment of the Focus Group was such that participants felt they owed no particular loyalty to me as the researcher. Apart from being members of the wider deacon network none of the Focus Group members were in any relationship of accountability to me. Moreover, the ethos encouraged within the wider deacon network is that of critical reflection and independent thought. Meetings were conducted in an informal environment and members of the group were free to be as honest and frank in their discussions, critique and feedback as they wished.

**Collegial response and emerging themes**

As the process of the Focus Group developed members entered into a more detailed narrative and analysis, based on the results of any developing theories emerging from the work of the Focus Group and the results of the returned questionnaires. It was here that relevant data began to emerge as a result of joint analysis and discussions from within the group. Theological, missiological and ecclesiological themes and questions
associated with the practice of diaconal ministry began to emerge. These included: naming God’s presence within the local context, identifying the inclusive nature of the kingdom of God, listening to the stories of people and finding ways to engage the spiritual aspect of people’s lives, affirning the congregation as a prophetic community as it seeks alternative ways of being church, and working with and respecting difference. The process of ‘loitering with intent’, and identifying those places where intentional openings for ministry could be created, was seen to be critical in order to enable deacons to stand alongside those who were marginalised. Emphasis was placed on the importance of using social analysis as a tool within any process of theological reflection that sought to lead towards a reconnection of word and deed.

The analysis required within this component of the research was fairly detailed. It involved a careful reading of issues discussed in order to identify the themes and sub-themes emerging through the narrative of experience. These were categorised into common themes for ongoing reflection and analysis, along with anything that might ‘stand outside’ the more common themes emerging, and any ‘marginal’ themes suggesting alternative directions to explore. This process required a degree of objectivity in order to ensure that this coding was as free of personal bias as possible. Members of the Focus Group helped to ensure that some of this bias was identified.

However, because some of the narrative and interpretation of experience that emerged was similar to that of my own interpretation and experience of deacon ministry, it was not always possible to be entirely objective. Any research that seeks to give meaning to experience cannot be entirely free of subjectivity. Indeed, this subjectivity will
always be part of the data collected and will thus be an allowable component of a qualitative research methodology. The ‘truth’ that I, as the researcher, bring to the process is part of the overall ‘truth’ that comes with the whole; it becomes part of the overall ‘text’ with which I am working. A Grounded Theory approach assumes this as part of its method and understands that ‘the interpretive tradition relies on knowledge from the “inside.”’

Because I am part of the wider deacon community and am engaged in ministry, I have my own insights and understandings about what that ministry is about. I also bring my own insights into key mission questions relating to the ministry, and the sort of ecclesiological questions this ministry throws up for the wider church. All members of the Focus Group were part of this wider deacon community, and they too had their own understandings and presuppositions about the ministry. The Grounded Theory approach assumes some involvement and an intelligent knowledge of the field to be studied; it also assumes that there is the possibility of entry into a further field of knowledge still to be defined, and a depth yet to be discovered in order to construct a deeper meaning around deacons’ reflections on ministry and understanding of their calling. Thus their ability to engage at a depth meant that the insights that emerged would provide a rich basis for exploring the nature of mission and church from a Grounded Theory approach. It also meant that my own theories and insights would be tested throughout the process and I needed to be open to be led into a response that I had not foreseen in order to both challenge and deepen my own understanding.

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176 Ibid., 34.
177 Clark Moustakas, *Heuristic Research* (Newbury Park, California: Sage, 1990), 15. Moustakas terms this ‘inward looking process’ an important component of Heuristic Research. This ‘inward looking’ reflection on personal experience must be an integral component of any hermeneutical approach which seeks to locate us within a communal setting and with social responsibility. See also Warren R Lett, ‘Researching Experiential Self-Knowing’, *The Arts in Psychology* 25, no. 5 (1998): 331.
The Grounded Theory method also means that the researcher can have some degree of control over the direction and nature of analysis of material gathered. He or she is able to employ some of his or her own critical skills within this process of analysis, bringing into dialogue the gathered material and insights gained from reflection on experience and any other ‘text’ from the wider theological or sociological community. This text can be the ‘text’ of experience, but it could also be ‘text’ from other sources, for example, differing understandings of theology, ecclesiology, or missiology. Part of this wider ‘text’ has already been identified within Chapter Two, ‘The Ecclesial Context for the Ministry of Deacon’.

3.10 Summary of findings: Pointers for ministry

A number of biblical themes were identified as being helpful in understanding diaconal ministry. They offer an insight into some of the sources that deacons draw on within their reflection on their ministry. They included:

- The inside/outside scenarios (e.g., Luke 7:36-50) where the action of the outsider is valued and used by Jesus as a teaching tool directed at the disciples;
- Jesus’ encounter with Syrophoenician woman in Mark (Mark 7:24-30) where there is a reverse context for learning, and a deeper identity to be discovered;
- The motif of the Exodus, and the journey in the desert, using only what is necessary for the journey and continuing to move forward;
- The inclusive image of God, as presented in the creation narrative in Genesis 1, for example;
- The journey to the cross which ultimately leads to hope;
- The story of the ‘Good’ Samaritan where it is someone from the margins who offers the possibility of healing (Luke 10:29-37);
- The woman at the well (John 4:7-42);
- Jesus’ ministry with the ‘little ones’ (e.g. Matthew 25:31-46);
- A hospitality which is directed towards the least (Luke 14:1-24);
- The provision of life from meagre resources (1 Kings 17: Elijah and the widow of Zarephath);
- Jesus’ ministry as a marginal ministry (Luke 4:16 - 30);
- Jesus upsetting the moneylenders’ tables in the temple (Matthew 21:12; Mark 11:15; John 2:14-22);
• The Incarnation (John 1:1-18);
• The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12; Luke 6:20-26);
• The parable of the ‘Great Judgement’ (Matthew 25:31-46).

These are not the only biblical and theological themes identified; they are, however, consistent with some of those outlined for the ministry of Deacon in the Report on Ministry; themes such as having a concern for the ‘hurt, disadvantaged, oppressed, or marginalised and to be in ministry with them in ways which reflect the special concern of Jesus for them (Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Matthew 25:31-46)’,178 and that deacons are called to serve ‘in the manner of Christ alongside marginalised people in solidarity with them as they struggle for human dignity and justice (Isaiah 58:1-12; Isaiah 61:1-3; John 8:2-11; Hebrews 13:1-3)’.179 They are also consistent with some of the key images offered through responses in the questionnaire, such as companion, servant, liberator, pastor and prophet. Interestingly, few of the biblical images offered by members of the Focus Group picked up on any of the specific passages often offered as examples of ‘servanthood passages’ (e.g., John 13:1-11; Luke 22:24-27; and Mark 10:35 -45).

Key themes

A component of the ongoing analysis of the work of the Focus Group was to look for key theological themes regarding an understanding of diaconal ministry that emerged over the process of the three meetings. The themes and questions which emerged included giving attention to the notion of freedom and responsibility in our relationships with others, the importance of creating community as a response to the gospel message, the ability to identify those places where hope is possible in the midst

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179 Ibid.
of despair, searching for a fullness of life which attends to issues of the Spirit, and identifying those places where God is already present within life. They also included the desire to affirm the reality of the Incarnation, of holding up a concern for God’s ‘little ones’ and the outsiders, of listening for the voices which come from ‘the other,’ and of searching for a vision for the mission of the church that is both prophetic and holistic and which grows out of our worship. Identifying those places where the kingdom of God is present was also recognised as being important, along with recognising that *diakonia*, and the call to serve as Christ serves has to be central within any understanding of the church and its mission.

**An incarnational ministry**

Members of the Focus Group affirmed an approach to ministry that was incarnational in character and became a sign pointing towards the inclusive nature of God’s kingdom. They saw their ministry as a ministry of presence whereby those they encounter will see something of the nature of God through them. They affirmed an approach that broadened the understanding of church to include an intentional focus outside the gathered community of faith, and an understanding of mission expressed through helping people name the God encounters they had in everyday life. They identified that part of the task of the deacon is to name those places where God is already present rather than assuming that it is necessary to ‘take God out there’ and to recognise that ‘God accepts everyone regardless of where they sit in relation to the church or wider society’. Thus the challenge becomes a personal one, because God is a personal and inclusive God. This means that mission is essentially relational in character with ‘people often moving towards or away from the church because of who
we are and the nature of the relationship established’. Some saw the challenge here as being in a position to help people move to another place through integrity of words, action and belief and to understand that even though people ‘may have difficulty with the church and its structures they do not necessarily have difficulty understanding God’. For one deacon this meant that she often found herself ‘sitting in the gutter talking philosophy and theology with anyone who wants to enter into it’.

* A ministry of mission

Some members of the Focus Group expressed the opinion that even though the Basis of Union puts us firmly within the context of a missional church¹⁸⁰ ‘we still tend to live with a congregational understanding of church rather than a missional understanding of church’. This was expressed as a cause of frustration for some as they felt they were often put in a position of having to defend their more outward-focused understanding of church. One deacon named as a ‘sin’ what he experienced as the distraction of believing that his ministry is failing if new people were not coming into the church as a result of his engagement with people in the wider community. Within the context of a missional understanding of church he saw this as a denial of the gospel that distracted from an authentic engagement with people. One deacon connected this sense of frustration and denial with what she had learned through her relationship with people who live with some form of addiction. She thus wondered whether we also have become too addicted to a particular expression of congregational life, to a certain way of being church, or of living within community and understanding culture and cultural norms.

Members of the Focus Group identified as important the task of listening to those who live life on the margins — listening in order that the church might hear the truth that comes from the margins. One deacon described this as being life-giving. She said, ‘those who are on the outside give me life’. She described the way that through her ministry with people on the margins she had discovered another side to life and to the church: ‘there is another side, and I’ve been dragged to this other side’.

Some deacons expressed an understanding of their ministry in prophetic terms and saw their task as that of calling both the church and the community into a new way of doing things or into an alternative reality. For a deacon working with a Board of Governance for a church agency, the task was that of prophet and being the conscience of the Board as it did its work. This prophetic dimension of the ministry was also expressed in helping the church to dream dreams and have new visions that would enable it to move into a future of hope.

The ecclesial nature of diaconal ministry was affirmed by members of the Focus Group who believed that, even though there were times in their ministry when it was not always helpful to be seen to be part of the church, nonetheless everything they were doing in the community was because they were an integral part of a community of faith. Moreover this community of faith was one that had called them into that expression of ministry thus giving permission and providing some authenticity for engagement in this outward-focused way.
Members of the Focus Group also discussed the impact of the church’s terminology used to describe their ministry. Some saw no difficulty in describing themselves as deacons\textsuperscript{181} within the context of their ministry with those who are not part of the church. However others suggested that the term was essentially an ecclesial one and, whilst it made sense within the context of the structures and the business of the church, it often made little sense for those they were in ministry with and who had no church background. Within this context some of the deacons tended to use the more general terms of minister\textsuperscript{182} or chaplain in order to name the category of their involvement within the non-church sector. One deacon suggested that whilst the actual title deacon was not overly important to him, the nature of the ministry that deacons engaged in was of critical importance and said that ‘it wouldn’t worry me if they took away the title deacon but it would worry me if they took away the input to ministry that forms deacons’. This deacon identified the function of the ministry of diakonia within the life of the church as being more important than the terminology. However another deacon believed that the title was very important because ‘the title liberates you to “be” the ministry you feel called to in a church which is imperfect’ and ‘at this point in our history we need those structures and those definitions’. Yet another, whose ministry involved working within a congregation, believed that the title deacon pointed to personal and ecclesial identity issues and the explicit focus of diaconal ministry and said that ‘I am willing to more firmly grab hold of being a

\textsuperscript{181} The ‘naming’ of ministry is for the sake of the church and not so much for the people deacons are in ministry with, even though in the naming of diaconal ministry we identify a particular function, both for the church and of ministry.

\textsuperscript{182} This is consistent with Uniting Church usage where the general term ‘minister’ is used to refer to those who are either deacons or ministers of the Word.
deacon, otherwise you get sucked into just doing the operation of the ministry of the Word on Sunday … and I won’t be a deacon any more’.

All members of the Focus Group believed that there were some unfortunate connotations with the word ‘servant’ being used in relation to their ministry. Most unease centred on the manner in which this term has been associated with subservience and the way some sections of the church had tended to dismiss the importance of the ministry of deaconesses in the past. Thus there was a strong affirmation for upholding the importance of the function of diakonia within the life and mission of the church at this time, whilst at the same time questioning some of the ‘baggage’ that surrounded the terminology used to describe it. One deacon indicated that it was because of the ministry of some former deaconesses within the Uniting Church that he felt called to the diaconate. He then told of the pain he felt when some others within the church ridiculed their ministry as being merely one of humble servanthood and then diminished his own calling to the diaconate. With this sort of response, it is understandable that few of the traditional servanthood passages were offered by members of the Focus Group to image their ministry.

**A ministry of presence**

Within the discussion of the Focus Group there were a number of quotable quotes that tended to sum up much of the ministry experiences for those present. These included an affirmation that diaconal ministry is very much about working the gaps and finding the openings where ministry becomes possible. It is also about being a companion and loitering with intent in order that these gaps can be identified. The importance of this
ministry of presence and the patience needed in order to engage in it was expressed as follows: ‘Because you are there then and you are there again tomorrow, it allows something to happen’. The patience required to give proper expression to this ‘being of ministry’ is not always easy and frequently the institution of the church does not allow sufficient time for this type of engagement in ministry to run its proper course. Often this is reflected in the time limitations of placements imposed by budgetary constraints. A number of deacons identified themselves as being seen to be ‘the God-person who comes to this place’ and one spoke of frequent encounters where she is asked: ‘So, what’s the news from Jesus today?’. To the affirmation that deacons are to be in ministry on the margins and where everyday life is lived, one deacon responded with: ‘Well, there’s lots of everyday world in St. Kilda!’, thus picking up on the notion expressed by Dickinson that ‘diakonia also requires struggles at the grass roots with real communities of people in their everyday lives’.183 Members of the Focus Group affirmed that they saw their ministry very much in terms of ‘holding the sign of the kingdom’ and that they truly were called by the church ‘to be, along with the scattered members of the congregation, a sign of the presence of God in the everyday world’.184

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CHAPTER FOUR
THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSION

4.1 Introduction: a foundation for ministry

The Swedish theologian Lars Lindström has cautioned that all our attempts to speak about *diakonia* ‘must be inspired by Christian theology’.\(^{185}\) Moreover, this theology must be such that it can undergird ‘every aspect of diaconia’,\(^{186}\) be an inspiration for the diaconate and be easily understood and recognised as such by those who engage in diaconal work.\(^{187}\) Lindström further suggests that our diaconal theology is to be understood in the ‘light of the incarnation’\(^{188}\) and lead us to recognise ‘God’s actions in the events around us in society, in that part of history in which we live, in nature and in the Church’.\(^{189}\) Thus it is grounded in an understanding of the mission of the church. When asked their understanding of either church or mission deacons inevitably focused on an understanding based on their experiences of face-to-face engagement in ministry. Many of their responses have already been outlined in Chapter Three of this thesis. It is important, therefore, to outline an understanding of mission and church that makes sense for deacons and for the manner in which the church understands this ministry. This chapter explores some dimensions of the relationship between the church and its mission and how that might then provide an

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\(^{186}\) Ibid., 32.

\(^{187}\) Ibid.

\(^{188}\) Ibid., 43.

\(^{189}\) Ibid.
appropriate foundation in order to draw conclusions about the de-centred nature of diaconal ministry.

In a small book published twenty years ago Charles Hill made the following statement about the church: ‘It is, after all, a multicoloured reality, this mystery of the church; the diamond needs viewing from one angle and another if we are to appreciate its richness’.190 One of the gifts which diaconal ministry brings to the life of the church is that of a challenge to view the church from a number of different angles. Through their work with marginalised people deacons remind the church that it is found in a number of different places and forms. Whilst we may be tempted to operate only within a particular understanding of denominational life and expression, deacons, through their ministry, remind us that God’s church is found in a myriad of places and amongst the least likely people. It is both institution and community, and is expressed in a variety of forms within our day-to-day engagement in people’s lives, an engagement that will frequently ‘de-centre’ us, taking us to the margins of life.

In order to explore how deacons might help us understand something more about the richness of this ‘multicoloured reality’ it is important to be clear about the nature of the church and the symbiotic relationship between the church and its mission. This chapter will outline some recent theological perspectives on images of the church, the importance of context and location in mission and the importance of diakonia in the church’s mission identity. It will become clear how these recent directions inform the comments of the deacons surveyed during this research.

190 Hill, Mystery of Life, 69.
4.2 A community of God

For at least the last six decades discussion about the nature and theology of the church has been high on the agenda of most Christian denominations. This is evidenced, for instance, by the large number of publications and study documents on church and ministry emanating from the World Council of Churches, particularly since the Vancouver Assembly in 1983. In addition, the early to mid 1960s and the Second Vatican Council signalled a time of redefinition for the Roman Catholic community with respect to some important statements about church and ministry. Whilst this exploration of the nature of the church was important for the Roman Catholic tradition, it was equally so for the Protestant Reformed Church in the variety of its expressions.

Attention to the manner in which we understand our identity as church, in both the Reformed and Roman Catholic traditions, has resulted in a number of helpful publications by various authors, for example, Jürgen Moltmann, Edward Schillebeeckx, Avery Dulles, Raymond Brown, Paul Minear, Leonardo Boff, Hans Kung, Yves Congar, José Comblin and others. Inevitably,
many of these studies focused on a theology of church as it relates to ministry and the church’s mission in the world. For instance, at Vatican II the term ‘people of God’ was used as a central metaphor to describe an understanding of the church. The Uniting Church also used ‘the people of God’ metaphor in its *Basis of Union* (Paragraph 18) with the implications of this metaphor reflected in explorations into the nature of ministry in both the 1991 and 1994 *Reports*.

**Imaging the church**

There is no one biblical understanding of the church, just as there is no one image or symbol which captures the different dimensions of the church’s life. In the New Testament the term *ekklesia* is used to refer to a ‘unique and transformed way of being in human relationship with God and with other persons’. Various scholars, such as

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203 ‘Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church’.
Avery Dulles,²⁰⁵ Paul Minear²⁰⁶ and José Comblin,²⁰⁷ have suggested different images and motifs in an attempt to identify what this relationship might mean. These images include understanding the church as the Body of Christ, the people of God, a servant community, a sacrament, a mystic communion and a community of the faithful. ²⁰⁸

Some of these images of church are also identified by deacons as being important in informing how they understand the practice of their own ministry. Some spoke of the church as being ‘the community of God gathered in any place’, or as being ‘the body of Christ, with God working through others’. The Report on Ordination speaks of the gathered and scattered nature of church.²⁰⁹ This is an image that was also identified as important by some deacons when they spoke of the church as being ‘where people are gathered whether that be out in the market place or in a building built specifically for the worship of God’. A deacon whose ministry as a Patrol Minister with Frontier Services means that she works in some of the most isolated parts of the country, experiences the church as the people of God ‘gathered and scattered … my ministry is to the scattered church who rarely have the opportunity to gather, to those struggling with all kinds of issues, of spirituality and God and life’. This is something of what is intended in the Report on Ordination when it affirms that ‘church and ministry are given in and with each other’, which is ‘a parallel … with God’s being-in-community, which is apostolic in both form and content. That is, it is outward-directed, reconciling

²⁰⁵ Dulles, Models.
²⁰⁶ Minear, Images of the Church.
²⁰⁷ Comblin, People of God.
²⁰⁸ See also Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004). In this publication Bevans and Schroeder outline some of the history of the mission of the church by tracing its missionary movements from the early church to the present time.
²⁰⁹ ‘Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church’, 22-26.
and gathering, and expanding and raising up new communities in the unlikeliest places and amongst the most unlikely people’.  

The Report on Ordination locates this activity within an understanding of the Trinitarian nature of God and expresses it in the following way:

In the economy of salvation this character of God’s life reveals itself in apostolic form: the Father sends the Son and the Spirit, who then return to the Father bringing the divine mission to completion (as in John 14, 17). This apostolic character of the Triune God can be seen in terms of a “double movement” of going out and coming in, of dispersing and gathering.

This, suggests the Report, ‘provides the essential backdrop for understanding the nature and dynamic of … leadership in the Christian community’.

The reason for the church’s existence as identified through some of these images was of critical importance for many deacon respondents when they talked of the church as being the community of God called to proclaim the gospel in both word and deed, a community which comes together to worship God and equip itself to go out into the world to proclaim a loving, inclusive and just God reaching out to all people.

Recognising that the church can exist in a variety of forms and locations meant that for some deacons it was easier to talk about what the church is not. One deacon suggested that the church is not about structures, not the organization, it is not the things we worry about which are outside the call of God. It is to love God, love neighbour, and love self! It is people gathering together in their struggle to understand a little more of the God we worship and their personal and corporate relationship with God.

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210 Ibid., 11.
211 Ibid., 10.
212 Ibid.
In the context of their ministry deacons come to discover that ‘within our life together we see God and know that the kingdom is near’.

**Images of church revealed in its ministry**

The use of images in order to try to capture something of the different dimensions of the church is helpful. We are reminded that images are immensely important for the life of the church and come to particular prominence within our communal worship experience.

Images can come and go as situations and human experiences change, but they can also take on a particular power and help us appreciate a greater self-understanding of the mysteries of the life of the church to which the gospel calls us. The importance is that whilst no one image captures the totality of what the church is they all speak of a single reality and their purpose is to point beyond the image to something else that is of more infinite value, that is, the kingdom of God. Minear is correct to remind us that ‘image after image points beyond itself to a realm in which God and Jesus Christ are at work’ and that ‘the church is everywhere anchored in the reality of God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ’.213

Therefore the variety of images offered by deacons in order to try to talk about the manner in which they view their ministry can help us understand the different dimensions of the church. Many of the images offered by deacons through this research echo some of the insights on the church already offered by a variety of scholars. They also affirm something of the multicoloured reality Charles Hill speaks

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of to describe the church and provide helpful insights into a diversity of forms of ministry engagement where we catch a glimpse of the incarnated reality of the church’s expression. Some of the major images offered by deacons, such as companion, servant, liberator, pastor and prophet are key characteristics of the life of the church. In exploring what is offered by way of explanation in each of these images we can appreciate something of the manner in which a number of deacons understand their calling in relation to the life and expression of the church.

The church in a variety of forms

The church exists under the unity of Christ. This means that whilst there may be a variety of images used to describe the church across denominational boundaries, there must be agreement that for the church to be truly church it is to understand itself as belonging to the one holy, catholic and apostolic church. Of course, different traditions will understand this in different ways, and we are all too aware that to make this statement does not necessarily lead to unity, nor common agreement as to what the one holy, catholic and apostolic church means. Nonetheless, the church commits itself to seeking ongoing unity under the Word of God that continually calls it beyond itself.214 This unity remains one of the challenges of ongoing ecumenical dialogue and relationship and means, therefore, that no tradition or denomination ought to claim to be the ‘true church’. Neither can we assume that the word ‘church’ carries the same meaning for all people.215

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214 Dutney, Where Did the Joy Come From?, 23.
215 See Thomas M. Thangaraj, The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1999), 36-38. Thangaraj uses the examples of feminist theologians who frequently challenge a perceived common understanding of the language of ‘church’ and suggests that in an attempt to move away from patriarchal notions and practices of the church, many theologians prefer to use the terminology ‘ecclesial communities’, or ‘ecclesial practices’ to refer to the church.
It is thus inevitable that the church will take on different forms in different places in order to respond to what God calls us to within differing local contexts. This will be one of the reasons why a deacon working in the inner city will be led to affirm that the church is one of the primary vehicles whereby God’s ‘Good News’ of liberation is realised and where she can be with people who are unafraid to share their suffering and can work with them to find meaning within God’s activity in their lives. The acknowledgement that the church is ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic’ affirms that it is Christ who gathers his church, and further, that ‘the unity of the church is not primarily the unity of her members, but the unity of Christ who acts upon them all, in all places and at all times’. Moreover, it is to be the church as a community of reconciliation that is to share in the mission of Christ, ‘bringing to light God’s new community as the realm where God’s justice and peace should be evident, built upon Jesus Christ, in the Spirit (Eph.2:11-22)’. This calling of the church is to become manifest in daily life in order to serve ‘the expansion (“building up”) of God’s community of love’.

**Church as sign of the kingdom: An incarnated community**

Central within any understanding of church is the Incarnation: God’s word and action embodied for the sake of human community and the whole created order. Thus God’s

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Reflecting on his background of growing up in India he further notes that within a multireligious and multicultural world community the word ‘church’ has often been seen as divisive and non-inclusive.


217 ‘Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church’, 11.

218 Ibid.
mission is at the heart of the church’s identity. The church claims its very existence ‘from Christ’s messianic mission and the eschatological gift of the Spirit’. Whilst the church lives in the present and must take form within the local context, it is this future orientation that defines its life. It is to encompass within its life essential elements of what it means for the whole of creation to live under the coming reign of God. The church is therefore both the body of Christ and the community of the Holy Spirit, living within the present and anticipating the future into which God continues to call it. It affirms that it is a creation in which both Word and Spirit are active and its task is to point to the message of Jesus Christ, a message that is transformative and will always call for response. It is this understanding that will lead a deacon working in an outreach ministry to affirm that ‘the church exists not only for ourselves, but for others, and that because it is called into mission we are enthused and charged by the gospel imperative to serve and love all people without judgement’ and becomes an invitation to ‘offer a new way into the future’. Moreover, this invitation is extended to all people, regardless of gender or social standing, so that they may ‘be transformed by the end that has already made itself present’220 and has thus opened up new possibilities for life.

One of the key images for the life of the church is that of being a ‘sign’ of the kingdom of God. This does not mean that we can simply equate the church with being the kingdom of God221 for we know that the church is made up of individuals who constantly fall short of what it means to live fully in the image of God. Rather, the church exists, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the coming kingdom and

219 Moltmann, Church in the Power, 339.
221 ‘Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church’, 11.
even if it takes form in a variety of expressions and local contexts its ‘calling out’ and universal nature means that for it to be truly church it must be defined by and live under the Word of God.

The language of God’s kingdom is scattered throughout the scriptures. It appears as a common motif throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (see Exodus 15:18; Judges 8:23; Numbers 23:21; Psalm 74:12; 95:3; Jeremiah 10:7,10; Psalm 22:28; 103:19; 145:11-13, etc.) and is often associated with power and mighty deeds. In the New Testament the ministry of Jesus is frequently linked to the image of the kingdom of God, particularly in the Synoptic Gospels and with a few references in the Gospel of John (John 3:3,5 and John 18:36). The opening section of the Gospel of Mark begins by affirming that the kingdom of God was to be the theme of Jesus’ preaching (Mark 1:15). Thus the kingdom serves as a frame of reference for the mission of God. Participating in this mission means being prepared to announce the good news of the kingdom. Further, this proclamation is a dynamic event designed to bring a change both in the nature of the ordering of society and of the life of the individual. This proclamation is evangelistic and becomes a transforming event as the proclamation of the kingdom is a matter of ‘words and deeds empowered by the liberating presence of the Spirit,’222 the same Spirit which continues to call the church into being today.

A Work of the Spirit

The church, wherever it is found, is first and foremost a work of the Holy Spirit. It is a community of people (ekklesia) ‘called out’ to live a life that is fundamentally different from its neighbours. It exists under the rule of God and is called into being

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222 Orlando E. Costas, Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1989), 92.
because of the gracious act of God. The Spirit of God breathed into being a new people. From a nation that had lost its way, the Spirit of God created a new people, a new nation (e.g., Deuteronomy 26:5-19; Ezekiel 37). By the Spirit the prophets were enabled to speak God’s word and to point God’s chosen people towards what it meant to do God’s will. This new people were to live as righteous people (e.g., Isaiah 5:16; Isaiah 54:13,14; Isaiah 58:6-14), understanding that their calling as God’s people meant that their life now encompassed new ethical implications and was to be marked by justice and peace. Moreover, that same Spirit called the early church community (see book of Acts) ‘beyond anything it ever dreamed possible’ and into a ‘boundary-breaking’ community as it grew into its own identity as God’s church.

Although references to the Holy Spirit are limited within the Synoptic tradition, nonetheless the Spirit controlled every phase of Jesus’ life and ministry. This is particularly clear within the Gospel of Luke where Luke underlines that every facet of Jesus’ life is empowered by God’s Spirit. Through the Spirit Jesus taught, healed and revealed the presence of the kingdom. With the Spirit he empowered his followers for ministry in his name. Luke seeks to make clear the continuity of Jesus’ preaching the kingdom of God with the calling of the nation of Israel, and the ongoing life of the church after the death and resurrection of Jesus (Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-8).

Perhaps one of the most powerful passages relating to how Jesus’ ministry is to be understood by the church comes within the programmatic passage of Luke 4:16-30. For Luke, this passage marks the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry and is to be seen as being constitutive within the overall structure of Luke-Acts. Luke’s account of Jesus’ preaching at Nazareth is significantly different from the accounts of both Matthew (Matthew 13:54-58) and Mark (Mark 6:1-6). It is clear that Luke had in mind a different purpose for this incident. He is more expansive than Matthew about the connection to Israel, with Jesus reading from the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 61:1-2a) that the ‘Spirit of the Lord is upon me’ (Luke 4:18). Luke makes specific reference to ‘outsiders’: the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17) and Namaan the Syrian (2 Kings 5:1-14). Luke is concerned to underline the message of the Hebrew Scriptures that sometimes it was the foreigners who knew God’s help when Israel itself did not. Jesus’ ministry was to have a ‘clearly Gentile mission orientation’ and to point to the reality that ‘God, therefore, was not irrevocably bound to Israel’.  

Whilst Luke’s intention is to signal Jesus’ encounter with the people at Nazareth as the beginning of his public ministry, what goes before is critical. Luke records Jesus’ birth (Luke 1:26-38), baptism (Luke 3:21-22) and testing in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13) as being guided by the Spirit. It is only after this that Jesus, ‘filled with the power of the Spirit’ (Luke 4:14) embarks on his public ministry. Luke places Jesus clearly within the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. The conflict which ensues with his interpretation of the reading from Isaiah that ‘today this scripture has been fulfilled in

your hearing’ (Luke 4: 21) is indicative of how his ministry will be received and the manner in which his followers are likely to be treated. For Luke, these first public proclamations of Jesus as an adult are intended to underline that Jesus’ ministry will be marked by commitment to those who are considered ‘least’ within the normal scheme of things. The eschatological time has now arrived in the person of Jesus. God’s promises are ‘now’ being fulfilled. The changes ‘for the poor and oppressed will occur today’. Therefore

the time of God is today, and the ministries of Jesus and of the church … continue. ‘Today’ is never allowed to become ‘yesterday’ or to slip again into a vague ‘someday’.

Thus the kingdom of God is at hand, and the church must respond and carry within its very being an understanding of what it means to live within this eschatological reality inaugurated by Jesus.

This commitment to the least is a recurring theme throughout Luke’s gospel message. So too is the reality that those on the ‘inside’ may be challenged to learn more about their identity and mission from those who are often considered to be on the ‘outside’. We see something of the implications of this in Luke 7:36-50. Here Luke outlines an encounter between a so-called ‘sinful’ woman, an outsider, and those who are considered ‘insiders’. In this passage, the woman, who lives her life on the margins, becomes the central focus for the story and a clear contrast is set up between the faith and actions of this nameless woman, an ‘outsider’, and the thoughts and actions of Simon, an ‘insider’. As in many other parts of Luke’s Gospel Jesus is portrayed as re-locating himself from the centre, here by virtue of being a male guest in Simon’s

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227 Ibid., 62.
house, out to the periphery in order to stand with the woman, a nameless outsider, thereby, as Dorothy Lee suggests, ‘establishing community with her and distance from Simon’.229

A commitment to outsiders: Leadership and diakonia in Luke and Matthew

Luke spells out something of what this commitment to the outsider entails with a redefinition of what leadership and service is to mean in the Christian community. An understanding of the nature of greatness and who was ‘in’ and ‘out’ and of the disciples’ expected place within the coming kingdom was something of a problem within the early Christian communities (see disputes about greatness in Matthew 20:20-28; Mark 10:41-45; Luke 22:24-30). Luke uses the setting of the Last Supper in chapter 22 as an opportunity for Jesus to deliver his farewell address to the disciples and to underscore how leadership was to be exercised within the emerging Christian community. Leadership within the new church is to be marked by service, by diakonia. And further, it is to be service that is directed towards those who are least and who feel free to accept God’s gracious invitation to the feast (Luke 14: 15-24). It is to those who are ‘least’, the outsider, and those who are unencumbered by the trappings of wealth, prestige and self-importance to whom the kingdom of God belongs.

In Matthew the theme of service to the least is highlighted in chapter 25, verses 31-46. Here the service is for the sake of the coming kingdom and is to be directed towards both God and neighbour. Indeed, God is seen to be the neighbour. Whilst Matthew

does not use the specific term *diakonia* within this passage, except in the negative in verse 44 where he admonishes those who ‘did not minister’, the intent is clear. The nature of service, or ‘ministry’, to both God and neighbour is at the heart of the coming kingdom. In serving those in need the disciple also serves God, with the corollary being that if the neighbour in need is *not* served, then neither is God nor the coming kingdom.

Service to God and service to fellow humans is inseparable. Thus discipleship within the new community is to be marked by a radical action of love and is to be directed towards those who are marginalised from much of the normal social benefits. Here Matthew is echoing the theme of obedience to God’s commands contained in the Hebrew Scriptures, an obedience that carries ethical overtones within its response. The faithful community – and hence disciple – is the one involved in mission in the world, a mission that is directed outward and having a particular concern for those on the margins.

This passage in Matthew makes it clear that all the nations will be judged regarding their acts of charity towards ‘the least of those who are members of my family’, which includes a responsibility directed towards all people and all nations (Matthew 25:40). Moreover, the nations will be judged in terms of their acts of hospitality to *all* of God’s ‘little ones’. Within the understanding of the emerging Christian community there is to be no distinction made between those who are inside the church and those who are seen to be outside, as the implication of this call to *diakonia* makes clear. Within this context *diakonia* means more than what is described in the acts of charity so outlined. *Diakonia* is redefined to mean a commitment to radical action directed
towards those who are ‘least’ within society, towards those who are considered ‘outsiders’, to the stranger and to those who are cast aside. Thus the concept of church has been broadened, and we discover that in our encounters with those around us, especially the poor, the destitute and the exploited, we find God and a glimpse of God’s kingdom.

4.3 Contextual Considerations

Any missional understanding of the church must take into account its contextual nature. Whilst the church is called into being in order to build up the fellowship of the faith community, it is also called to engage in mission within the local situation. By its very nature it must take account of the reality that Christ is already present and active within the world that it serves and that the culture ‘outside’ the church can no longer be seen as godless territory.

If we understand that God is already active within the world, either because of, or even despite the ministry of the church, then our christology must also make room for the fact that ‘Christ’s salvific activity in bringing about the kingdom of God is already going on before our arrival’.230 This means that the church must ‘listen’ to the community around it and order its life in ways that will enable it to enter into God’s transformation of this community. It does not do this for the sake of the church itself, but for the sake of the coming kingdom of God.

230 Schreiter, Constructing Local Theologies, 29.
This ‘outward turn’ and desire to take context seriously in developing a mission identity is illustrated both by the rise of liberation theology and by my own personal journey as a Christian.

**Insights from liberation theology**

Because the mission of the earliest followers involved the person of Jesus himself mission within the early church was personal and radically revolutionary, a reality highlighted by many liberation and other Two Thirds World theologians today. The church is to be a community for the sake of others and is never to see itself as existing apart from the prevailing culture with which it shares its life. In being faithful to Jesus’ ministry today the church is to be a sign to the community that it exists for the sake of others, and is to be ‘a model for others to emulate and be challenged by’.

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232 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 47.

233 The term ‘Third World’ which is often used to describe both a geographical location and the socio-economic/political reality in some parts of the world is now generally recognised as an inadequate term to describe the conditions of the vast majority of people in the world. The term ‘Two Thirds World’ is often used in its place, although it too has limitations in that it continues to delineate one section of the world over against another. In any reflection on the contributions of Liberation Theologians, particularly from either the Asia or African countries, I prefer to use the term ‘Two Thirds World’.

Liberation theology begins with this claim that the church, its ministry and the manner in which it talks about God is necessarily contextual in nature. It seeks to tell something of the story of the experience of God amongst the people. The Asian theologian Choan-Seng Song reminds us that theology is essentially speaking about the story of God within the lives of people everywhere. It is ‘the story of people, not just of Jewish-Christian people, but of millions and tens of millions of people [here in Asia].’ The implications of this assertion are wide-ranging at a time when we come to recognise that the majority of Christians now live in what could be identified as the ‘Two-Thirds World’ of Asia and Africa, and of the reality of an increasingly multicultural and multireligious community here in Australia. The challenges presented to the church come in the form of the necessity for open dialogue with people of other cultures and faiths, and a willingness to listen to and learn from those people who experience God from within their own cultures and life experience in ways which might seem foreign to those of us who inherit our Christianity and experience of the church from the western tradition.

Liberation theologians remind us of the importance of history and that it is always within the history of a particular people that the story of God is experienced and told. We recognise this reality within the Hebrew Scriptures, where the story of the Israelite people and their history and experience as a people of faith in relationship with God is told. Their history and their relationship with God had to do with their daily life and their very existence. They learned that it was only because their God journeyed with them throughout history that they had a life and a future and were able to sense the

‘theological meaning of happenings in their personal life and in the life of their nation’.

The acknowledgement of this historical nature of God must not be limited to the Hebrew people as the God who acted within history in the life of Israel continues to act within the lives of people within our own context today. Those of us in the ‘white western’ tradition are thus challenged to find ways in which God has been active within the histories of people and cultures other than our own in order that our own experience of God’s presence can be enhanced. Song suggests that we must search hard in our histories, letting them speak to us not only historically but also theologically. It may be that the theology of history … is, to our surprise, already there. We perceive that a link, a theological link, fashioned by God, the creator of the whole universe, does exist between biblical life and Asian life. Our theology … then becomes an exciting effort to decode the codes God has implanted in the lives of Asian peoples and in the histories of Asian countries.

Song is speaking out of his experience as an Asian theologian, but his insights are also relevant for those of us within the church in Australia. For instance, one of the challenges before us as a result of this insight is the manner in which we understand and relate to our Aboriginal brothers and sisters in this country, particularly their experiences of a creator God, expressed through their myths and the stories of the Ancient Dreamtime. Song’s insights challenge us to give greater attention to the experiences of people whom we may not identify as belonging to the church, perhaps

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238 Ibid., 22.
because they do not share our language for talking about God, or don’t understand our cultural expressions of being church and the many symbols we use which give meaning to our life together.

_Taking account of our cultural and religious heritage: Insights from a personal journey_

We cannot avoid being influenced by the power of our cultural orientation. The way we perceive the world is determined in large part by the culture into which we have been nurtured. We are born into a culture that has created and developed a number of religious and symbolic traditions that give meaning to life, traditions which serve to hold us together within a web of human relationships. The way in which we view life and the means by which we are equipped to respond to the issues around us are shaped by the cultural traditions that we take to be the norm. A short reflection from my own experience will illustrate something of what I mean here.

I have come to value the very strong nurture in the Christian faith I received as a young person. Of course it had its limitations in scope and insight and needed to be redefined as I sought to give expression to my own faith response. As a child I spent many holidays on an uncle’s farm where I felt secure and well loved. My experiences there became an important part of my Christian nurture. Though I did not recognise it at the time this nurture was somewhat conservative. Whilst I have come to appreciate the importance and warmth of such nurture I also realised that unless I was able to appropriate my own faith response I would be limited in my ability to address many of the important issues facing me in the world outside the security of that environment.
There are two important insights from the memories I have of my years of nurture within this environment, insights that continue to influence the way I think about faith and the nature of mission. One of the memories I have was that my uncle’s home seemed always to be open to visitors. People would be constantly passing through, either as house guests or merely for a short chat and a ‘cuppa’. During my holidays there I met a number of people who were active within the life of the church, including some who had served as missionaries in different parts of the world. I listened to their stories and was drawn into what I now recognise as a somewhat romantic and paternalistic notion of mission as ‘conversion of the heathen’. To my young mind and developing personality, it all sounded very exotic and I began to associate the ‘open door’ hospitality at my uncle’s farm with the excitement of hearing about the spread of colonial missionaries into other lands.

As I matured I began to perceive that I did not always feel comfortable fitting into this way of viewing faith and mission and felt that I had been provided with a one-dimensional capacity for reflecting on the nature of my faith and the manner in which that faith was to be expressed on a day-to-day basis. Whilst I may now question some of the imagery of this early nurture I do, however, want to affirm some important legacies from that time, such as the respectful and inclusive hospitality so generously offered. These legacies are ones that will continue to inform my ministry and challenge the manner in which I perceive the world and the way that my faith is expressed.

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Reflecting on some of our personal stories may lead us to an awareness of the ways in which our cultural and religious heritage shape who we are. In particular we come to see that no one cultural or religious tradition possesses absolute truth, and that there is no universal position for viewing reality. We become more self-conscious about our own historical reality and in the process more aware of the historical, cultural and religious reality of others. We come to recognise that other traditions and expressions of faith have impressive resources for interpreting and orienting human existence and for facing the challenges of modern society. We need to learn from these differing cultural realities and develop a means by which we can begin reconstructing our own understanding of Christian faith and the way it informs our worldview. In this way we may better understand the importance of contextualising our understanding of the church and its mission.

Arising out of this reflection on my early nurture I have come to appreciate that the notion of ‘hospitality’ is central in all our mission encounters. However, this hospitality serves the message of liberation in mission only if it also affirms the integrity of the cultural reality of those we are in relationship with. Their lives and experiences must be respected as they come to claim for themselves the future that God wills for them. Understanding the nature of this relational hospitality means that we will be helped to discover our own response to the challenges contained within the words of Jesus in Luke 9:48, – ‘And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who

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241 This is a theme taken up by Gordon Kaufman in: Gordon Kaufman, ‘Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness, and Christian Theology’, in The Myth of Christian Uniqueness, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987): 3-15. In this article Kaufman acknowledges our pluralistic world and calls for open dialogue between different religious traditions and groups, for without that dialogue there is a serious threat to the future of our planet. For Kaufman, the issue is not simply theological, although it is indeed that as he is addressing a Christian audience; it is also an issue that has significant global and political consequences.
sent me; for the least among you is the greatest’ – and in the image of the person of Jesus who ‘refuses to recognise any social, ethnic, political, or religious barriers’.242 There is, suggests Stone, a ‘gathering together of a new family, a new household’,243 where

a commonality [is] made possible only by the dismantling of social hierarchies and oppositions. There is an equality around the table; each is called to care for the other person’s plate over one’s own, and greatness is defined by serving at table and washing dirty feet.244

Jesus’ ministry embraced all in order to empower them and lead them into God’s future. He exalted those who were lowly and challenged those whose power oppressed. He included within his community those whom society had excluded. He taught his followers that ultimately the matter of hospitality was intimately related to kingdom life and mission, that it was through our hospitality towards others that the mission of the church was to proceed, and that in welcoming the stranger one encountered God.

4.4 Context and Mission

Contemporary biblical, theological and mission studies underline the importance of taking account of context as a vehicle for transmitting faith in God. The Roman Catholic theologian Louis Luzbetak reminds us that ‘mission consists in incarnating Christ in the given time and place, allowing him to be reborn in the given lifeway’245 and that

243 Stone, Evangelism after Christendom, 79.
244 Ibid.
245 Luzbetak, The Church and Cultures, 133.
contextualization is the process by which a local Christian community integrates the Gospel message (the “text”) with the real life context, blending text and context into that single, God-intended reality called “Christian living”. By “Christian living” we mean living as Christ would live here and now – that is, as he would behave, what he would teach here and now, and what his values and emotions, his underlying premises, attitudes, and drives would be if he belonged to the particular community we are dealing with.\textsuperscript{246}

Whilst Luzbetak is referring to the impact of a westernised understanding of mission and missionary undertaking directed primarily towards those in other countries, his insights remain relevant as we engage with the variety of cultures and ministry situations within our own local and national communities. We cannot merely suppose that the vehicle for transmitting the message of Christ and the gospel within a predominantly westernised expression of church and faith will helpfully translate within other cultural contexts, or indeed within the variety of Australian contexts the church now finds itself in. Too often we have entered a ministry context assuming that we have the answers to questions that are not even being asked by the people we are amongst. In seeking to both ask and answer what are really our own questions we run the risk of failing to recognise and take seriously the reality of faith and the activity of God within the lives of our neighbours. Thus we will often miss important opportunities for presenting the gospel as being a message that can bring change and offer hope within the lives of people.

\textit{Reading the Bible in our context}

Any discussion of contextualisation will inevitably raise questions about how we interpret the biblical text and the manner in which we view the basic structures and character of our Christian worldview, that is, the relationship between the activity of

\textsuperscript{246} Ibid. Italics follow Luzbetak.
God, humanity and Christ. Both liberation and feminist theologians have reminded us of the importance of taking care about the manner in which we approach the Bible and the way that we read the biblical text. They call for a re-reading of the biblical text and the development of a new hermeneutic that takes seriously the context of the lives of the people with whom we engage. They recognise that the gospel message was not presented in a vacuum and that the same prophetic Spirit which inspired the Scriptures within an ancient community continues to act today within history, bringing liberation and life to those who experience the burden of oppression in its many forms.

A focus on the cultural situation encourages us to better understand the need to arrive at an understanding of our faith from below, that is, from the perspective of God’s action amongst the poor within history. We peel off the layers of understanding and interpretation that our nurturing has taught us to be important and arrive at the core of our Christian faith in order to discover what the nature of our engagement is to be. This does not mean that what we have already received is unimportant; indeed it continues to inform and form us, but we come to realise that it is always presented through particular cultural lenses that have been blurred with assumptions about

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appropriate experience and orthodoxy. When we are able to understand the way in which culture shapes our perceptions about Christian faith and mission we open ourselves to the possibility of an encounter with God through a dialogue with and learning from others. Our own faith is therefore enriched in the process.

A contextual approach to Christian faith has significant implications for the way we understand the church and its mission. It also stresses the importance of community because we come to realise that our Christian life is lived in community and within the processes of history. That means we take account of those people around us and the events that constitute our daily lives and the manner in which we are to take responsibility for each other. We are all shaped by the immediate world in which we live, and each of us, to some extent, shapes that world. We are interdependent. When one of us suffers we all suffer, and when one rejoices we all rejoice, for that is what living in community implies. This interconnectedness is at the heart of the Christian gospel. Community lived out with such interdependence is an indication of the activity of the creator God within our midst and points to the call to share with God in creating a world marked by peace, justice and the integrity of creation. Moreover, we come to realise that it is only within community, with the ability to be open to and aware of the movement of God’s Spirit within the life of the other, that we have a future in this world.

**Missio Dei: An impetus for mission**

Scholars such as David Bosch and Lesslie Newbigin point to the influence that Karl Barth had in rethinking of the nature of mission. Barth’s approach was to put any understanding of mission within the context of an understanding of the doctrine of the
Trinity. Mission was thus understood to derive from the very nature of God, thereby re-emphasising the importance of the concept of *missio Dei.*\(^{248}\) Within this understanding mission is not primarily an activity of the church but an attribute of the God who calls the church into being, and is seen essentially as a movement from God to the world. Bosch writes that

> the *missio Dei* concept has helped to articulate the conviction that neither the church nor any other human agent can ever be considered the author or bearer of mission. Mission is, primarily and ultimately, the work of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is privileged to participate.\(^{249}\)

Moreover, it underlined that mission is based on solidarity with the incarnate and crucified Christ.\(^{250}\) The church is thus called to develop and live out of a missionary theology, rather than to offer merely a theology of mission.\(^{251}\)

Thus it is important to recognise that the beginning of mission is first and foremost an action of God. God is a ‘sending God’ whose desire is to set in place the presence of a renewed and transformed reality. This renewed reality is not possible through any

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\(^{248}\) Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 391. In a small article entitled “St. Augustine and the Missio Dei,” Edward Poitras, a United Methodist missionary and Emeritus Professor of World Christianity at Perkins School of Theology, quotes Bosch as he highlights the importance of the fifth International Missionary Council Conference, held in Willingen, Germany in 1952 where the concept *missio Dei* re-entered public conversation (Poitras p.29) as a long overdue correction in western mission thought. See Edward W. Poitras, ‘St Augustine and the Missio Dei: A Reflection on Mission at the Close of the Twentieth Century’, *Mission Studies* 16-2, no. 32 (1999): 24-46. Poitras suggests that the beginning of this concept could be found in the theology of Augustine. He points out that whilst *missio Dei* was not one of the dominant themes in Augustine’s work the doctrine of the Trinity and the ‘sentness of the divine missions as aspects of God’s actions and being were key concerns … and that … we may expect to find in Augustine’s reflections both an affirmation of the centrality of the Triune God in mission and also of the importance of the Incarnation in God’s relating to the world and the sufferings of human history’. Poitras, ‘St Augustine and the Missio Dei’, 30.

\(^{249}\) Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 392.

\(^{250}\) Ibid., 390.

action of our own, but rather through the presence of the Spirit of God within the world.252

Mission has to do with the recognition that we go out into the world in God’s name. Through our baptism God calls us out to be God’s people within the world. The mission in which we engage is not our own, but rather is God’s mission (missio Dei), and the church exists only because it has been called by God to participate in God’s mission in the world. Through the continuing act of creation (Genesis. 1: 27-31), God is acting within the world in order to create the future that God wills. Thus the church is called into being to become co-creator with God in order to bring about God’s kingdom, proclaiming Christ crucified and risen and embodying within its life a foretaste of the kingdom. Through its daily life the church bears witness in word, sacrament and deed ‘to the graciousness of God who offers to all people new life in the power of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ’.253 Mission therefore has to do with respect for all of creation that God has ‘deigned to create, to sustain, to love to the utmost’.254 Thus the missio Dei is God’s self-revelation as the One who loves the world and ‘incarnates the Good News that God is a God-for-all-people’.255

_A location for mission_

This understanding of God-for-all-people is of critical importance when reflecting on the day-to-day engagement in mission for deacons. Through their reflections we are

255 Bosch, _Transforming Mission_, 10.
reminded that there is little point in talking about the involvement of the church in God’s mission unless our discussion is informed by our reflection on everyday matters of daily living and relationships where ‘the basic issues of justice make the critical difference between life and death’.256 This highlights one of the fundamental questions that must be addressed regarding our understanding of mission and the manner in which we engage in ministry, that is, ‘who are my people and what is their location?’. Where one belongs within the context of mission becomes of vital importance within our understanding of how we engage in mission.

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus identified who his people were to be. In the programmatic passage of the Nazareth inaugural in Luke chapter 4 (Luke 4: 14-30) Jesus declared that his ministry was to be one which would ‘bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free’ (Luke 4:18-19). His ministry was one that would go to those who were considered to be the outsiders of the community and to stand within the prophetic tradition of the Bible. This understanding by Jesus of his own ministry was offensive to those who considered themselves to be the powerful, and the resulting tension was one that would mark Jesus’ entire ministry. He was constantly challenged not only because of his association with ‘sinners and outcasts’ but also because of his reinterpretation of Jewish legal requirements and expectations.

The mission of the church is to take on a local face and is to be acutely aware of the reality of the community with which it shares its life. It is to find ways whereby it can move from what it perceives as its own centre out into the periphery of life where

humanity is most vulnerable, and it too must become vulnerable. It is to be reminded that the act of hospitality means that not only is it aware of the needs of those who suffer, but it must go and seek ‘the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame’ (Luke 14:21) and invite them into its midst. It means that the church, wherever and in whatever particular form it is found, must be a place where all can find a welcome; whether the poor, the prisoner, the refugee, or all those whom society has pushed side, because in welcoming them, the church also welcomes God. Thus the church is to be aware of the world around it and conscious of the needs of the people and the community in which it is located. Immersion in its own particular social location will, in large part, determine its mission praxis and it must take account of the particular time and circumstance into which God’s people are called. Mission will always have a contextual response as we become aware of the ‘inseparable union of the divine and the dusty’ within a particular social reality.

**Margins and the particularity of social location**

The ability to attend to the possibilities presented in ‘marginal places’ is critical if we are to be faithful to God’s call to mission today. Whilst our theology of church and mission must be seen to be credible within the context of the church universal, it is the particularity of our country’s own social and cultural setting which must define much of the manner of our engagement. That is a challenge, but it is also ‘gift’ for the Uniting Church as it claims to be a church set within the context of the experiences of this country and as it seeks to discover anew what it means to be a church at mission within this new land. This freedom and responsibility to begin ‘anew’ allows the

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258 Bosch, *Believing in the Future*, 32.
diaconate within the Uniting Church to make significant contribution to the articulation of both the practice and theology of diaconal ministry within the Uniting Church itself and within the world church. Taking account of the social location of the church in this country will inform our understanding of mission, and of diaconal mission in particular.

Today we are very aware of the marginal position that the church holds within our society. Given the history of the initial entry of the Christian church into this country this is not surprising.  Nor is it surprising to note that Australia has sometimes been described as the most secular nation on earth.  If this is true then it presents many creative opportunities for evangelism. However, it also means that we need to take care that we do not dismiss this reality nor assume that secularism is ‘a total enemy of the Gospel’, for to do so would mean that we would then be at risk of missing the way in which God is already present within the lives of the people of this country. Rather, it opens up for us the opportunity of attending more fully to the task of determining the horizons of our existence, of being aware of our context, our environment and our worldview in order that we might make a decision as to ‘where one stands, or better, with whom, one stands’ in society.

261 Ibid.
Since we cannot necessarily assume a Christianised society or worldview within this country we are free to more critically examine the unhelpful legacies of the past and find new ways of engaging within what is now regarded as a largely post-modern and pluralistic society. We can thus recognise that the marginal places we now inhabit allow for new expressions of faithfulness and service.

**Pluralistic or fragmented?**

The existence of both pluralism and secularism has always been a reality for the church and we are reminded in the book of Acts of the pluralistic nature of the world within which the early Christian church found itself (Acts 17:22-28). The response of the Evangelists was to present the gospel in ways which would enable listeners to hear the Good News and respond in faith. Today we may think that the church faces great threats to its faithfulness and it is easy to become discouraged as we struggle to know how best to respond. We need to understand that whilst the times in which we live may change and thereby challenge our own faithfulness, the promise of the gospel and God’s faithfulness endures.

Some theologians, however, suggest that whilst we have moved from a modernist worldview and are thus more aware of the reality of pluralism, pluralism itself is not the biggest challenge facing the church today. Rather, the challenge for the church is to recognise that we live in a world that has become fragmented and where there is a growing inability to locate any sort of ‘centre’. In this sort of world, Jonathan Wilson argues, our lives become incoherent and are lived in a piecemeal fashion as we

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struggle to locate any sort of centre.264 We experience a dis-ease with ourselves, and with those around us, a dis-ease that becomes impossible to resolve because we have lost the locus for defining our life and the manner in which we experience it. The effect of such fragmentation is that at the level of both the individual and the wider community there is a crisis in worldview and self-understanding. David Bosch points to the significance this has for our mission engagement when he suggests that ‘when such a crisis involves the dominant visions of a particular society ... the entire society is prone to massive breakdown’.265

In order to know how we are to understand the mission of the church within this context we must recognise that the church too is in danger of becoming fragmented because for too long it has attempted to locate itself at the centre of the culture and to define its life from this position. Perhaps that is why, when we see membership numbers dropping and attendance at worship on Sunday mornings declining, we assume that our place within the world is under threat and our faithfulness is being questioned. When the perception of that centre no longer exists it is tempting for the institution to dig the trenches and retreat into the fortress of the familiar in the vain hope that the times will soon pass.266 In practice this will often mean that the church is tempted to move towards excluding that which threatens its interpretation of itself and turn in upon itself, seeking to claim its identity more through doctrinal statements designed to sustain institutional structures than by exploring how it might engage with others in the world in ways that remain faithful to the gospel. It may also fail to recognise those fragments of the church’s influence present within the wider culture

264 Ibid., 27.
265 Bosch, Believing in the Future, 3.
266 Ibid., 4.
and which provide authentic openings for engagement. In short, it is tempted to ‘domesticate’ how it views itself and the manner of its mission and engagement with others in the surrounding community.

Part of the challenge for us within any fragmentation or loss of the church’s influence is not so much to deny the validity of the institution, or to become discouraged by what we may perceive as a loss of influence, but rather within this new reality to learn how the institution can reflect a more faithful response to the gospel for the times in which it lives. We need to recognise that the problem is not that the church is institutional, but rather one of how it is institutional. The question thus becomes one of determining whether the conserving tendencies of the institution could mean that its life becomes a betrayal of God’s mission and how the institutional life of the faith community can become an embodiment of the Good News. We should not become so entrenched into any so-called ‘centre’ that we come to ‘fear the margins,’ but, rather, come to understand mission

as a fundamentally subversive activity, born out of a posture of eccentricity (living “off center” or “outside the center,” at the margins) and out of a cultivation of such deviant practices as sharing bread with the poor, loving enemies, refusing violence, forgiving sins, and telling the truth.

4.5 Towards a mission identity

In order to move towards developing an authentic mission engagement today we need to take note of our history. David Bosch reminds us that for many centuries Christians in the West have lived in the climate of Christendom, ‘which operated on the basis of a symbiosis between church and society and in which there were, officially, no

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[268] Stone, Evangelism after Christendom, 11.
[269] Ibid., 13.
unbelievers’. Within this understanding the church had no interest in the world outside the church except insofar as the ‘outside’ could be incorporated within the church’s own worldview of itself in relation to the world. Early endeavours of the missionary movement termed the world outside ‘heathendom’, which needed to be conquered and incorporated into Christendom and thus the Christian Church. This continued the process of domesticating both the gospel and Christianity begun before the time of Constantine. I will explore some of the continuing implications of this for deacons in Chapter Five of this thesis.

The early part of the ecumenical movement, at the beginning of the twentieth century, challenged this view and highlighted the need for a radical rethink of the church’s identity and the nature of its mission. This thesis has already argued that the church claims its identity because of God’s call to be involved in mission. Moreover, it is a mission that is not to be primarily based on attention to various programs or activities designed to increase the membership of the church, although that may well be an outcome. Rather, the church is not so much the agent of mission as the locus of the mission because

it is God who acts in the power of his Spirit, doing mighty works, creating signs of a new age, working secretly in the hearts of men and women to draw them to Christ … in a community … which bears witness to the goal of history … the risen life of Jesus made available for others (2 Cor. 4:10).

In this way the church claims its existence through its commitment to be involved in God’s mission. Mission is therefore an intrinsic part of the nature of the church, and there can be no church without mission.

270 Bosch, Believing in the Future, 28.
271 Ibid., 29.
272 Ibid., 33.
Drawing some conclusions for ministry.

What, then, can we conclude about the nature of the church and the manner in which ministry may be expressed? Again, it will be helpful to refer to some insights from the *Report on Ordination*. Acknowledging the ecumenical context within which the Uniting Church is placed, and in an attempt to provide some theological and biblical basis for both the ordering and expression of ministry, the *Report* makes the following helpful comment:

The Bible does not prescribe one particular form of ministry as the “correct”, most Godly form, but rather from time to time describes various forms of ministry that existed in the communities of the church. The overwhelming consensus of modern biblical scholars is that the diversity of the community needs gave rise to a diversity of forms of ministry in the early church, and that ministry adapted over time to meet those changing needs, as a response to their understanding of God’s commitment to creation.274

This insight affirms the importance of taking note of both the immediate and historical context within which the church is placed and the implications which derive from that.

Mission and diakonia

As God’s Spirit calls into being the church and its mission, so too it empowers that same community to see the light of Christ within the serving, or *diakonia* of the neighbour in need. In Acts 2:44-45 we see how this took form within the life of the early Christian community: ‘All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need’. As this commitment worked itself out within the fledgling life of the community ‘it took the form of care for, and the honouring of the dignity of, the

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274 ‘Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church’, 7.
dysfunctional within ancient society, the ‘nobodies’ of that culture: widow, orphan, prisoner, slave, poor”. Together with the worship and witness of the church diakonia is an ‘outward and visible’ sign, and a gift of the Spirit where broken bodies are made whole and broken spirits healed as diakonia continues in each new setting to be a sign of the Spirit in the church in communion with the purposes of God.

As the church and its diakonia is of central concern within this study, understanding the church as a sign of the kingdom of God helps give a particular focus to diakonia and to the ministry of Deacon. This does not deny the importance of other expressions of ministry within the life of the church. Rather, the ministry of Deacon is seen as one of the essential ministries of the church, embodying something of the manner in which the whole church can act as a sign for the coming kingdom. It is not the only ministry that does this, although its particular gifting and calling reminds the church of the diaconal calling of all its members, indeed that diakonia is at its heart and is an essential expression of its very being.

The variety of charismata within the church (1 Cor 12:1-31) reminds us that the church does not exist merely as a collection of individual members, but rather is called into being as a dynamic fellowship with Christ as its head and as a living community of God’s people. This fellowship, often expressed by using the term koinonia, is properly understood as a gathering of the baptised as they join with each other around the central act of the eucharist in which the gifts of God are shared.

275 Fackre, The Church, 5.
276 Ibid., 4, 6.
Thus *diakonia*, arising from this central symbol of the all-encompassing and redemptive act of God, is a sign of the outpouring love of God made evident for believers and extending to their everyday life in the world. As such, it is a ministry that could be understood as being the ‘liturgy after the liturgy’. This term, arising from an Orthodox understanding of the interconnectedness of worship and everyday life, expressed especially through the celebration of the eucharist, has become something of a ‘catch-cry’ for many deacons. The image adds to our understanding of the manner in which *diakonia* emanates from the worship life of the church, and Bria reminds us that

the dynamics of the liturgy go beyond the boundaries of the eucharistic assembly to serve the community at large. The eucharistic liturgy is not an escape into the inner realms of prayer, a pious turning away from social realities; rather, it calls and sends the faithful to celebrate “the sacrament of the brother” outside the temple in the marketplace, where the cries of the poor and marginalised are heard.278

Therefore *diakonia*, as an essential expression of the life of the church, derives its identity from and is integrated within the eucharistic sharing of the whole community.

It is, notes Birgitta Larghé, expressing ‘two dimensions of the same thing. Christ in the liturgy and Christ in our neighbour’279 where the commission at the end of worship is not so much a going out as it is ‘a going in, into the world’.280

Thus the *caritas* and *diakonia* of the church is freed from a purely functional or sociological perspective that often characterises an individualised charity

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278 Bria, *The Liturgy after the Liturgy*, 20.
280 Ibid.
understanding of the service ministry of the church and is now to be defined more concretely in eschatological and ecclesiological terms. It underlines the affirmation of the Christian community that the Incarnation is God’s promise for the reconciliation of all creation. We are to be caught up in ‘the presence of God in history’ and involved in God’s ‘ongoing restoration of the world’s situation and the human community’. This theological motif of the service of diakonia founded in the life and work of Christ and therefore made visible within the eucharistic community is a helpful reminder for all members of the church and particularly for deacons. Its importance is further underlined by the following statement in the 1982 BEM document:

All kinds of injustice, racism, separation and lack of freedom are radically challenged when we share in the body of Christ. Through the eucharist the all-renewing grace of God penetrates and restores human personality and freedom. (Eucharist, para 20) ... All (these) manifestations of love in the eucharist are directly related to Christ’s own testimony as a servant, in whose servanthood Christians themselves participate. As God in Christ has entered into the human situation, so eucharistic liturgy is near to the concrete and particular situation of men and women. In the early church the ministry of deacons and deaconesses gave expression in a special way to this aspect of the eucharist. The place of such ministry between the table and the needy properly testifies to the redeeming presence of Christ in the world (Eucharist, para 21).

Therefore, the church, within its life of worship and service, and through its gifts in ministry, is ‘called out’ in order that it might follow Christ’s mission to the world and it to be engaged in ‘following Christ’s service for the world’. The church exists for the world and ‘lays claim to the whole of humanity in mission’. Further, ministry ‘takes place within its own particular horizon of the eschatological expectation of the

282 Ibid.
283 Ibid.
285 Ibid.
coming kingdom of God, of the coming righteousness and the coming peace, of the coming freedom and dignity of [all people]' 286

286 Ibid.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE MINISTRY OF DEACON: A DE-CENTRED MINISTRY

5.1 Introduction

It is clear that the church’s call to mission is at the heart of the ministry of Deacon. Moreover, this mission has a particular intent in that its focus is on areas that are marginal and normally beyond the parameters of congregational concerns – ‘in areas of life which are socially exposed, on the frontiers of the church’s activities, in places and among people remote from the experience of ordinary church-goers’.

This marginal location is not just because some people have a particular expertise for ministry in such places. It is, rather, for the sake of the whole church. There is an expectation that in order to give voice to the church’s commitment to ministry with those who are on the margins deacons will model and lead the church into an embodied expression of what this means. Their task is to be prophetic, and to challenge the church to take the risk of being a de-centred witness within the world, as the Report on Ministry makes clear:

Deacons point to those areas of community life where new needs are emerging, and by their own radical commitment to ministries with poor and disadvantaged people challenge the church to effective action. Their experience, expertise and spirituality will guide and sustain the church as it moves into new areas of service.

Drawing on many of the responses from deacons in Chapter Three and the theological perspectives outlined in Chapter Four, this chapter explores some of the implications for the life of the church and invites us to view the ministry of Deacon specifically.

288 Ibid., 43.
from a de-centred perspective. It uses reflections on further selected biblical and theological themes in order to highlight how these experiences of deacons might assist the church to better understand its collective response to this de-centred ministry.

5.2 Mission from the edge

Within any understanding of the church and its mission most deacons will respond imaginatively to the notion that their ministry is primarily located outside what might be considered the normal boundaries of the church’s life. That reality can be expressed in a number of different ways. The following comment by one deacon captures something of how we might understand margins and where the mission of the church is to be located: ‘I am beginning to reach out and be present with those both on the margins of the church and more particularly those who might be considered to be on the margins of communities’. For many deacons margins represent both the reality of being outside a dominant understanding of church and ministering amongst people who find themselves living on the margins of society. One deacon expressed this in the following way:

My ministry with … the rural poor is with very marginalised people, especially as these people are getting further away from the ‘centre’ … and the ministry of Deacon is very much seen as peripheral to the broad understanding of ministry in the UCA. The ‘type’ of people we focus our ministry on are not going to help us become in the centre as many of them have been rejected themselves. I feel this marginal place in ministry, this sense of being outside the mainstream, is in fact, prophetic and must be maintained for us to keep our integrity. 

This comment is of particular importance and invites us to take account of how the insights and experiences of those on the so-called outside can help us understand more about what it means to respond to God’s call. It invites us to consider that we may learn more about God, and God’s calling of the church, from the outsider than we
might otherwise think possible. We are invited to discover what it means to be a church which is now called to live within the ‘marginal’ places of society, whether that be as a result of the way that the church is now perceived within our culture, or because of the social location and life experiences of many of those with whom we are in ministry.

Thus one of the tasks of the church may be to see itself involved in what Mortimer Arias calls ‘centripetal mission’.289 As Arias describes this concept, it is an understanding of mission as an activity that ‘goes from the center to the periphery of the world’.290 Moreover it maintains that the mission of the church cannot, in fact, remain at any centre, perhaps understood either in terms of doctrinal orthodoxy or a perceived need to attend only to its own institutional needs or survival. Rather, it affirms that God’s missionary Spirit moves us towards the boundaries and frontiers of life: ‘to all peoples everywhere … the whole world … the whole creation … to the ends of the world … and to the end of time’.291

This term ‘centripetal mission’, however, is somewhat problematic. Whether it is intended or not, the concept of ‘from the center to the periphery’ reflects something of a value-laden conviction. Robert McAfee Brown suggests that often this centre is understood as being where ‘we were’, and the periphery, the far reaches of the world, was where ‘they were’, with the traffic going only one way. Moreover, he suggests, this image “‘from the center to the periphery” left no doubt who was really in

290 Ibid.
291 Ibid.
control’. It is reminiscent of the images of mission I received through the stories of visitors to my uncle’s farm and suggests that our mission response is based on an understanding that we have a message to give to those at the ‘far reaches of the world’, but they have nothing to contribute to us. Rather, within our response to the call of the Spirit to go to the boundaries and frontiers of life we are to be, as Stephen Bevans reminds us, challenged to experience and understand

that the essential nature of the church (its ‘inside,’ its *ad intra* nature) is not to be discovered by focusing on the church but on the church’s mission (its ‘outside’ or *ad extra* character) … and that the church is radically ‘eccentric’ and ‘centrifugal’.

Therefore, perhaps a more helpful term is ‘reverse evangelism’, a phrase identified by Robert McAfee Brown as being in common use amongst Two Third’s World Christians. This is an understanding that ‘those who were once the objects of the evangelistic enterprise are now acquainting us with fresh understandings of the gospel, drawn from their own situation rather than from ours’, an insight which relies heavily on the experiences and reflections of liberation theologians over many years. Of course, when we think of mission we think of ‘going’ but we also need to recognise that the centre of where we find God’s presence is more often likely to be at those places that we define as the periphery. Thus the definition and interplay between centre and periphery become critical in determining both the nature and the location of our missionary engagement.

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293 Ibid.
296 Ibid.
297 Ibid. See note 8, page 151.
Centre and edge in creative dialogue

This interplay between centre and periphery will frequently create tension. Indeed, the Australian theologian Denham Grierson suggests that it ‘should always be disturbing’ because ‘the centre makes claims that the edge finds offensive, … [and] the edge throws up questions that the centre would rather not accept as questions it has to answer’. Grierson locates the necessity for this dynamic between the centre and the edge within an understanding of the mission of the church suggesting that it is necessary for the health of each. He suggests that

at the centre the commitment to proclaim, to liberate, to heal is given its justification. There the story of the serving ministry of Christ is told. There the invitation to join him beyond the gate is made. … At the edge the movement of a serving ministry occurs. There the word of hope is spoken. There the freedom which is Christ’s gift over the powers comes into the midst of human suffering, grief and oppression. There the healing act takes place that calls us to go on seeking wholeness and peace in all areas of need.

The tension between the centre and the periphery is an important motif for the mission of the church, and specifically for deacons. We are reminded that God’s Word is found in both the centre and at the periphery. Moreover, the manner of our engagement with this creative tension will frequently define the manner in which deacons relate to and influence the life and identity of the faith community. Living in this place of tension is both creative and vulnerable and it is sometimes difficult to hold the tension, because the church, in reality, is both at the so-called centre and at the periphery, with the centre often claiming most of its time, energy and financial resources. The challenge is to find the interpretive possibilities within this tension and

298 Grierson, *Conversations at the Edge of the Raft*, 60.
299 Ibid., 59.
resist the temptation to retreat to the centre when the periphery becomes too demanding or unclear.

Believing that it is not just particular individuals who are called to move to the periphery, but rather the whole church, deacons understand that part of their call to offer leadership within the life of the church is to challenge the congregation to look beyond the concerns of its own life. A deacon who works within a large central city church describes her role in the following way:

At the moment I feel like I am in the centre of power within wealthy city churches. My challenge is to make them more aware of the people on the margins on their doorsteps and of how to respond to them.

This deacon is standing within this creative tension in order that the congregation may become more aware of the breadth of its missionary responsibility beyond the walls of the church building and within its own social location, and in order that the congregation will take responsibility for its own collective mission response.

In this instance the image of the deacon acting as a bridge, enabling the recognition of God’s incarnational presence, becomes a helpful one. The bridge image is often used by deacons and appears in some United Methodist Church publications about the diaconate. Crain and Seymour suggest that as well as helping the church identify those places where God’s activity may not readily be seen, by being present in the day-to-day concerns of the community deacons are a

bridge between the needs of the world … [and] help others to cross the bridge from church to world and from world to church, and to equip the people of God to be bridge builders who bring the grace and healing and justice of God to a hurting and wounded world.301

300 See especially Crain and Seymour, A Deacon’s Heart; and Hartley and Van-Buren, The Deacon.
301 Crain and Seymour, A Deacon’s Heart, 87.
Mission, therefore, is to be a congregational response because it significantly defines the identity of the life of the whole church. It is also an intimate engagement on the part of the congregation, requiring a willingness to engage with the dusty reality of the life of those around it as it seeks to live out its mission-calling as God’s people. Mission is not left to some paid professional but is part of the daily responsibility of all baptised members of the congregation. Thus part of the deacon’s task is to be what David Clark calls ‘community educators’ and to equip ‘the laity to fulfil their calling to build communities that manifest the gifts of the kingdom community’.302 Within this task the deacon will be involved in the ‘liberation of the laity and, thereby, the coming into being of the diaconal church will be accomplished’.303

Often we have assumed that the ‘going’ aspect of mission means giving attention to that which is located furthest away from our own immediate social concerns. In doing so the reality of our own social location does not impact on our day-to-day concerns or conscience. However, as Stephen Bevans reminds us, giving attention to the local is of critical importance as ‘it is as the body of Christ and the “face” of the Spirit that the church discovers its mission in the world’304 and becomes, ‘part of God’s embrace of the world, an embrace made flesh in Jesus’.305 This embrace is to be within the local sphere as much as it is to the global because through it a diaconal expression of church embodies the intimacy of the Incarnation.

302 Clark, Breaking the Mould of Christendom, xviii.
303 Ibid.
305 Ibid.
We know, however, that we may not always recognise either the manner or the nature of God’s presence in the midst of our local community and we can therefore miss the ‘Spirit’s powerful yet “anonymous” presence’.\textsuperscript{306} We are then in danger of not understanding the implications of an incarnate God who comes to us ‘in a concrete human nature, within the parameters of a concrete human culture at a very particular time in human history … to say words of prophetic insight and renewing forgiveness, to live a life of freedom’.\textsuperscript{307} It is to this incarnate God that the deacon in the central city church is pointing and inviting the congregation’s response.

\textit{The place of the outsider: Holding the tension}

It is critical that we allow our experiences with people who are not normally part of the community of faith to help shape our understanding of where God’s grace is to be found and what our role is within the ongoing story of God’s relationship with God’s people. In the introduction to his recent book, \textit{The Faith of the Outsider} Frank Anthony Spina reminds us that

\begin{quote}
there are several narratives where outsiders are not only explicitly presented as such, but where they are in a variety of ways actually shown to be superior to God’s elect, the insiders. Sometimes these outsiders show more faith in, a greater sensitivity to, or a greater understanding of [God] ... [on] other occasions they do something that promotes the agenda of [God], their outsider status notwithstanding ... There are even times when outsiders become insiders ... and magnify the emphasis on God’s sovereignty and grace.\textsuperscript{308}
\end{quote}

The interplay of the insider – outsider motif within the biblical narrative gives us a window through which we might view the all-inclusive nature of God’s grace,\textsuperscript{309} a grace which is not only mediated through our membership of an exclusive community

\textsuperscript{306} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{307} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{309} Ibid., 11.
of faith or congregational setting. Moreover, as Costas suggests, giving attention to the insights gained by relationship with those whom we might consider to be outsiders is an important faith response because ‘the demands of the kingdom do not encompass only personal and ecclesial affairs, but also social and institutional issues’.\textsuperscript{310} We have as much to gain, indeed perhaps more, by our relationships with those who are not part of the church because through these relationships we may be challenged to learn something more about the future to which we are all called, a ‘future which is not limited to the community of faith [but which] embraces all of history and the universe, … [it] is the task of the ecclesial community to witness to that all-encompassing reality’.\textsuperscript{311} It is this future orientation that we are to serve, and it is to this future that a church, able to embrace its own diakonia witnesses and is ‘present in the world to help transform it’.\textsuperscript{312}

For some deacons this means holding in creative tension the notion of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the community of faith primarily for the sake of the church. A deacon who is seeking to create a community of faith within the environment of a city’s growth corridor sees the importance of holding together an involvement within both the life of the congregation and the wider community. Most deacons would agree with the necessity of this. This deacon believes that if we are not able to hold together these inward and outward aspects of our calling then deacons run the risk of being ‘pushed even further out’ by the church ‘so that eventually our ministry will just not be accepted’. Another deacon noted this tension in his ministry with people who suffer some form of addiction and who find themselves marginalised from many aspects of

\textsuperscript{310} Costas, \textit{Christ Outside the Gate}, 93.
\textsuperscript{311} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{312} Ibid.
community and church life. He suggested that one of the ways to overcome any possible misunderstanding was to be very clear about the theology that underpins our involvement in the wider community and to focus ministry on where the kingdom of God is to be found: ‘I don’t see myself “outside” because the kingdom of God is both within the church and outside the church … and it depends on how we have defined our understanding of the church’. He then went on to ‘image’ what he meant by using the analogy of minestrone soup.

To me I think the picture merges and it is much more minestrone where you no longer identify the carrot, the pea and the onion. They become merged into the minestrone. I think that is the model of what [our] ministry is; the congregation and the community are the minestrone. Whereas we often focus too much on the congregation being the peas and the community being the onion. The result of true diaconal ministry is that there are no boundaries; it merges into the minestrone so that the community is in the congregation and the congregation is in the community.

5.3 Learning from the edge

We can no longer assume that those ‘outside’ the church are only the receivers of our missionary endeavours. They may in fact understand much more about the mission to which the church is called than does the church itself. In order to give proper attention to its diaconal calling we must find ways whereby the church can listen to the voices that come to it from engagement with the periphery so that we can better identify where the Spirit of God is at work and the variety of places where the church is to be found. This means that we must leave ourselves open to allow God’s Spirit to teach us something new. Thus the deacon whose ministry places her within an inner urban context will frequently find herself ‘sitting on the steps talking philosophy and theology with anyone who wants to sit with me’ and will discover within that experience ‘that I am dragged to the other side of experience, and I learn more about
me, about God, and about what the church is and where it is to be found as a result’. Drawing on the image of reverse evangelism already offered by Brown this experience in ministry for this deacon could be termed ‘mission-in-reverse’.313 Through it we find ourselves being encouraged to be open to understand that the mission of the church ‘is as much about being evangelised by the cosmos, the earth, and other human beings as it is about a commitment to their welfare and cultivation’.314 This underlines the importance of taking the particularity of history and social location seriously in all that we do and understand that it is not so much within the activities of the church’s mission that we encounter God but rather within our presence with others we encounter in the community. Mission is ‘therefore not so much to “do it all” as it is to point, name, witness to, and cooperate with God’s powerful and transforming presence’,315 a presence which is already alive and active within the world, whether we recognise it or not.

Lessons from a courageous woman

Deacons frequently spoke of the insights they gained from their engagement with those who are not normally part of the church, and referred to the energy that such engagement gave them. The ability to listen to the voices and concerns of such people is critical. So too is the ability to reflect on these encounters and learn something new about ourselves, our mission and the nature of the church. Amongst the biblical images offered by some deacons were a variety of references to encounters that Jesus had with outsiders. The account of the Syrophoenician woman in Mark (Mark 7:24-

314 Ibid.
315 Ibid., 103.
30; see also Matthew 15:21-26) was offered as a significant one which illustrated what some deacons meant by learning from their encounters with those outside the church. In this story the familiar image of a teaching Jesus is turned upside down and we have instead ‘a portrayal of a learning Jesus’. Moreover, the encounter Jesus has with this particular woman provides us with a somewhat different dynamic than that of some of his other encounters with outsiders (see, for instance, Luke 7:36-50; Luke 14:1-24) and suggests the possibility of deeper personal learning.

This story locates Jesus specifically within an encounter between the centre and the periphery with the dynamics of the encounter becoming an ‘instance of margin transforming the centre’, redefining ‘marginality as a continuous journey to and from the margins and centers’. Here is a Gentile woman, an outsider, seeking help for her daughter from Jesus, a Jew, thus setting up a ‘double outcast’ scenario. Not only does the reaction of the disciples further alienate her, but Jesus’ dismissive reaction to her does as well, thus confirming her ‘otherness’. The New Testament scholar William Loader, suggests that within this story Mark is portraying the image of a ‘more conservative Jesus appearing in the context of a boundary crossing’. Along with the stories of the encounter with the leper in Mark 1:40-45 and the encounter with the woman suffering from a flow of blood in Mark 5:25-34, Loader suggests that the story of the Syrophoenician woman ‘celebrates Jesus’ crossing boundaries, but only after initial reticence or resistance’. The story as we have it has

320 Ibid.
a number of facets to it. It is a story about healing, persistence, courage, faith and inclusivity.

The story follows teaching about who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’, and becomes a lesson about boundaries set within the context of a reflection on what should and should not be eaten. Jesus has already declared all food clean, and has crossed the sea and travelled to Gerasa, thus breaking down the barriers that were obstacles to building community with Gentiles. The practicalities of what this means are then uncovered and explored with the story of the Syrophoenician woman that follows. In it Mark contrasts two attitudes of Jesus and presents ‘Jesus as a foil for Jesus’. 321

The courage of the woman in this story is significant. There are a couple of points when she could have retreated from the scene because of the response she received from Jesus. She was both a woman and an outsider, clearly not invited to the home where Jesus was, and thus not a legitimate member of the community gathered there. She was keen to engage with Jesus, although clearly he was not as keen to engage with her and wanted to remain as anonymous as possible; ‘He entered a house and did not want anyone to know that he was there’ (v. 24). But this woman interrupts his retreat. She has an ill daughter she has to look after. This in itself gave her the courage to take desperate measures and confront Jesus as she did. She was ‘prepared to stomach the abusive appellation for the sake of her daughter and pleads that her lower status in the order of things should not prevent her from receiving what she needs’. 322

As a result of the exchange ‘she wins Jesus over’. 323 After the initial rebuff her

321 Ibid., 46.
322 Ibid., 49.
323 Ibid.
courage and faith enable her to persist and she gets what she wants. Her daughter is healed and she has defended the right of her people to also be at the table.

Whilst Mark is probably not interested in Jesus’ attitudinal development here, nonetheless, this woman is portrayed as having taught Jesus something more about his own mission and identity than he was perhaps aware of. The Japanese theologian Hisako Kinukawa suggests that this woman ‘has set the stage for him to act out his mission’ and ‘has freed Jesus to be fully himself’. Moreover, Kinukawa suggests, it is within this encounter that Jesus is seen as a ‘boundary-breaker’, with the Syrophoenician woman creating ‘the opportunity for him to cross it and step over to her side’. The woman has thus become a player in the movement towards a celebration of the inclusive nature of God’s kingdom. Further, as Loader suggests, it is in agreeing to the woman’s request that Jesus ‘exemplified and legitimised … the reality which he celebrates: the community of faith inclusive of both Jew and Gentile’.

The way that Mark has presented the actions of the woman in this story could suggest a challenge to our understanding about what constitutes the community of faith and of how ‘church’ is defined. The intuition of this woman in sensing who Jesus was and the courage to act on this for the sake of her daughter means that both she and her

324 Ibid., 46.
326 Ibid., 147.
327 Ibid., 148.
328 Loader, ‘Challenged at the Boundaries’, 46.
daughter have been ‘resurrected from death’. Thus Jesus is seen as the life-giving Christ and has been ‘motivated to act, inviting the gentile, the socially outcast, the materially poor, the sick, the oppressed, and the rejected into God’s community’, a community which has been redefined in a radically new way in order to become one which will lead to mutual transformation.

Through this story we are reminded once again of the need to listen to the voices and experiences of those who seek to understand the mission of the church from an ‘outsider’ point of view. Paul Hertig suggests that it depicts the necessity of a ‘partnership between those at the margins and those at the center’. Whilst Jesus is initially portrayed in this story from a ‘centralist perspective of exclusion’ the insights and actions of the woman ‘acknowledged the center and claimed access to it’. The woman was very clear about who she was and what her social location was. She was also clear about what she was entitled to, and where the centre of God’s hospitable kingdom was to be found. Those on the so-called ‘inside’ were less clear about this reality. The message of the gospel will give us significant insight into the nature of the partnership Hertig refers to. We are reminded that, whilst the Gospels were written primarily for the faith community, and therefore for believers, it is often those who are on the outside who will teach us much more about what it means to be faithful to God.

330 Ibid.
331 Ibid.
333 Ibid.
334 Ibid.
Thus we need to leave ourselves open to the possibility of having our own identity and that of our faith community redefined by those who live their lives at the periphery, because, in reality, it may be there that we find the centre of God’s presence and kingdom. Thus the ‘centre’ has been re-located out into the margins with the possibility that there now may be many ‘centres’ where once we may have thought there was only one. The deacon who suggests that she has been ‘pulled to the other side’ through her encounter with those on the city streets is thus able to acknowledge that her own insights into the nature of her ministry are enhanced because she has been forced to look at the church, and those with whom she ministers, from a different perspective. This is a lesson that will have great value as we contemplate what it means to be a diaconal church.

5.4 Reclaiming *diakonia*

This thesis has already suggested that *diakonia*, and thus ‘servant’, is a term that we cannot ignore in any discussion about the nature of the church and its mission. However, as John Collins reminds us we must take care that our interpretation remains faithful to both the biblical text and historical usage of the term.\(^{335}\) This discussion is of critical importance for deacons within the Uniting Church. It is from an exploration of this term *diakonia* that we have our contemporary understanding of the ministry of Deacon, as well as drawing on the rich but somewhat problematic legacy of diaconal ministry in the church over the last hundred years or so. We know from experience that often the translation of the term *diakonia* into a generalised

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\(^{335}\) See comment on this by Jeannine E. Olson in Olson, *Deacons and Deaconesses*, 475. Olson suggests that because Collins prefers a ‘narrower use of the word *diakonia*, more in line with its use in scripture and the early church’ this is ‘upsetting for some modern deacons whose self-understanding is centred in a servant image’. She suggests though that use of the term has not remained static and that it has experienced many changes.
concept of ‘servanthood’ has caused problems throughout the history of the church,336 and today some deacons continue to sit somewhat uncomfortably with having their ministry designated solely by use of the term ‘servant’, due mainly to the manner in which it has been misused in the past, and their own personal experiences within the church.

Nonetheless the term has had widespread use in the church and it seeks to talk about the ministry of the church in general and the ministry of Deacon in particular. Because it is a term so closely associated with the ministry of Deacon some hesitation about the way it has been used is understandable. This is so because it frequently conjures up images of subordination and patriarchy. Women, and deaconesses in particular, have suffered as a result of these misrepresentations. In his recent doctoral thesis, Ronnie Aitchison, a deacon in the Methodist Church of Great Britain, argues that ‘much of the theology that has tended to make diaconal ministry unattractive has grown out of the interpretation of the ‘footwashing’ narrative as urging those who feel called to “diakonia” to do some form of menial service’.337 Aitchison suggests any interpretation of this narrative as menial service and as an end in itself ‘lacks intellectual credence’,338 and that this misrepresentation of the Martha image as being one portraying ‘deaconesses as an untrained, God-fearing woman, who looked after the indigent of the neighbourhood on the church’s behalf’339 contributes to this incomplete representation of the notion of service.340

338 Ibid.
339 Ibid.
340 For a very helpful critique on the manner in which the Mary and Martha stories have been interpreted, see Yamaguchi, Mary and Martha.
Beyond Christendom

Thus there is some historical baggage that must be negotiated before we can begin to move forward with any contemporary appreciation of the term, particularly in relation to the manner in which the church understands the ministry of Deacon, the nature of its own *diakonia* and the way it understands ‘servanthood’. In his recent book *Breaking the Mould of Christendom*, David Clark, a deacon in the Methodist Church in Great Britain suggests we retain use of the term. He is supported in this position by a small Church of England publication entitled *For Such a Time as This* which asserts that in any discussion about ministry, and diaconal ministry in particular, the ‘ideal of service remains fundamental’.

This report goes on to affirm that we should not react so far against the received interpretation that we lose sight of the servant character of all Christian ministry. That is still crucial to the understanding of *diakonia*.

In like manner, Steven Croft maintains that the term *diakonia* expresses the ‘foundation of all Christian service’ and therefore our

understanding of ministry as *diakonia* finds much deeper roots than the patterns of ministry that emerged in the early church: service expresses something essential of the character and nature of Christ and of the incarnation.

Clark argues that the church God is calling into being in order to meet the needs of our age is a diaconal church, a church whose ‘nature, form and leadership enable it to reflect and communicate the essence of the kingdom community’. Further, he suggests that until we can break free from the Christendom mindset that still

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341 ‘For Such a Time as This: A Renewed Diaconate’, 31.
342 Ibid.
dominates much of our current understanding of the form and function of the church, and its approach to ministry, this diaconal church will struggle to become a reality. He maintains that

it is only as we are prepared to question some of the foundational assumptions of Christendom that we will be able to look at the nature of diaconal ministry with fresh eyes and to discover its radical, redemptive and recreative message for the life of the church and world alike.\textsuperscript{345}

Therefore, perhaps one of the important points to remember within a renewed understanding of diaconal ministry is that it is only one of the ministries which is reforming as a direct result of the breakdown of a Christendom mindset, a mindset wherein the church saw society as an extension of itself, so that those who were not part of its structures and beliefs were seen to be ‘outsiders’.\textsuperscript{346}

Once the Christian church received official recognition under Constantine in 313 a largely hierarchical church began to emerge. Deacons were soon seen as the base order for a movement up the hierarchical order of ministry and deaconesses were marginalised within an increasingly centralised and hierarchical system.\textsuperscript{347} New ways of living faith on the edge were called for. For many the monastic life presented itself as both protest against the central church and as a positive way of serving God and assisting the sick and the poor. Over time a more radical and marginal expression of deacon and deaconess ministry emerged.\textsuperscript{348}

It is this more radical and marginal understanding of the ministry which is being recovered in many denominations in the world church in ways which open up an

\textsuperscript{345} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{346} Costas, \textit{Christ Outside the Gate}, 190.
\textsuperscript{347} For an excellent overview of this see chapter 2, ‘From Constantine to Luther’ in Olson, \textit{Deacons and Deaconesses}, 51-105.
\textsuperscript{348} Ibid.
understanding of the diaconate as a ministry of prophecy and transformation, offering the possibility for a renewal of the church’s way of being incarnated in our time.\textsuperscript{349} It is expressed as a ministry which opens up the possibility that within this more radical ‘edge’ to the church’s life we may discover more about the nature of the church’s mission by becoming an ‘outsider’ amongst the ‘outsiders’.

\textit{A time and place for a new dynamic}

In reflecting on the importance of committing ourselves to those who are also outside and for whom Christ also gave his life Orlando Costas reminds us that

salvation lies outside the gates of the cultural, ideological, political, and socio-economic walls that surround our religious compound and shape the structures of Christendom. It is not a ticket to a privileged spot in God’s universe, but, rather, freedom for service.\textsuperscript{350}

This has profound implications for our understanding of ministry and mission, and especially for an understanding of a more contemporary expression of \textit{diakonia}, where we move from understanding mission as being an activity which brings the periphery into our definition of a centre to an understanding which reflects a ‘permanent, \textit{moving} center in the periphery of life’.\textsuperscript{351} Moreover, suggests Costas, the community of the church must be a ‘sojourning community … a temporary abode, a tent in the wilderness, not a fortress or an insulated castle’ and that ‘\textit{diakonia}, or the ministry of mercy, is to be understood in terms of … living just lives’.\textsuperscript{352} Costas goes

\textsuperscript{350} Costas, \textit{Christ Outside the Gate}, 191.
\textsuperscript{351} Ibid., 192. Italics follow Costas.
\textsuperscript{352} Ibid.
on to connect our life of *diakonia* firmly within our act of worship as a community of faith and suggests that

we can only offer sacrifices of praise to God and confess the name of God if we are on the move towards him ‘outside the gate,’ if we are sojourners, if we live just lives and share what we have with those who are in need. Worship, evangelism, and service have Christian value if they are done ‘outside,’ in solidarity with the crucified Jesus and his permanent commitment to the outcast.\(^3\)

If the diaconate is to be seen as an essential component of the church’s understanding of itself and its mission, the marginal nature of the history, location and practice of this ministry must place the diaconate within that creative and future-oriented interplay between the centre and the periphery. It is within the tension of this marginal ‘God place’ that new possibilities of service are revealed and a transformed reality can be made possible. Further, it is within this context that we are enabled to recover an appropriate appreciation of the richness of the term *diakonia* and its translated notion of servant and remember that servanthood’s true meaning ‘derives first and foremost from the life and ministry of Christ’\(^4\) and that service is a ‘checkpoint … [a] symbol of the new creation: the definitive transformation of the world by the power of God’.\(^5\) Moreover, suggests Clark, the notion of servanthood is of ‘fundamental importance for the diaconal church because the relational qualities of servanthood are there at the very heart of the kingdom community’.\(^6\)

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\(^3\) Ibid., 192-193.
\(^5\) Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate*, 193.
\(^6\) Clark, *Breaking the Mould of Christendom*, 74.
5.5 Renewed identity: A basis for moving forward

In our efforts to move away from some of the unhelpful legacies of the past we need to take great care, and ensure that our understanding of this ministry is based on sound theological and biblical principles. We should not get caught up in any notions that the *diakonia* of the church is defined only in terms of function or through one expression of ministry only, such as that of the ministry of Deacon. To do so would be to return to an unhelpful Christendom model where definitions of role and function served only to control and limit. Nor should we be seduced into believing that the understanding of servant and the role or function of a deacon is to be expressed only in works of charity. That is a reductionist response and severely limits our vision to only what is presented in front of us rather than directing our attention towards the horizons to which God’s kingdom beckons. *Caritas*, the mission of ‘charity’ or ‘compassion’, is only one dimension of *diakonia* and can never fully define it. As Collins reminds us a diaconal church is the servant of the kingdom community and of the Trinitarian God who rules that kingdom.357 However, service, in and of itself does not entirely get to the heart of what it means to be part of this community, a community which ‘transforms the world through quiet authenticity and authority, not by frenetic endeavour’358 and is one which is itself ‘a community of relationships’359 freed from any of the misuses or distortions of institutional power.

The Swedish theologian Sven-Erik Brodd suggests that any tendency towards a functional or reductionist response can be avoided if we understand that the essence of

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358 Clark, *Breaking the Mould of Christendom*, 78.
a deacon’s ministry within the life of the church, and the wider community it serves is seen within the mandate of ordination. He suggests that ‘it is possible to distinguish between diakonia (the Greek term) and diaconal work’.\textsuperscript{360} The former, he says, is a ‘fundamentally theological concept; the latter is a description of an activity’.\textsuperscript{361} Brodd’s distinction is important because it underlines the manner in which our ministry is to be modelled on the ministry of Christ the servant. It reminds us that we should not to be so caught up in busyness, achievement or shoring up the membership of the institution that we forget the relational nature of diakonia.

The importance of this relational aspect of diakonia has been highlighted for me by an ongoing relationship with a member of the isolated community where I am now in ministry.\textsuperscript{362} I first met Julie\textsuperscript{363} towards the end of my first year in ministry within the community when I went along to a meeting at the local Community Centre.\textsuperscript{364} Over supper Julie handed me a plate of dried fruits and nuts and invited me to take some. On the plate was some dried mango. I love mango, and so I rather flippantly said ‘Oh, dried mango. I love mango. It’s such a sensual fruit.’ Julie looked at me with mock

\textsuperscript{361} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{362} My ministry location is currently within the Uniting Church’s Frontier Services ‘High Country Patrol’ (and the Gippsland Presbytery’s ‘East Gippsland Remote Areas Ministry’) in the Alpine region of far East Gippsland, Victoria. I have responsibility for ministry within the small farming communities of Ensay, Swifts Creek, Omeo, Benambra and the people of isolated farms in that area, along with the people of the Gelantipy and Wulgulmerang region and down towards the Snowy River. The distances are vast, and the population is small and scattered through rugged terrain. I am currently the only resident minister of any denomination serving in the area that the High Country Patrol covers.
\textsuperscript{363} Not Julie’s real name.
\textsuperscript{364} The background to the meeting was that during the late 1980s Swifts Creek, along with five other small towns around Victoria, participated in a ‘small towns’ study and this meeting was to be part of the follow-up of that study. Some consultants from Monash University had came to talk to a group of the locals about some of the difficulties and benefits of living in a small isolated town and to look at what might now be different from the time the initial study was made some seventeen years previously. The purpose of the meeting was to explore some of the strengths of the community and what might be needed for the future. As a newcomer to the area I was keen to learn a little more about how this community viewed itself.
horror and said, ‘You can’t say that; you’re the minister!’ We then got talking. The upshot of the conversation was that Julie offered to construct a garden around the church as her contribution to the overall landscaping and beautification of the community. She acknowledged that she was not a churchgoer but said ‘this is our church and it is part of our community. Now people will have a nice place to sit and rest in the shade’. This church garden, therefore, was to become her gift to the community. So, over a period of months Julie landscaped and constructed the garden. She potted up many of her own plants to go in, purchased others and mobilised members of the community to contribute plants for the church garden.

Who is providing ministry here – the church, the community, or Julie? All are, and even if she does not recognise it Julie has contributed to the opening up of a threshold for relationship and ministry within this particular community. It is unlikely that Julie will ever join in our small worship gatherings but she recognised the importance of the church for that community and wanted to play her part in creating an environment where people could feel welcomed. In a very real sense she has become part of the extended body of the church as it participates in the diakonia of Christ within that small community.

I am aware that Julie’s relationship was initially with me, and not so much with the institution of the church but it symbolises something of the nature and place of relational ministry in small isolated communities such as the one I am in. Certainly the fact that she knew I was ‘the minister’ provided something of a context for the relationship and an avenue to make the request to help with the garden. In this small community the church and its ministry is based very much on personal relationship
and trust rather than on who attends worship, important though that is. The nature of the relationships developed within the community are so important that they actually become the body and expression of the church within a particular location. This is all very basic to how ministry is often experienced in a variety of settings, and so perhaps nothing unusual. However, within a church environment where we often seem to be more concerned about numbers at worship and with what is happening within congregations than we are about where we might glimpse expressions of God’s grace outside the church, this story highlights that the ministry of the church is very much broader than this. It suggests that there is great value in taking the time and interest to allow ministry to emerge spontaneously from within the wider community, even if those who offer it may not recognise that this is what they are doing. Thus we are reminded of the many stories in the Gospels of ‘outsiders’, mostly women, who offered ministry to Jesus. As in the case of Julie, it is frequently those who are outside the life of the church who will demonstrate what it might mean to be servants pointing to the coming kingdom of God.

5.6 Indicators for a de-centred ministry

Understanding that mission is at the heart of the ministry of Deacon one deacon stated that for mission to be authentic it needs to engage with others in ways that are liberative and which ‘support and encourage people’s growth towards wholeness’. There is to be recognition that being part of God’s mission is an ongoing process, that God is always drawing us forward into new territory in order that we might share the Good News of the gospel. For most deacons this means being prepared to engage with the wider community by having an intentional focus outside the community of faith,
of being prepared to engage with the ‘other’ in ways whereby we can experience our own powerlessness and enter into relationships of mutuality and trust. It is this ability to recognise our own powerlessness and make an authentic commitment to mutuality with others that ‘enables us to bear God into the world’. Thus, suggests Dawn Nothwehr, the ‘how’ of our mission engagement is as important as the fact that we ‘do’ engage in mission. Moreover, we are required to engage in a manner that allows for a relinquishing of the ‘power of the powerful and a taking up of power by the poor and marginalised’ because, as one deacon suggests, it is through our own understanding of ‘servanthood as powerlessness that we are able to share the gospel of our paradoxical Jesus’.

Thus the discussion about the term ‘servant’, or diakonia and what that means, is of central importance for this research project and for deacons within the Uniting Church and it is through their ministry that our understanding of what the church is and where it is to be found can be enhanced. During the research deacons were asked to offer some images that informed their understanding of their ministry practice. Along with words such as companion, liberation, pastoral and prophetic the image of ‘servant’ was one of the five key images offered by deacon respondents. Understanding that most of us operate within a variety of images that speak to us at various points during our ministry, the responses around these five images suggest that they are significant ones for their ministry. They provide us with some helpful indicators for both the theory and practice of deacons’ engagement with others.

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366 Ibid., 250.
367 Ibid.
An exploration of the power of images for ministry can be very helpful because it puts in front of us a variety of understandings of how God might act within our contemporary world. This is critical for deacons because often the institution of the church will want deacons to conform in order for it to understand what it is deacons actually do. The danger is that the conforming tendencies of a predominantly congregation-based church will most likely result in a domesticating of the diaconate, pushing us back into some of the unhelpful legacies of the past. Exploring the power found in images invites us to discover something surprising and new about what sustains us in our life and ministry and affects the way we respond to those around us, helping us move into the possibility of a broader vision of what ministry could be. It allows us to safeguard and maintain the place of biblical witness and tradition, but also to search for an engagement that may provide an alternate pathway into understanding more of the heart of the Christian gospel for our time.

**Images and identity**

The use of images to describe ministry has long been part of how we have sought to express the heart of the Christian gospel. There are some images that have sustained the church through different periods of its history. Many are still valid although we will be helped if we can look for new interpretations in our images that will take us in new directions and provide for renewed opportunities for faithfulness. For instance, the juxtaposition of different images, such as ‘wounded healer’,368 ‘servant leader’369

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and ‘servant church’ offer the opportunity of discovering something of the paradox and vulnerability contained in diaconal ministry and gives us the space to explore other dimensions of our life together.

Discovering our own images for ministry has the potential of affecting human behaviour at a deeper subliminal level and forces us to attend to some of the questions of ministerial identity. Who we are in ministry and how we are in ministry are critical questions to address. What guides and directs our engagement in ministry and what sustains us in the day-to-day practice of this ministry are questions for both the heart and the spirit. They are questions of identity and call us to attend to the reality that part of our task as diaconal and pastoral ministers is to ‘symbolise the holy among the profane’. We are reminded that the art of imagery is at the heart of the Christian gospel giving us direction and the possibility of a ‘renewed understanding of ministry for the sake of the church and the world’.

**Being companions**

The image that was offered by most deacons to describe their ministry was that of companion. The similarities in some of the explanations offered for the choice of this image and that of ‘servant’ were significant. Many deacons spoke of the serving and

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370 See, for example John Booty, *The Servant Church: Diaconal Ministry and the Episcopal Church* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow, 1982); and Cone, ‘Servant Church’.


journeying aspect of being a companion, of being prepared to be present with people in those places where they live their lives, of being prepared to ‘be’ with people, to walk with them in their lives rather than ‘offering quick fix solutions and moving on’. This means sharing something of their experiences, listening to their story, and being prepared to be their friend as we journey alongside. It means helping people interpret the significance of their own story and life journey without judgement or fear. This will take some courage as very often we will have to step back from our own preconceptions and view the world through another’s eyes. Being a companion, or a friend, means being prepared to understand our own vulnerability and marginality as we journey with the other. It means being prepared to ‘work out our salvation together’ and understand that as companions we ‘try to negotiate that in the suffering of the world we see God’s grace within the relationships that we develop’.

One deacon in the Focus Group expressed the significance of this companion image within the context of mission when he stated:

> For me, my understanding of mission is helping people name the God encounters that they have in their everyday life. We don’t have to take God out, God is already there. Our task is to help people name that and to see it through a different lens other than a society lens, and in doing so they can then see themselves very differently.

In order to do this we need to take the time to develop relationships of trust and to understand that our own journey within this relationship will also be transformed. Moreover, suggests Joerg Rieger, it is in our encounter with those whom society may consider to be at the margins that we will understand how we can ‘become more aware of, and accountable to, what God is doing’.

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our task to define the manner of our engagement, we come to realise that it is frequently ‘the marginalised other’ who best shapes it.

However, we do need to take care that in our role as ‘companion’ we do not succumb to the temptation to objectify or generalise the journey to such an extent that our reflections are defined only from a position of power that takes little account of the contextual reality of those with whom we are in relationship. The ability to be in honest relationship with specific peoples and contexts is what legitimates our reflections and learning and thus authenticates our journey. \(^{374}\) Moreover, suggests the Indian theologian Thomas Thangaraj, there is to be a mutuality that leads to solidarity inherent within the journey for it to be a transforming encounter. Thangaraj suggests that we need to ‘begin our theological construction with local stories’. \(^{375}\) These are not just any stories, but must be both specific and contextual. These stories are of two kinds, ‘namely, one’s own autobiography and the story of one’s own local community, however one may define “local”’. \(^{376}\) Mutuality is essential as these stories are personal and ‘need to be in conversation with each other in the task of constructing a theology of mission’ \(^{377}\) and in order that our own stories do not merely ‘become matters of our inner subjectivity and autobiographical fancy’ \(^{378}\) without taking account of the possibility for any transforming impact of the other on us.

This notion of mutuality was a component of the five key images offered by deacons to describe their ministry. There are elements of hospitality and solidarity also

\(^{374}\) Ibid., 4.
\(^{375}\) Thangaraj, The Common Task, 28.
\(^{376}\) Ibid.
\(^{377}\) Ibid., 29.
\(^{378}\) Ibid.
inherent in this image: the ability to stand along side, to be present-with, and to be open to the possibility of receiving hospitality from the other. Being ‘present-with’ is a term used frequently by deacons, and it is understood in the sense of just ‘being’ with another person without the pressure to ‘do’. Deacons find this a liberating component of their ministry and see within it permission to engage with those outside the church without the distraction of believing that they should somehow be adding to congregational numbers. Primarily it is about offering the gift of ‘presence’ without any strings attached and frees us from the limiting notion of having to take responsibility for the responses of the other, or to ‘do’ for the other.

A ministry of being ‘present-with’

Most deacons have their own stories of what it means to just ‘be’ and not ‘do’ whether that is sitting with a homeless person on a city street, of journeying with an addicted person as his or her demons are quelled or of simply chatting with a young single mother over a cup of coffee. The importance of this ‘being’ aspect of ministry was made very clear to me during an encounter I had with a single mother, Susan.\textsuperscript{379} I had known Susan and her three young daughters for some time, having first met them when they came into our Emergency Relief Centre for assistance. The family was not part of the church, but at Susan’s invitation I had visited the family often at their home. Over time I developed a very good relationship with Susan and her daughters. Eventually she trusted enough to disclose that she was suspecting some form of sexual abuse of her youngest daughter during access visits with her former partner. I knew that Susan sensed what needed to happen in terms of the legal issues around the

\textsuperscript{379} Not Susan’s real name. This encounter happened in a previous placement where I was involved in outreach ministry within a growth corridor on the western side of Melbourne.
suspected abuse and that I would feel obliged to report the abuse. However during the
course of our conversation I realised that what she wanted from me was simply to be
‘her minister’, to simply ‘be’, and to believe in her and her story. There was
significant resistance from her if I suggested I would make the report: ‘No, not you, I
don’t want you to do it’ she said. What Susan required was for me to help her find
some other professional she could trust to do the reporting. My role was to believe in
her enough so that I would just journey with her through the process. She wanted me
to be her minister not her social worker, and, like the Syrophoenician woman in
Mark’s Gospel, persisted with me until she got what she wanted. She needed to know
that I was prepared to enter into the mutuality of the relationship we had developed,
that I would trust that she would follow through on what she knew needed to happen
and to simply support her in the process. The mutuality of the relationship meant that
she would not allow me to step outside experiencing some of her own vulnerability by
retreating to any formulaic response contained within the professional response that a
social worker might make. I was to respect the relationship I had with her and allow
her to define the nature of that relationship in order that her own future, and that of her
children, could be enhanced.

Our relationships with others are not always about ‘doing’, as we so often assume
them to be. In fact they may be rarely about ‘doing’. Thangaraj suggests that our
response and responsibility to others is to be understood within “a mode of solidarity”
which involves ‘a “being-with-ness”’.\textsuperscript{380} Moreover, this solidarity ‘stands for
relationships between humans … that respect the distinctiveness of each person, the
interweaving of structural relations, and a willingness to work with and alongside the

\textsuperscript{380} Thangaraj, The Common Task, 54. Italics follow Thangaraj.
Within the nature of our relationship Susan helped me understand something of what Thangaraj is referring to when he writes, ‘the very “going-forth-ness” of the human is possible only in a situation of interpersonal relations, [and a] social network of relationships’. Thus our mission, and our diaconal ministry in particular, must be seen within the sphere of the vulnerability of interpersonal relationships made possible within a spirit of mutuality.

‘Loitering with intent’

This requirement to just ‘be’ and support those we encounter on the outside of the church can be both prophetic and liberative for those we are in ministry with. No longer can we arrogantly assume that we have all of the answers to the questions which confront people, as together we must work to discover our mutual future. Many deacons speak of the notion of ‘loitering with intent’, a common phrase in mission circles today. It speaks of being intentionally present with people in a way that allows our response to emerge from the context of the other’s life and experience. Our response comes about as a result of being prepared to sit with the other in a way that demonstrates preparedness to enter into friendship and mutual hospitality. It takes time to ‘loiter with intent’ because, as one deacon suggests, we ‘never know what’s actually going on in people’s lives until you give them something of your time and self’.

Indeed, as Luther Smith reminds us, our ability to be present with people is bound up in our willingness to understand that the particularity of the churches social location

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381 Ibid., 55. Italics follow Thangaraj.
382 Ibid., 56.
383 Ibid., 57.
means that in order to provide credibility to our mission response we must realise that ‘before we can speak, we must listen’.\textsuperscript{384} This listening is a particular sort of listening. It is listening to the call of God in the gospel message\textsuperscript{385} and to the voice of the people.\textsuperscript{386} I suspect that this understanding is intuitive within the calling of most deacons within the Uniting Church and many will affirm, as did one deacon, that

\begin{quote}
it is important to develop relationships in a way that develops trust so that stories, concerns etc. can be shared and explored. Where we can be a ‘non-anxious’ presence with people who continue to experience stigma and shame on account of difference.
\end{quote}

Another small story from my own experience will illustrate something of what this ‘loitering with intent’ may mean.

Not long after I arrived in an outreach placement in the western suburbs of Melbourne I went to a weekly meeting of a local women’s group in an attempt to get to know a few of the women and to learn something more about the community the local congregation was asking me to minister in. I could tell that the members of the group were a little wary of me, but, nonetheless, they offered me hospitality. I very intentionally went back to that group every week, even though initially it was difficult to discern whether any difference was being made by my presence. However over time I could sense that they were accepting me. They soon forgot to apologise if their language became colourful and allowed me to become more involved in some of the functions of the group. I learnt more about the local community, the issues they were facing and the concerns they had about the community. I became privy to some of their family and health issues. Towards the end of my first year in the group they

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\textsuperscript{384} Luther E. Smith, *Intimacy and Mission: Intentional Community as Crucible for Radical Discipleship* (Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald, 1994), 68.
\textsuperscript{385} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{386} Ibid., 71.
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admitted to me that on the first day that I had come several of them had stood at the kitchen window of the Neighbourhood House and watched as I drove away. They said to each other, ‘She won’t be back’. Then with real warmth and affection they said ‘But you just kept coming back’.

My encounter with this group was very intentional. It was about being prepared to ‘be’ with them on their terms, to offer something of myself, to wait for any openings they gave me and to then respond. I was ‘loitering with intent.’ Thangaraj describes this intentionality as ‘kerygmatic presence’ and suggests that the church in the New Testament ‘saw itself as just being a community of faith at a given place’.387 Using the account of the early church at the end of Acts Chapter 2 Thangaraj describes the life of the church as the early disciples’ ‘being present in their society in an intentional and prophetic way’.388 Moreover, he suggests that mission in this instance was understood more in terms of ‘being’ rather than ‘being sent’ with the disciples being ‘where they were in intentional and specific way’ and that the ‘marks of this community were kerygma, koinonia, diakonia, and maturia’.389

5.7 Margins transforming centres

Thus we enter into the process of the margins transforming the centre. However, as Glory Dharmaraj reminds us, defining the centre is a complex task, as is that of identifying where the margins are.390 There may be as many centres as there are margins. Yet it is the margins that are to play a key role within our understanding of

387 Thangaraj, The Common Task, 102, 103.
388 Ibid., 103.
389 Ibid. Italics follow Thangaraj.
the ministry of Deacon. The Report on Ministry reminds the Uniting Church that deacons are to be present in the places where people of all sorts live their everyday lives, as a sign of the presence of God there. Particularly among people who are marginalised, oppressed, suffering, the forgotten, the unlovely, the deacon is a sign of the justice and mercy, judgement and forgiveness, compassion and saving grace, the suffering and victory of God.\(^{391}\)

Deacons’ involvement among people who are marginalised has a particular purpose that is directed towards the coming kingdom of God. Further, we are reminded that it is frequently at the margins that transforming encounters happen, and where we can discover that the margin ‘is the true center for God’s mission and our discipleship’.\(^{392}\) It is here that deacons are to model the service to which all Christians are called, which in itself ‘is a sign of the kingdom – present, anticipated and looked for’,\(^{393}\) and hold up to the church a mirror on what the true nature of the church is to be. Moreover, it is at the margins where we can be part of the transforming of the church and the world as together we participate in God’s mission and the future to which we are all called.

This ‘de-centredness’ of the ministry of Deacon has precedence in the ministry of Jesus who deliberately chose his disciples from those who were at the religious and political margins. His ministry was intentionally located at the margins where he sought out the ill, the lost, the crippled, and the excluded. He demonstrated to them that they mattered and were loved by God. He recognised the mutuality within his encounters and behaved as though he needed them as much as they needed him. They

became the ‘media for his message’\textsuperscript{394} and together, this “community of nobodies” … changed the world, from the margins to the centers\textsuperscript{395} It is this to which the church calls the contemporary diaconate, and it is to this that the church itself is called.

\textsuperscript{394} Gittins, \textit{Ministry at the Margins}, 153.
\textsuperscript{395} Ibid.
6.1 Introductory overview

As outlined in Chapter Two, the issue of a renewed understanding of the diakonia of the church and the manner of its ecclesial expression, as embodied in the ministry of Deacon, is a matter of important discussion in many denominational traditions today. Various reports and publications produced from within the ecumenical context attest to this.396 What is common to most of these documents is an acknowledgement that the conversations regarding how a renewed expression of diakonia may be expressed are being undertaken against the background of an exploration into how the mission of the church is to be understood within the context of a changing church and a changing society. Some reports suggest that ‘fragmentation rather than coherence, fluidity rather than stability, have become significant features of Western societies’397 and that ‘different patterns of ministry and of mission’ are called for as we recognise that ‘the call of the church to engage in the mission of God has shaped its life profoundly’.398 Thus we come to appreciate the extent to which our response to God’s call will


397 ‘For Such a Time as This: A Renewed Diaconate’, 20.

398 Croft, Ministry in Three Dimensions, 3.
continue to reform us, the life of the church and our understanding of Christian ministry.\textsuperscript{399}

Recognising that ‘whatever the Church says about the diakonia expressed in the ministry of Deacon it also says about the ministry of the whole people of God’\textsuperscript{400} there remain significant challenges if the church is to do justice to this ministry it believes God has called into being. Some of these challenges have been identified through this research and include issues around placement availability, funding of the ministry, a willingness to take seriously the diakonia of the whole church, education of the church regarding the ministry, and formation issues for candidates for diaconal ministry.

6.2 An identity based on ecclesial understandings

If, as this thesis suggests, diakonia is an ecclesial concept and is at the heart of the church’s identity then the nature of the church’s own diakonia will inevitably impact on identity issues for deacons. Because diaconal ministry is oriented towards action, it is sometimes tempting to confuse role and function with ecclesial and ministry identity. In order to take seriously our responsibility of living out the diakonia of the whole church we must move away from some of the unhelpful legacies of the past which defined the role of deacons purely in terms of being servants of the church undertaking various acts of charity, or of only taking responsibility for the social welfare arm of the church. Rather, we must move towards an understanding of the diaconate as being ‘defined out of ecclesiology and not [out of] a definition of what

\textsuperscript{399} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{400} ‘Review Report’, 2.
diakonia might be’. A deacon’s identity is to be found within the mandate of ordination and not from a role being carried out at any particular time. The distinction lies within understanding the relationship of the diaconate as being either ‘a fundamentally theological concept’ or as being a ‘description of an activity’. One flows from the other and ‘you do what you are’ because of the ecclesial basis of ordination.

Deacons need to understand the significance of this distinction. Many of the roles that we fulfil may appear very much like community development roles, or social work roles, and some deacons are qualified within these, and other, professional disciplines. This provides a helpful resource for the way in which the diaconal task may be undertaken. However, it is not our role within these particular disciplines that makes us a deacon because the role of the deacon is ‘uniquely Christian and has no counterpart in secular organizations’. Our mandate is to model Christ the servant and hold up service as being central to all Christian ministry. We are deacons fundamentally because the church has called and ordained us to be deacons and we carry a representative function for the sake of the whole. It is ecclesiology and ordination that defines a deacon’s identity, not role, function or professional expertise, important as these are in day-to-day ministry. Our ministry can be compromised if we are tempted to get so caught up in the ‘doing’ aspect of our calling that we forget what is at the heart of our identity. For instance, Susan, the young mother I referred to in

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403 Brodd, *The Diaconate*, 267. See also Brodd, ‘Caritas and Diakonia’, 27.
405 Ibid.
the previous chapter, was very quick to remind me of this distinction when I wanted to move too quickly away from being her minister towards being her social worker.

6.3 Taking account of the influence of history

In order to move towards a more integrated understanding of its representative expression of diaconal ministry the Uniting Church must assess its own reaction to the influence of differing interpretations of the ministry of deacons and deaconesses throughout history, particularly the last 200 years. Obviously the ministry emerging from Kaiserswerth and the work of the Fleidners is significant here. Whilst most modern expressions of the ministry of deacons and deaconesses have sought to move away from a reductionist understanding of humble servanthood and the charity approach of the nineteenth century, nonetheless it will be difficult to be completely free of this as the church continues to struggle with the consequences of this interpretation. For deacons it is of particular importance because it is difficult to model any renewed understanding of diakonia if the church as a whole remains defensive about the nature of its collective diaconal response. Often our understanding of ministry has been reduced to the perceived tasks of the person who undertakes it. Let me offer a short illustration.

At a meeting of a Synod committee recently one of the participants, a candidate for the ministry of Deacon, offered to get refreshments for others present at the meeting. When she brought the tray of refreshments into the room one member said: ‘Oh

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406 Some of the following is based on a paper I presented at an ecumenical deacons’ conference in Brisbane in October 2007: “Theological Reflections on Diakonia: From Scripture to …?” The paper was invited in response to the keynote address delivered by Dr John Collins.
Sally I see you are practising your servant ministry’. The embarrassed silence that followed indicated just how inappropriate such a comment was within the context of this meeting and it was observed that similar comments had never been made to other members of the group who had offered to get refreshments in the past. Comments such as this are often laughed off as a joke but all too often deacons or deacon candidates are on the receiving end of such comments. As a consequence their call to diaconal ministry is diminished, as is the diakonia of the whole church. Underneath the comment is a fundamental misunderstanding of what the ministry of Deacon is and the part deacons have to play within the life of the church. Their ministry is reduced to being merely that of ‘humble service’ with the result that those who are called into the ministry are required to carry the burden and responsibility for this misunderstanding. Such a response, suggests Aitchison is an ‘aberration’ and comes ‘from other people’s concept of deaconess, the Martha image still much admired by some male ministers and women in power in the church.”

### 6.4 An intentional location for ministry

The issue of margins figures prominently in the stories of deacons in ministry. Indeed, the Uniting Church expects that most deacons will find themselves in ministry with those whose lives are lived on the margins, however these margins are defined. This does not mean that ministry needs to be spectacular in any form, but it does ask that it be faithful to the gospel, that it focus on the coming kingdom of God and that it take proper account of ‘being present’ with those we are in ministry with. This may present significant challenges and will mean that we are required to listen again to those

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407 Not the actual name of the deacon candidate concerned.
voices which emanate from below, or from outside the perceived mainstream of tradition, and to recognise that the power of the ‘liminal place’ lies in its ability to subvert and transform from the outside.\textsuperscript{410} This marginal space is a paradoxical place to be because it demands that we turn backwards within our biblical and theological tradition in order to discover an identity for the present at the same time as we risk moving forward.

In practical terms this requires engagement in a process of radical hermeneutics, attention to an analysis of social and communal structures and reflection on lived experience in the light of the gospel and the future that the Spirit of God will create. Alongside the dominant metanarratives that are often developed in order to define dogma and understanding of reality, deacons can offer those much-needed counternarratives that give voice to an alternative reality, and offer insights that emerge from sustained theological reflection on their engagement with the margins. These counternarratives then help shape the church’s centre in a largely de-centred world as they identify and give meaning to those signs outside the institution which point to the Spirit of God at work.

This can be a difficult task. There will be many times when the conserving tendencies of the institution will attempt to domesticate the ministry of Deacon. Because deacons will serve for the most part in areas of life that are socially isolated and in places remote from the experience of many churchgoers, their ministry will frequently be misunderstood. Their presence will be open to misunderstanding and they will need to attend to the health of their own spirit in order to avoid discouragement and

\textsuperscript{410} Roxburgh, The Missionary Congregation, 47-48.
burnout. Thus deacons will need to be part of a community that offers support structures that are light and flexible and which will sustain without constricting.\footnote{Report on Ministry, 1991’, 42.}

### 6.5 Connection with a worshipping community

It is difficult to see how deacons can do justice to their call to represent the \textit{diakonia} of the whole church without having a strong connection to a local worshipping community. Along with being faithful to expressing the outward-directed, reconciling and missional focus of the church’s life\footnote{See ‘Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church’, 11.} deacons become within the community of God’s people a ‘sign and means for what is essential for what Christ and Church mean’.\footnote{Brodd, \textit{The Diaconate}, 242.} Therefore, ‘if \textit{diakonia} is so central, we cannot exclude it from the church’s liturgical life’\footnote{Walton, ‘\textit{Diakonia} in Worship’, 102. Italics follow Walton.} as ‘the \textit{diakonia} that the deacon embodies is not service-in-the-world alone, but a “double \textit{diakonia}”’\footnote{Ibid. Italics follow Walton. The term ‘Double \textit{diakonia}’ is used by Paulos Mar Gregorios. See Paulos Mar Gregorios, \textit{The Meaning and Nature of \textit{Diakonia}} (Geneva: WCC, 1988), 24.} whereby the level of ‘diaconal consciousness’ is specifically raised in worship as an essential component of a deacon’s ministry. The deacon embodies for each member of the local congregation the fact that their own ‘\textit{diakonia} is something given in baptism’\footnote{Aitchison, \textit{The Ministry of a Deacon}, 31. Here Aitchison is quoting Kevin Flynn. See Kevin Flynn, ‘Once a Deacon’, in \textit{Anglican Orders and Ordinations: Essays and Reports from the Interim Conference at Jarvenpää, Finland, of the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, 4-9/8/97}, ed. David R. Holeton (Cambridge, UK: Grove Books, 1997).} and not an optional extra only to be undertaken by those members called ‘deacon’. Thus the deacon is ‘a constant reminder to the church of its sharing in Christ’s … ministry … and helps all Christians
to live their baptismal vocation" as they stand at the ‘threshold of the church and the world, … leading others in mission in the world and worship in the church’. 418

The Uniting Church expects that deacons will have a leadership role in the worship life of the church. The challenge for the church is to understand the differing contexts where worship may occur. For many deacons it will not be within the ‘normal’ context of Sunday worship, but rather within those contexts where their day-to-day ministry is most often exercised. This will include prisons, church or community agencies, schools, and many of the ad hoc situations with people and groups who have no association with the formal structure of the worshipping church. For instance, deacons who work with isolated communities through their work with Frontier Services will carry out their worship responsibilities in remote stations or mining communities where presiding at the sacraments becomes central to their role. This is no less true for the deacon whose primary responsibility is to work with people who live with mental illness or whose home is the city street. We must recognise the legitimacy of these experiences and not assume that all worship for all people must take place on a Sunday and within the confines of church buildings and particular forms of congregational life.

We also need to recognise that these encounters may not mean that the pews in local churches will suddenly become filled and membership numbers increase. It is one of the common misconceptions that those people with whom deacons work are expected to then become members of local worshipping communities. This may happen, but frequently our local worshipping communities appear ‘foreign’ to those who have

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417 Brown, Being a Deacon, xiii.
418 Ibid., xi.
never been inside a church or who are not part of the largely white, western, middle class demographic that characterises much of the church. Thus there is a challenge here to any congregational ‘obsession’ in our understanding of church and the location of ‘legitimate’ ministry.419 One deacon spoke of this ‘obsession’ as being somewhat like the experiences of people living with some form of addiction when he suggested that

there are some great parallels between our own congregations and people of addiction. In reality they both know that they have to change but the change is often scarier than remaining where they are. There is a comfort zone of remaining where they are. They know things would be a lot better if they could change, but that step is just too big.

He wondered who it was who was addicted and suggested that his role as a deacon within the church was to encourage people to leave their comfort zone, to move out from their congregations and discover their own experiences of being marginalised in their proclamation of the gospel beyond the confines of their safe congregational structures.

### 6.6 A ministry that takes time

Many of the insights arising from the research indicate that for the ministry of Deacon to become effective it needs time to develop. This is so in terms of allowing the church as a whole to appreciate both the theological and practical insights offered by this ministry as well as allowing sufficient time for face-to-face ministry to become credible and sustained, as outlined through some of the research findings in Chapter

419 Gregor Henderson, ‘Looking Towards 2020: The Uniting Church in Post-Christian Australia’, *Uniting Church Studies* 3, no. 1 (1997): 4. In this short article Gregor Henderson reflects on his role as General Secretary of the National Assembly of the Uniting Church and offers some suggestions on what he thinks the UCA will look like beyond the year 2020. He suggests that, among other things, there will be a greater emphasis on a more localised expression of mission and ministry and more freedom in how a ‘congregation’ is defined, thus allowing a greater variety and definition of ‘faith communities’ to be recognised as being part of the church.
Three. Frequently deacon placements are offered as three-year appointments, often based on funding availability. The personal and professional strain that the expectations of this short-term ministry places on individual deacons is immense.\textsuperscript{420} Not only is continuity of ministry compromised, it is difficult to know how a ministry that the church specifically intends to be located within the most marginal places of our society can ever become self-sufficient in terms of financial resources. This is a significant challenge for the church’s financial commitments and Placements processes to address if it really wants to take this ministry, and its own expression of \textit{diakonia}, seriously. Ministry needs time to develop because credibility, trust and ‘presence’ take time to establish within any context.

\textbf{6.7 A ministry formed for its task}

Perhaps one of the most significant challenges for the Uniting Church is the manner in which it approaches formation for its embodied expression of diaconal ministry. It is important to ground formation for this ministry within a thorough background of biblical, historical, pastoral and theological disciplines. However there is also an urgent need to ensure that this is done within the context of a formation experience that takes seriously the nature of the engagement of this ministry and the vision that led to its renewal in the life of the church. It is worth highlighting again the hope expressed by Davis McCaughey that those people whom the church recognises as being endowed with the special gifts and graces for ‘service for the needy world’\textsuperscript{421} will be trained appropriately. If, as McCaughey suggests, there is a ‘theological principle underlying our understanding of the church that [these gifts] should be

\textsuperscript{420} ‘Review Report’, 11-12.
\textsuperscript{421} McCaughey, \textit{Commentary on the Basis of Union}, 77.
different, distinctly characterising particular people.”\footnote{Ibid., 77, 78.} then we need to ensure that deacons are formed in the best possible manner for their calling to this distinctive ministry. This means that deacon formation will not just mirror the formation needs of other candidates preparing for ministry. Time and effort also needs to be put into ensuring that deacon candidates receive appropriate education within some of the social sciences and community development fields. Some flexibility in terms of length of course, timetabling, and expectations of what might constitute core curriculum for deacon candidates is required.

Some of the practical implications of this have been set out within the \textit{Review Report}.\footnote{\textquote{Review Report}, B27-15-17, B27-19-21.} Inevitably this will mean additional financial commitment on the part of the church in order to better enable the long term and specific formation costs for deacon candidates. This is also true with respect to providing for appropriate educational opportunities of the wider church regarding this ministry.

\section*{6.8 Moving forward together}

To the question regarding future directions deacons offered responses covering issues relating to finding appropriate placements for deacons, finance availability for the ministry, appropriate formation needs for candidates, the education of the church as a whole about the diaconate, and personal and professional identity for deacons. They also identified as important the freedom to be engaged in ministry with those on the margins with the church’s blessing and support, and the need for greater attention to be given to the relationship of the diaconate with the church’s understanding of its
own theology of mission. The church must appropriate its representative diaconal ministry and find ways of intentionally incorporating its needs and theology into the day-to-day life of the church as much as deacons must understand themselves to stand under the authority and accountability of the church. Unless deacons are able to see themselves as truly embodying the \textit{diakonia} of the whole church their theological and ecclesial insights will remain compromised and ineffective, as will the capacity of the church to be a ‘sign’ pointing towards the coming of God’s kingdom.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

7.1 Summary

The natural place for a deacon to be, suggests Rosalind Brown, is on the margins, able to ‘occupy space on the boundaries, to be … at ease alongside people who are at the edges of church and society’.\textsuperscript{424} This is not because they might have a preference for this particular lifestyle, but because the church itself expects them to be there ‘simply because God is there’.\textsuperscript{425} The insights of Uniting Church deacons, the subjects of this research, affirm this suggestion. Most have been attracted to this ministry because of its primary focus on the marginalised and various social contexts outside the normal understanding of congregational life. They are, however, acutely aware of the importance of the representative function and ecclesial connections of their ministry. Most respondents affirmed the primary importance of embodying the liberating message of the gospel for those who live their lives on the margins, many of whom will have no formal connection with the institutional church. The challenge for deacons and for the church is to ensure that their ministry arises out of sound theological principles that ground it firmly within the mission of the church, principles that are supported by the biblical and historical traditions of the church.

The results of this research, and the insights of scholars such as Sven-Erik Brodd, amongst others, suggest that it is only after we have clearly defined diakonia as being

\textsuperscript{424} Brown, Being a Deacon, 33.
\textsuperscript{425} Ibid., 31.
of the essence of the church, and a response that all members of the community of faith are called to, that we can then talk about the specific and representative ministry of deacons. Often we have developed our understanding of ministry from the function of a particular group of people, sometimes citing inadequate understandings of biblical precedence and cultural and church traditions to support our position. Ultimately this severely compromises our faithful response to the gospel, a gospel grounded on the life and witness of the risen Christ within the contextual realities of daily living.

This research has suggested that the commitment of the Uniting Church to renew its diaconal ministry has enabled the church to be clearer in its understanding of the representative function of an ordained diaconate and build on the important and often ground-breaking ministry of many former deaconesses. It has opened up the way for a group of people to offer for ministry, committing themselves to this intentional outward-directed missional focus for the sake of whole church. The context of their ministry means that they will need to be influenced by some of the theological and practical insights emerging from various community development disciplines and liberation theologians.

This research was undertaken primarily for the benefit of the Uniting Church deacon community but I hope it will also have value for the church as a whole, with some important insights emerging for future exploration and action. Some of these have been outlined in Chapter Six where I have suggested some ongoing challenges for deacons and for the Uniting Church.
I have identified that when the Uniting Church renewed its expression of diaconal ministry it did so within the context of similar renewals within the ecumenical church and within the context of a thorough grounding in the church’s commission to be a church at mission. A significant portion of this thesis was given over to an exploration of what this call to mission means for deacons and the church as a whole. The research re-enforced the importance of offering insights to the church from deacons’ ministry with those on the margins. Chapter Four outlined some biblical and theological implications for a missional church and led me to suggest, in Chapter Five, that the ministry of Deacon could be viewed as a de-centred one, sometimes offering an alternative view on where and how the church might define its life. Chapter Five also explored connections between the responses and insights offered by deacon respondents and insights from a variety of other theologians regarding what this de-centredness might mean for the church and for ministry.

The insights of deacons actively engaged in ministry were critical in informing the content of this research. There was, however, an intentionality in the way that deacons were encouraged to respond using their reflective stance on the nature of the church and its mission. Therefore questions about church and mission were central and as I expected, rich insights on these questions emerged, affirming the direction that the church took in its renewal of the diaconate and offering a well-informed theological critique and reflection on their ministry. These responses are set out in Chapter Three, which deals with methodology and findings. Within this section deacons offered a variety of images – such as companion, servant, liberator, pastor and prophet – to undergird the practice of their ministry. They also offered a rich list of biblical and
theological images to explore, some of which were dealt with in Chapters Four and Five of the thesis.

A major component of this thesis was an exploration into the *diakonia* of the church, particularly as it relates to the representative function of the ministry of Deacon. *Diakonia* is a central biblical and theological term and is at the heart of the church’s identity, including that ofdeacons. I used insights and challenges emerging from the scholarship of John Collins, who suggests that we need to look again at the way we interpret and use this word in our discussions about the ministry of Deacon. Also influential was the work of Sven-Erik Brodd, who contends that *diakonia* is an ecclesial concept and is at the heart of the church’s identity, being ‘fundamental for the life of the church’.426 Brodd’s insights provided an important platform for the basis of the research and any interpretation of the findings. The experiences of deacons in the Uniting Church affirm Brodd’s position and the research findings suggest that most deacons embody within their day-to-day practice of ministry the reality that ‘the task of the diaconate is to be a sign for the whole church of its own *diakonia*’.427

Significant challenges remain for the church if it is to take this reality seriously. We can no longer be bound by incomplete interpretations of *diakonia*, nor outdated stereotypes of what deacon ministry is about, stereotypes that continue to promote the notion of humble servanthood and which say less about current deacons’ understanding of the theology and practice of their ministry than they do about those who continue to hold such views. Rather, it is now time for the church to more fully

426 Brodd, ‘Diaconia through Church History’, 20.
427 Ibid., 21.
embrace the richness that this representative ministry has to offer. In so doing it may discover that within the de-centred view of ministry offered by its deacons is something central to its own collective *diakonia*.

One of the gifts of the diaconate is the affirmation that within the marginal places where deacons minister the church will find its own identity and call to mission. Whilst this ecclesial and missional understanding of the ministry of Deacon is central to the Uniting Church’s renewed understanding of this ministry, it stands alongside similar insights emerging from international and ecumenical perspectives on the diaconate where a renewed understanding of the meaning of the *diakonia* (service) of the whole church is also being offered.

### 7.2 Beyond this research project

Whilst some important insights have emerged from this research project there is scope to go beyond some of the implications explored within the thesis. As the research was intentionally focused on how deacons understood their ministry with people on the margins, particularly in relation to questions of church and mission, there were limitations with respect to the breadth of conclusions that could be drawn. For instance, it would be important to now explore the manner in which those whom deacons were in ministry with actually received their ministry, and whether this was consistent with deacons’ own understanding of how they think their ministry is received. Such research would be consistent with deacons’ commitment to listening to the voices of those on the margins, particularly if this voice offered an alternative view.
Equally important would be to explore how the church itself receives the ministry of deacons and what impact this has on how it now understands its own diakonia. If, as it has been suggested, diakonia is ‘such an important aspect of the gospel’ it must be given a ‘correspondingly important position in the proclamation of the church and the life of the congregation, as the Word expressed in action’. It would therefore seem important to explore how the ministry of Deacon influences the manner in which this happens on a day-to-day basis within the life of a congregation and the manner in which the congregation then becomes more aware of its own identity as a church of diakonia.

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429 Ibid.
## Appendix Contents

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Appendix One

QUESTIONNAIRE
Research Project for degree of Doctor of Ministry Studies
by Alison McRae

Project Title:
De-centred ministry: a diaconal view of mission and church

QUESTIONNAIRE
This questionnaire is designed to elicit basic information regarding ministry placements for deacons, and to receive information regarding deacons’ understanding of their ministry, especially around issues of mission and church, and in the light of the Uniting Church’s definition of that ministry (see page on Explanatory statement).

By filling in and returning the questionnaires participants are agreeing to take part in the collection of data and to having that data included in the writing up of the research project. No identifiable names will be included in the coding of the data, or in the written up research. However, it is likely that my personal knowledge of the circumstances of some deacons in this survey means that I may be able to identify you through the description of your ministry setting. If this is the case I give you my assurance that I will not deliberately attempt to do so, and that the information provided by you will be treated by myself not only in strictest confidence but in awareness of the trust which we owe to one another in ministry.

The data to be collected will be used within the writing up of the above named research proposal, the final form of which will appear as a Thesis, held within the office of the Melbourne College of Divinity and the Joint Theological Library, UCA Theological Hall, Ormond College, Parkville, Melbourne.

The questionnaire should take no longer than one hour to complete.
The questionnaire is divided into three different sections.
It is important that you answer the questions in each section.

Section 1. Background to your Placement and ministry experience
Section 2. Interpretive questions: How do you understand your ministry within the local context, and in light of statements by the church about the ministry?
Section 3. Hermeneutical questions: What does your ministry mean within the overall ministry of the Uniting Church?

Some of the questions will assume some knowledge of the Report on Ministry in the Uniting Church presented to the 1991 Assembly, and the Report on Ordination presented to the 1994 Assembly. If you do not have a copy of the relevant sections of these reports, please contact me and I will forward them to you.

Please return completed questionnaires to Alison McRae by Monday 28th November 2003
SECTION ONE

(Note: this section was repeated four times in order to allow a separate section to be completed for those deacons who had different locations of ministry placements. This is not reflected in the questionnaire included for this Appendix of the thesis. The layout of the questionnaire has been condensed in order to fit more easily into the Appendices)

BACKGROUND TO PLACEMENT AND MINISTRY EXPERIENCE

1.1 Date of Ordination

For the rest of Section One, please follow through with the full series of questions for each ministry Placement you have been in so far

1.2 Please indicate the ministry Placements (including length of time) you have been in since ordination.

PLACEMENT ONE (see above note)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Synod and Presbytery</th>
<th>No. of Years &amp; Dates</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Your role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.3 To whom were you/are you primarily responsible for your ministry in this setting?: (circle relevant body)
   Congregation
   Presbytery
   Synod
   Assembly
   Chaplaincy (state type)
   Agency (specify type)
   Other (indicate who)

1.4 In no more than one sentence please describe the major focus of your ministry tasks in this area.

1.5 Would you describe your ministry as being: (circle the choice closest to your view)

   Yes  ‘inside’ the church
   No   ‘outside’ the church?

Please expand on reasons for your answer, and provide examples from your ministry setting.
1.6 Is this/was this placement part of a ministry team? If yes, please give numbers in team and briefly outline positions other team members hold/held.

1.7 What role (if any) do you/did you have within the worship life of the church? Please outline.

SECTION TWO

HOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND YOUR CURRENT MINISTRY WITHIN THE LOCAL CONTEXT, AND IN THE LIGHT OF STATEMENTS MADE BY THE CHURCH ABOUT THE MINISTRY OF DEACON?

2.1 Please outline the ministry relationship you have with different sections of the wider community:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Nature of your ministry relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

2.2 Do you see this relationship as being central to your ministry? (circle appropriate one)

No Not very Fairly Very

Please use back of sheet if you need more room

2.3 The 1991 Report on Ministry in the Uniting Church states that deacons are called
(i) to be, along with the scattered members of the congregation, a sign of the presence of God in the everyday world.
(ii) To be especially aware of the places in the community where people are marginalised, and,
(iii) to be a sign, both in the church and in the community of the kingdom in which all things are made new (see pages 41 and 42 of 1991 Report)

Please describe briefly how your current ministry responds to each of the above affirmations about the ministry of Deacon:
(i)
(ii)
(iii)

2.4 The ministry of Deacon is often described as being a ‘ministry on the margins.’

In what ways might this be an accurate description of your ministry?

2.5 Deacons in the Uniting Church exercise a sacramental ministry appropriate to their calling and ministry context.
In what ways does this sacramental ministry enhance your understanding and practice of ministry?

SECTION THREE

WHAT DOES YOUR MINISTRY MEAN WITHIN THE OVERALL MINISTRY OF THE UNITING CHURCH?
(These questions are designed to be seen within the context of the ministry of Deacon as an ordained and representative ministry of the Uniting Church, and as outlined within both the 1991 and 1994 Reports to Assembly.)

3.1 What images or metaphors would you use to describe your understanding of the ministry of Deacon?

3.2 If you were describing to another person what is most distinctive about the ministry of Deacon, what would you say?

3.3 In a nutshell, what is the understanding of ‘church’ which informs the practice of your ministry?

3.4 Briefly, what is the understanding of ‘mission’ which informs the practice of your ministry?

please use back of sheet if you need more room

3.5 To varying degrees we identify with labels emphases or images for our theological or ministry approach, for example:

- liberation
- feminist
- missional
- evangelical
- social analysis
- pastoral
- ‘orthodox’
- prophetic
- servant
- companion
- other

Please identify up to four words you identify with, either from the list or using others, and give reasons for your answer (in no more than one sentence for each).

1
2
3
4

3.6 Do you feel that your ministry has been well understood within your Placement
setting?  

*Circle appropriate one*

- No
- Not much
- Moderately well
- Very well

Explain:

3.7 What impact do you think your ministry has on your congregation/agency’s understanding of its mission?

Give reasons and examples for your answer.

3.8 What challenges and possibilities for new directions are there for you within your placement?

3.9 Based on your experience in ministry, how would you like to see the ministry of Deacon further developed within the Uniting Church?

Give reasons for your answer.

3.10 What is your ‘wish list’ for future ministry placements for deacons?

Please provide a rationale for your answer.

______________________________________________________________

Thank you for taking the time to fill in the questionnaire.  
Completed Questionnaires can be returned (by 28th November 2003) to:

Rev Alison McRae (Deacon)  
21 Dummett Avenue  
Hoppers Crossing  
Victoria 3029
### Appendix Two
Overview of overall response to questionnaire according to ministry category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministry Placement Category</th>
<th>Type of ministry context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frontier Services</td>
<td>Four Patrol ministries, including both aerial and 4 wheel drive patrols ministering in small congregations and to remote and isolated communities/families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbytery/Synod/Assembly</td>
<td>Two separate placements with UCA Partner Churches overseas; Mental Health appointment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission Outreach</td>
<td>Deacon as second agent in congregation with outreach responsibility; sole ministry agent working with cluster of congregations in outreach work in specific area of regional city; task to establish ‘church’ for ‘non-churched’ in growth corridor of city; Co-ordinating minister-Uniting Church in the City/City Mission; dual role of congregational minister and chaplain to Drop-in centre for people with mental illness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Prison chaplain; agency minister in large UCA Community Agency; position as ‘deacon’ within child and family services agency; deacon/counsellor in UCA agency; chaplain in drug and alcohol rehabilitation agency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregation</td>
<td>Worship leadership and pastoral support (part time/sole ministry agent); leadership of congregation (sole ministry agent); worship leadership and mission outreach (rural/sole ministry agent); minister of congregation/mission outreach leadership (sole ministry agent); minister of congregation and using Community Development skills for mission outreach (part time/sole ministry agent); “Parish Minister” (rural/sole ministry agent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaplaincy</td>
<td>Chaplains in Aged Care facility and in a General Hospital.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Three
Focus Group Discussion Questions

MELBOURNE COLLEGE OF DIVINITY
Research Project for degree of Doctor of Ministry Studies

Project Title:
De-centred ministry: a diaconal view of mission and church

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION
The following are the parameters of discussion for the Focus group meetings. They are designed to ‘mirror’ the categories as set out in the questionnaire.

Each participant will be given a copy of these questions at the beginning of the process.

A copy of the transcript from the Focus Group will be made available to all participants.

First session  (November 2003)

Introductory meeting.

1. Invite each person to reflect on their current Placement, and their ministry experience.

2. How would you describe the major focus of your ministry tasks?

3. What do you think ministry ‘on the margins’ might mean for your current ministry setting.

4. How do you think this relates to your understanding of the ministry of Deacon?

Questions for clarification, and in order to enhance the discussion will be allowed during the Focus Group process.

For next session:

Provide each participant with a copy of the relevant sections of the 1991 and 1994 Reports to Assembly, and relevant sections of the Report of the Review Task Group to the 2003 Assembly.
Second session  (March 2004)

Interpretive questions: Your ministry and the wider community

1. Invite each participant to outline how they are involved within the wider community.

2. In what way is this a key component of your present ministry Placement

3. Based on key themes coming out of the 1991 Ministry Report, (eg: The 1991 Report on Ministry in the Uniting Church states that deacons are called:

   - to be, along with the scattered members of the congregation, a sign of the presence of God in the everyday world.
   - To be especially aware of the places in the community where people are marginalised, and
   - To be a sign, both in the church and in the community of the kingdom in which all things are made new (see pages 41 and 42 of 1991 Report)

Describe how your involvement in the wider community relates to your understanding of the ministry as a deacon.

4. Deacons in the UCA exercise a sacramental ministry appropriate to their calling and ministry context.
   In what ways does this sacramental ministry enhance your understanding and practice of ministry?

5. As a result of discussion based on the first three questions, what do you think a ministry on the margins means for you and your current ministry setting? (this question connects back to one of the discussion questions from the first Focus Group meeting)

Questions for clarification and in order to enhance the discussion will be allowed during the Focus Group process.
Third session (May 2004)

Hermeneutical questions: Your ministry and the wider church

• Recap of where we have come from through the process. Allow for any areas of clarification to be dealt with.

• Invite participants to talk about an image or metaphor that they find helpful in describing their understanding of their ministry as a deacon.

• If you were asked to describe in one sentence what the church is, what would you say?

• In what ways does reflection on your ministry practice inform your understanding of the church?

• In what ways does your experience as a Deacon inform your understanding of mission?

• What challenges and possibilities for new directions are there for you within your placement?

Questions for clarification, and in order to enhance the discussion will be allowed during the Focus Group process.

Thank you for being willing to participate in this Focus Group process.

Alison McRae
(May 2004)
### Appendix Four

Collation of responses for Images offered from questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMAGE</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Frontier Services</th>
<th>Pres/Syn/Assem</th>
<th>Mission outreach</th>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Cong’n</th>
<th>Chap’y</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4/6 = 67%</td>
<td>3/6 = 50%</td>
<td>5/9 = 56%</td>
<td>5/8=62.5%</td>
<td>6/13=46%</td>
<td>2/8=25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companion</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servant</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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<td>Liberation</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Pastoral</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Prophetic</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missional</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Five
Collation of dominant images offered, along with explanations and linkages.

The following table outlines the five dominant and subsequent linked images offered by respondents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Key words/phrases from explanations offered</th>
<th>Suggested linkages with other images offered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COMPANION (noun)</td>
<td>Journeying alongside, being present, relationship, common journey, as in breaking bread together, being ‘with’ and sharing in life together, incarnation: God became human in Christ, to offer and receive as Christ did.</td>
<td>Incarnational, hospitality solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SERVANT (noun)</td>
<td>Enabling, leading from within, serving others and not self, giving and receiving, meeting needs of the marginalised spiritually, emotionally and physically, awareness of both serving and being served, to offer and receive as Christ did.</td>
<td>Hospitality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIBERATOR (noun)</td>
<td>Enabling people to be free in a variety of ways; pointing towards the liberation Christ offers, Justice for the oppressed, new freedom and gives hope when despair seems possible, breaking bonds which oppress and where I see liberating power of God, encourage growth towards wholeness, standing with/alongside, advocacy, identifying and hearing the unheard voices, empowering people and teaching about basic human rights</td>
<td>Feminist solidarity social analysis advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PASTOR (noun)</td>
<td>Listening to deeper issues of life, care in times of crisis, attending to the spiritual dimension of the lives of people involved in Agency, standing with, friendship, hospitality, giving something of time and self, caring, companion on journey, sitting with, allowing people to be themselves, help people understand and interpret their lives and connections to God, incarnation continues on in us, operating with a history of faith. offer and receive as Christ did, extend unconditional love to all.</td>
<td>Hospitality companion story-teller grace incarnational orthodox orthodox solidarity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROPHET (noun)</td>
<td>Looking for a different paradigm, challenging injustice, to seek an alternate vision, voice to the church about the place of the marginalised, critique and expose individual oppression which is backed by societal structures, calling church to be an inclusive and just community, identifying and hearing the unheard voices, God becoming human: Incarnation, empowering people, a physicality that draws to the homeless, hungry and poor in variety of contexts.</td>
<td>Social analysis advocate feminist incarnation solidarity earthed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix Six

**Collation of responses for all images offered**
*(see 3.1 and 3.5 of Questionnaire)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image offered</th>
<th>No. of response</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Companion</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Journeying alongside; in the understanding of being present and with people as in breaking bread or sharing in life together; being ‘with’ people and being prepared to walk with them rather than just offering quick fix solutions and moving on; because all this is done in relationship. Being a friend to, and being alongside the marginalised to share others’ journey; because I believe that together with my clients ‘we work out our salvation together’ and that as companions trying to negotiate the suffering of the world we see God’s grace in the relationships we develop together; we are on a common journey; journeying with people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servant</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Enabling, serving and leading from within out of grace shown to me—I am called to serve others with the grace and love of God; as in servant leadership, modelling servanthood is a process of both giving and receiving, being prepared to give something of myself away; this role can be expressed in various contexts, even my time as interim Presb. Minister was one of servant of the Presbytery; word is important because it emphasises the paradoxical nature of Christian ministry and mission (see Philippians 2:1-13); meeting the needs of the marginalised, spiritually, emotionally and practically as is possible; in being part of a service agency of the church and modelling the ‘servant’; providing emotional and physical support; Jesus washing disciples feet has been significant for me as an image of ministry; to practice humility and awareness of both serving and being served.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Enabling the people to be free in a variety of ways Christ came to set people free from all kinds of things—inside and outside their lives – justice for the oppressed; attempting to free people of the things that hamper their lives and development; because it speaks of a new freedom to be and gives hope when despair is probable; … is to be liberating, is to be unorthodox …; because I constantly work with people to identify and address the bonds which oppress them and in such work I see the liberating power of God; to find ways that support and encourage people’s growth and movement towards wholeness; standing alongside, advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastoral</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>practical help plus a listening ear leads to looking at the deeper things of life as relationship grows; seeking to relate to the spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Value</td>
<td>Description</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prophetic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>looking for a different paradigm; our society (Aust) needs prophets now, perhaps more than ever; challenging injustice; because the world needs to hear the alternative vision and imagine in a new way; being a prophetic voice to the church about how God is working in the world with the marginalised and how we are called to join this work; because I am aware that individual oppression is backed up and supported by societal structures and beliefs which need to be critiqued and exposed; because God reveals things that are meant to be an encouragement; calling the body of faith to be an inclusive just community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>enabling the people to be free in a variety of ways; Christ came to set people free from all kinds of things—inside and outside their lives—justice for the oppressed; attempting to free people of the things that hamper their lives and development; because it speaks of a new freedom to be and gives hope when despair is probable; … is to be liberating, is to be unorthodox…; because I constantly work with people to identify and address the bonds which oppress them and in such work I see the liberating power of God; to find ways that support and encourage people’s growth and movement towards wholeness; standing alongside, advocacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missional</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>being part of the <em>missio ecclesio</em>, and the <em>missio Dei</em>; mission is an ongoing process, i.e. never ending … there is always more to do … God is always drawing me forward into new territory; in the going into another ‘context’ (it could be in Aust. of course) we become powerless (or less powerful) and more able to share the gospel of our paradoxical Jesus; engaging in the world; … to be evangelical is to be missional …; having a focus always outside the gathered body of faith; as previously stated, there is no room to sit idly and ponder the gospel meaning without action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>all these are one for me … ; because it is about bringing ‘good news’; proclaiming Good News; the Good News leads to praise and thanksgiving which leads to healthier lives; proclaiming and naming the gospel message of love, grace and hope that comes from God in and through Jesus Christ.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Feminist     | 3     | identifying and hearing the unheard voices; God is greater/larger than any titles and boxes—let’s keep open to the greatness of this incredible God; because I am aware that in a sinful world, women
often bear the brunt of suffering and oppression and God’s word is
one of special favour for the weakest and most disdained.

| Social Analysis | 2 | this world acts too often out of fear and revenge; More understanding
|                 |   | and guts to act accordingly required; |
| Hospitality     | 2 | to offer and receive as Christ did. |
| Political Mystic| 1 | (see Messer) as it succinctly links a range of the above ‘labels’ into
|                 |   | one term. |
| Advocate        | 1 | empowering people to take greater control of the present
|                 |   | circumstances and to teach them about basic human rights. |
| Earthed         | 1 | there is a physicality, a practicality to ministry that is drawn to the
|                 |   | homeless, hungry, poor in a variety of contexts. |
| Solidarity      | 1 | standing with. |
| Unorthodoxy     | 1 | … which in turn is evangelical. |
| Orthodox        | 1 | i.e. operating with a history of faith, responsible and respectful and
|                 |   | recognising the inevitable changes that are part of growth. |
| Grace           | 1 | to extend unconditional love to all. |
| Theologian      | 1 | in seeking to encourage intentional theological reflection by the
|                 |   | Board about policies/directions for the agency. |
| Expansive       | 1 | an understanding of God that is wide, inclusive, embracing, |
| Theology        |   | liberating. |
| Story-teller    | 1 | being able to help people understand and interpret their lives and their
|                 |   | connection to God. |
| Incarnational   | 1 | God became human in Christ – that incarnation continues on in us. |
**Appendix Seven**  
**Collation of responses offered regarding ‘mission’, by ministry category**  
*(see 3.4 of questionnaire)*

Respondents were asked to offer an understanding of mission which informed the practice of their ministry. They were to do this from within the context of their present ministry placement (at the time of filling out the questionnaire), but also to draw on their wider ministry experience and understanding within the life of the church.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MINISTRY CATEGORY</th>
<th>RESPONSES REGARDING MISSION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Frontier Services | Our mission is Christ’s mission to live and work towards the Kingdom of God.  
Mission is enabling the reign of Christ to be the experience of all people.  
Be aware, be humble, be yourself, and listen, listen, listen.  
An attempt to engage the world that is not church in a fully truthful manner.  
The ‘mission’ as I understand it is to bring the hope of God into situations where I find myself – maybe showing love, compassion, speaking out on reconciliation and justice, walking alongside people in different times with support and care. |
| Presbytery Synod Assembly | My mission is empowered by John 21:15-19 and the call to “pick up your cross and follow me”  
Mission arises from the ‘heart’ rather than the ‘mind’ i.e. it happens naturally and at times unconsciously.  
Meeting people where they are at, befriending them, showing them Christ in and through me rather than going out specifically to ‘evangelise’. Over time, when the time is right, sharing about Christ arises but is not my primary focal point.  
Mission is about people living life as abundantly as possible, i.e. in the context of a loving God. It involves the whole person – their spirituality as well as their physical and practical needs.  
While material needs may have to be met it is also necessary that mission involve a helping of people to help themselves, to take the necessary steps to gain self-esteem — through acceptance of God’s love as shown in Christ. This can be developed in community and through community and comes to have a mutuality to it.  
Mission is the ‘intentional’ action of a Christian person when they leave their ‘context’ for ministry in the name of Christ. ‘Christian witness’ is our everyday responsibility as Christians and happens in our local ‘context’. |
| Mission Outreach | Mission is being with people who are hurting in the community and offering them, in a relational way, the love of God.  
God is at work transforming the world into a community of love, justice and peace and invites us to participate in this mission.  
Mission is evangelism.  
Help people to acknowledge what is mission from their life and introducing them to the answer as I know it. This I believe is achieved by helping people demolish the barriers they or others have erected, which may stop them from this crucial meeting with their God. These barriers may be many things, including: poverty, relationships, riches, life |
experiences, illnesses, education etc.
Mission in this context can be seen as the promotion, preaching, and proclamation of the gospel. Gospel meaning ‘Good News’ means to bring ‘Good News’. This is not so much about ‘here after’ or next world phenomena, but rather about the solidarity, care, and compassion of God for people experienced in real terms in whatever situation.
It’s to participate with God in the process of transformation in the world.

| Agency | Mission is about walking with people at a time when God can be heard more clearly, i.e. when things are at a low or crisis point.
To enable encounters with grace.
Mission is sharing in God’s work in the world. God is at work with vulnerable children, young people and their families—the agency participates in God’s work with these people. I seek to bring an awareness of this to the wider church, and an awareness in the agency of what it’s work means for the church.
I understand mission to be about NOT expecting people to move to encompass our (as Christians) positions, view points and beliefs, i.e. to come to us, as much as we are called to move out amongst them and acknowledge the ways that God is already at work bringing wholeness and healing to their lives and situations.
As above. I cannot separate my understanding of mission and church, as the church is called to be ‘missional’ |

| Congregation | what’s happening here and how can we be involved in it. Where is God at work within the school? Community? Where do we need to be and how do we need to be there? Currently, how do I deal with the fundamentalists!
Moving beyond the congregation into the wider community or working with those who are on the fringes of the congregation
Mission – proclaiming the love of God that brings people to wholeness and inclusion in a community of faith.
To take the care and concern of God’s people to the furthest and darkest places of our cities and isolation of our country.
Living, speaking, acting — informed by, responsive to the faith we hold and the God who holds us all.
To connect people with the notion that they are welcomed and loved by God, and that the church ought to be an embodiment of that. |

| Chaplaincy | Christ said to go into all the world – to gather the people from the lanes and alleyways. Forgotten people to be brought to God’s banquet of love that is offered unconditionally. |
Appendix Eight

Collation of responses offered regarding ‘church’, by ministry category

*(see 3.3 of questionnaire)*

Respondents were asked to offer an understanding of Church which informed the practice of their ministry. They were to do this from within the context of their present ministry placement (at the time of filling out the questionnaire), but also to draw on their wider ministry experience and understanding within the life of the church.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MINISTRY CATEGORY</th>
<th>RESPONSES REGARDING CHURCH</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frontier Services</td>
<td>The people of God gathered together in any place. I think we use church in many different ways. To be the church in a way that people might always expect it to be, yet offering a new way to be into the future, whatever that is! Christ as “servant-leader”, expressed in the local church as Discipleship of Christ. It is God existing in community. ‘Church’ is much larger than any congregational gathering. Church is the ‘people of God’ gathered and scattered. My ministry is to the scattered church who rarely have opportunity to gather – to those struggling with all kinds of issues, of spirituality and God and life. Christ is already there – do I have the ears to hear where God is working and moving?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presbytery Synod Assembly</td>
<td>The church should exist not only for ourselves but for others. We should give more attention to others than our buildings. The body of Christ—God works through people. Even though some would regards a church as somewhat like a club, there are those who genuinely exercise a ministry of diakonia and it is both with such people and going to and from them that my ministry is practised. Church is a gathering of people to worship God, encourage one another and receive teaching to help them in their walk with God or in their searching for God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission Outreach</td>
<td>Church is where people are gathered whether that be out in the market place or in a building built specifically for the worship of God. An inclusive, welcoming, open community It is easier to say what it is not. It is not the structures, not the organisation, it is not the things which we worry about which are outside the call of God to love God, love neighbour and love self! It is people gathering together in their struggle to understand a little more of the God we worship and their personal and corporate relationship with God. Church = people of God whether attenders of congregational worship or not. People that have either a history i.e. baptised, or not are on the journey towards God. I see the local congregation as one example of this.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>To see the image of God in all and know that the Kingdom is near. God is in every encounter. I see ‘church’ as the people who consciously seek to follow the way of Jesus Christ, supported by each other and by the Holy Spirit. The agency is a ‘church’ agency but it is an ongoing challenge to see what, if any, difference this makes to the staff and those who receive its</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
service. In my ministry I seek to encourage the agency, particularly the Board, to reflect intentionally on the agency’s faithfulness to being part of the church.

The church is one of the primary vehicles whereby God’s ‘Good News’ of liberation is realised. Being church means not so much being a repository of unchanging, unchallenged theological propositions, but being with people and being unafraid to share their suffering and working with them to find meaning and God’s activity in their lives. The church is to proclaim the gospel in the community in word and deed.

| Congregation | Denominational UCA because that speaks to me of a body of Christians more concerned with the state of God’s world than with themselves and prepared to get in there and do something – strongly linking call in Matthew (25) with activity. Congregational life. A community that comes together to worship God and equip itself to go out into the world to proclaim a loving, inclusive, just God that reaches out to all people. That I am an agent of the institution called church, who is called to be active in sharing God’s love, compassion and blessing (shalom) with all God’s people everywhere. ‘Church’ is not just what happens within the usual four walls – its who we are in the world that speaks loudly of who we are in God and who all are as part of God’s ongoing creation. Several: (1) the church as a group which meets, (2) the institution, (3) the people of God – from people’s point of view, – from God’s point of view. |
| Chaplaincy | Basically reflecting on the ministry of Jesus and with whom he associated and ministered with That we are called to be a church at mission – that we are enthused and charged by the gospel imperative to serve and love all people without judgement. |
Appendix Nine
Collation of key themes emerging from the Focus Group

Section 1.

The location and focus of ministry placements for the participants were represented in the following key areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location of ministry placement</th>
<th>Focus of ministry placement</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Chaplaincy (including: tertiary, agency, hospital, to streets? Reflection on this raised questions about the nature of chaplaincy, and whether deacons model a ‘different’ approach to chaplaincy)</td>
<td>Pastoral Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Community Development/ Community</td>
<td>Hospitality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Outreach</td>
<td>Outreach – into community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Synod</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Agency</td>
<td>Creating links – church/community, and community/community = community building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Congregational focus (either within existing, as part of team, or establishing of new congregation)</td>
<td>Worship – liturgy, ritual, issues of spirituality</td>
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<td>Policy development/ Management</td>
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<td>Referral</td>
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<td>Networking</td>
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<td></td>
<td>‘manage’ mission = ‘manage’ change</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reconnection of Word and Deed</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.

The following section represents some of the major theological and Biblical themes emerging from the discussions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theological Themes</th>
<th>Biblical Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freedom and responsibility</td>
<td>Made in image of inclusive God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community (creating of)</td>
<td>Insider/Outsider scenarios (e.g., Luke 7: 36-50, Mark 7:24-30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healing = wholeness of life</td>
<td>Exodus motif</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision for the mission of the church</td>
<td>Hospitality directed towards the least</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of God’s mission?</td>
<td>Incarnation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are we here, and where is God within this scenario?</td>
<td>Narrative … connection with parables?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope within despair</td>
<td>Good Samaritan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Samaritan Woman at the well (John 4: 7-42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choices and place of free will</td>
<td>John 10: 10 (‘I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding underlying issue/story</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being. Moving towards fullness of life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incarnation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Being’ there; standing alongside</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Being’ the Church</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginalised offering the possibility to encounter the challenge of the margins</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diakonia: as the function of a particular ministry or a function of the whole church (the value of the ‘naming’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The other side</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ‘little ones’ (who are they: disciples? outsiders?)
Resistance to call of the Gospel
turning away/turning towards?
Providing for life out of meagre resources
Prophetic
Diakonia
Wholistic
Kingdom of God
What is church?
Where is Church?
Inclusion
‘Voice’ of the ‘other’

Jesus’ ministry with the ‘little ones’
Life from meagre resources (1 Kings 17: Elijah and the widow of Zarephath)
Jesus upsetting the money lenders’ tables in the Temple (‘upset the apple cart’)
(Matthew 21:12, Mark 11:15, John 2:14ff)
Alternative to dominant view
Beatitudes
Jesus’ ministry as a marginalised ministry (Luke 4: 14 ff)
Parable of the ‘great Judgement’

Section 3.
Themes of ministry emerging from discussions

Listening to stories (valuing of)
Finding soul of agency/ ministry context
Centrality of theological reflection
Door to engage the spiritual
Educative role: within congregation, within community
Working with difference and respecting of differences.
Respecting of different culture
Reconnecting Word and Deed
Creating space and intentionality
Identifying issues of faith within trauma and despair
To be in centre of common area, especially in agencies, community centres
Social analysis: Govt. policy often pushes people to the margins
Looking for new models which will speak into the situation
Responding to question: where do I locate my ministry? Where is my heart for
ministry located (terms from United Methodist deacon publication: ‘The Deacon’s
Heart’)
Where is focus?
What priorities are to be challenged? How do we put in new priorities?
Resident theologian – why are we here?
Finding the spiritual within the mundane
Loitering with intent
Finding alternative spaces, finding alternative ways
Need to look at our own marginality
Section 4.
Some of the key phrases or images which were shared during the discussions were:

- People ‘outside’ give me life
- Door to engage the spiritual
- Being the God-person who comes to this place
- What’s the news from Jesus today?
- Loitering with intent
- Ministry is not anonymous
- I’ve discovered there is another way, and I’ve been dragged to the other side.
- I see myself sitting in the gutter talking philosophy with anyone who wants to enter the conversation
- Are we all on the margins and we don’t really know it. Is this really what Jesus wanted for us anyway?
- So, who is addicted anyway? (insight on church from a deacon who works with people suffering from some form of addiction)
- Because you were there then and you are there again tomorrow, it allows something to happen.
### Appendix Ten

**Collation of Future Directions from questionnaire responses**

These responses are divided into six major categories: finance; theology, church and mission; placements; personal and ministerial identity; education and formation; margins.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FINANCE</th>
<th>THEOLOGY, CHURCH AND MISSION</th>
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| • More money obtained for more ‘on the ground’ diaconal ministries, eg mental health, juvenile justice etc.  
• Limitations of funding means you are pressured to ‘get runs on board’ in a limited time. This is not possible in a relational ministry.  
• Lack of ongoing funding continues to be an issue. Placement needs to be longer term.  
• More financial support for placements to be longer than 3 years.  
• Difficult to live with the uncertainty of being unable to find really diaconal placements. | • Broader understanding of deacon ministry. To take risks, and church to enable deacons to work where there is ‘real’ marginalisation  
• More intentionality in way ministry develops  
• That we are not simply servants of the marginalised but are able to bring the church into new forms of mission.  
• Deacon ministry to be linked to congregations, but leading them into new forms of mission  
• To continue to encourage the church to try new things in order that we may discover more about the God whom we worship.  
• Deacons not to merely fill congregational vacancies which runs the risk of being tied to trying to sustain a Christendom model of doing things, but rather be freed to help take the church into a new era, into a new way of being.  
• That the whole church would become diaconal as this is the only way that the church can be viable.  
• For the church to be open to find new ways of performing ministry, to look beyond the ‘norm’, and take risks.  
• All agencies to have minister/chaplain to reconnect the churches mission with its faith.  
• Become more proactive in building up the profile of chaplaincy in the community, and offer more opportunities for deacons to be amongst the community in workplaces, church agencies and schools.  
• Would like to see all ministry become diaconal |
| PLACEMENTS | • Deacons to take seriously the enabling of the whole church, the enabling of lay ministries.  
• Difficulty of deacons being asked to fill MoW roles which leave little time for a diaconal focus and engagement.  
• Opportunity for deacons to discover ministries in disadvantaged communities and for the church to recognise these as placements.  
• Look for new possibilities, rather than repetition of old patterns  
• Importance of positions which can highlight the ministry, and allow deacons to ‘show’ what the ministry is, rather than always having to only talk about it.  
• To know that deacons are of value for longer than 3 years.  
• Limitations of funding means you are pressured to ‘get runs on board’ in a limited time. This is not possible short term in a relational ministry.  
• Deacons not to merely fill congregational vacancies which runs the risk of being tied to trying to sustain a Christendom model of doing things, but rather be freed to help take the church into a new era, into a new way of being.  
• Lack of ongoing funding continues to be an issue. Placement needs to be longer term. Difficult to live with resulting uncertainty.  
• More deacons to take up the challenge of cross cultural ministry.  
• Much more intentional placement of deacons so that they have the opportunity to express their core calling.  
• Greater opportunities for Ministry of Word and Ministry of Deacon mixes in teams in congregations so the balance of functions is more truly represented.  
• Match placements with deacon’s gifts and abilities, especially with focus in community and work with marginalised, rather than congregational ministry.  
• More care of who is placed in diaconal positions,  
• Larger congregations to be encouraged to consider a deacon as a second agent. |
| IDENTIFY | • Deacons to be recognised more as outreach workers assisting the church in a difficult time.  
• To know that deacons are of value for longer than 3 years.  
• Much more intentional placement of deacons so that they have the opportunity to express their core calling.  
• How does the church better care for those who are tired and burnt by the ‘edgy’ work?  
• Match placements with deacon’s gifts and abilities, |
especially with focus in community and work with marginalised, rather than congregational ministry.

- Like to see the church truly ‘own’ the deacon’s ministry
- Like to see diaconal ministry taken more seriously. Often possibilities within deacon ministry of new ways of being church have been ignored.
- Difficult to live with the uncertainty of being unable to find really diaconal placements

| EDUCATION AND FORMATION |  
|--------------------------|---|
| Importance of preparation for this ministry, especially through leadership from MEC |  
| More education at all levels about what deacon ministry can offer to the church |  
| There is a sense in which there is still a ‘stigma’ associated with being a deacon. Church needs more education about this ministry, and is still unaware of the possibilities and uniqueness of the diaconate. |

| MARGINS |  
|--------------------------|---|
| For the church to be open to find new ways of performing ministry, to look beyond the ‘norm’, and take risks. |  
| Perhaps going down the ‘order’ track might help deacons be more where the marginalised are and not be so caught up in structural issues within the church. This might help deacons become more prophetic as an order, and to be an alternate voice. |  
| Match placements with deacon’s gifts and abilities, especially with focus in community and work with marginalised, rather than congregational ministry. |  
| Stronger emphasis on deacons working in alternate programs. The missional focus of those on the edges is important at this time. |  
| To be involved in ministry outside walls of church building |


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