

The Basin and The Towel: Understanding Diaconal Ministry

By Ellen D. Doughty
mecedb63@hotmail.com

There are four rosters of leaders in the ELCA: Ordained Ministry, Diaconal Ministry, Associate in Ministry (AIM) and Deaconess.

Diaconal Ministry is a ministry of Word and service as opposed to the ordained's ministry of Word and Sacrament. Both diaconal ministers and deaconesses serve at the intersection of the church and the world and seek to make the church become aware of the needs of the world in which we live. Diaconal Ministers serve in secular, congregational, and churchwide organizations. The symbols of Diaconal Ministry are the basin and the towel, reminders of Jesus showing the disciples that although he was their teacher, he also was here to serve, and an infinity cross, to show the continuous connection and flow between ministry in and outside of the church setting.

There are six marks of Diaconal Ministry (from the ELCA Candidacy Manual-Diaconal E-1). For a full description of the six marks, please go to the Diaconal Ministry Web site <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Vocation/Rostered-Leadership/Diaconal-Ministry.aspx>. Diaconal ministers (DMs) are marked by these characteristics and shall:

1. Be rooted in the Word of God
2. Be trained to carry out a particular service
3. Be committed and prepared to equip the baptized for ministry in the world and in the church
4. Give particular attention to ministries at the boundaries between the church and world
5. Exemplify the life of Christ-like service addressing all forms of human need
6. Be grounded in community.

There are currently 155 consecrated diaconal ministers in the ELCA, with another 20+ approved for call, and 120+ actively in the candidacy process to be a diaconal minister. Their calls vary as much as they do:

Diaconal Ministry calls are congregational, synodical, or churchwide calls. While many are called to one position, some are called to two congregations, or a congregation and either a church organization or a secular position. There are DMs who serve as chaplains in nursing homes, hospitals, and even home health care settings. Some preach and teach. One started and runs a thrift shop that donates money to missions. Some are called to positions at seminaries. One DM serves directly under the bishop of her synod as "a resource person for earth keeping education and advocacy, and to equip and empower the members and clergy of this synod to be more faithful in their care of our Lord's creation." There is a DM who serves a rural congregation in the role of Word and sacrament because there are no ordained candidates available. His wife, who is also a DM, is a trained intentional interim minister.

For more information and to read stories of Diaconal Ministry, please go to the Diaconal Ministry Community's website at <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Vocation/Rostered-Leadership/Diaconal-Ministry.aspx>.