



The Diocese of Southwest Florida

Commission on Ministry Report on The Deacon's Vote

Approved by the Commission on Ministry February 19th 2009

Introduction

At The 2008 Convention of the Diocese of Southwest Florida the Commission on Ministry was charged to research and report on the implications for restoring the vote to deacons at Convention. This report aims to offer a starting point for discussion at the 2009 Spring Convocations of the Diocese. The report will consider the history of diaconal participation in the councils of the church, and the more recent practice of deacons choosing to give up the right to vote in this Diocese. Further considerations of the Commission on Ministry will also be noted.

It was clear during Commission on Ministry discussions of this matter that strong, and divergent, views on this matter are held. Whatever the outcome of Convocational discussion the Commission on Ministry seeks to be very clear in pointing out that an underlying issue of the nature and acceptance of diaconal ministry has brought this issue to the attention of the Diocese. Proper communication and pastoral support of our deacons must accompany the decision making process as we move towards Diocesan Convention 2009.

The Historical Place of Deacons in the Councils of the Church

The prominence of deacons in the governance and councils of the church has varied enormously through the course of church history. In 325 at the council of Nicea the bishop of Rome did not attend in person but sent two deacons as his delegates, yet Canon 18 of that council placed restrictions on the ministry of deacons. Describing the place of deacons for the New Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship Hincliff neatly summarizes the ups and downs of deacons,

“Deacons are always formally reckoned as the third order and below the presbyters. On the other hand, they were a full-time and professional ministry, with clear liturgical and administrative functions at a time when the presbyters were hardly more than an advisory board. In Rome, especially, the deacons were of considerable importance and were often chosen to occupy the Episcopal throne. Evidence for the importance of the deacon is to be found in the leading part played by Felicissimus in the opposition to Cyprian at Carthage, and the schism of Hippolytus may have been partly a result of presbyteral jealousy of the deacon’s growing importance. As presbyters gained a new position as the normal minister in charge of particular districts and congregations, the balance began to switch the other way. In the Middle Ages the parish priest became the local embodiment of the church’s life, while the diaconate lost most of its real functions.” (208)

The clearest statement it is possible to make is that deacons have a time played a leading role in the councils of the church and at other times have played no part.

The request from Deacons to give up the voting privilege in 1999

Page 32 of The Journal of the Diocese of Southwest Florida, 1999, records the events at 31st Annual Convention on October 9th 1999. *“A group of deacons asked for a point of personal privilege. They chose to give up the privilege of voting at convention in order to become prophets of the church and removed themselves from the political process. This was a voluntary act and one of personal choice. The following deacons did so: The Rev. James Cox, the Rev. Barbara Carmine, the Rev. Mack Bauknight, the Rev. Ray Persson, the Rev. Phil Davis, the Rev. Gary Cartwright, the Rev. Glad McCurtain, the Rev. Glad McCurtain, the Rev. Jack O'Reilly, the Rev. Mildred Terry, the Rev. Lucien Watkins, the Rev. Dan Cole. Bishop Lipscomb spoke to the issue.”*

Further Considerations

In September 2008 the question of Deacons voting at Diocesan Conventions was raised at the Province IV Commission on Ministry meeting held in Jacksonville. No clear pattern emerged as representatives from the dioceses shared practice. In some diocese deacons vote, in others they do not.

The place of deacons as full voting members at General Convention is clearly set out in Article I.4 of the Constitution of The Episcopal Church (2006),

Sec. 4. *The Church in each Diocese which has been admitted to union with the General Convention, each area Mission established as provided by Article VI, and the Convocation of the American Churches in Europe, shall be entitled to representation in the House of Deputies by not more than four ordained persons, Presbyters or Deacons, canonically resident in the Diocese and not more than four Lay Persons, confirmed adult communicants of this Church, in good standing in the Diocese but not necessarily domiciled in the Diocese; but the General Convention by Canon may reduce the representation to not fewer than two Deputies in each order. Each Diocese, and the Convocation of the American Churches in Europe, shall prescribe the manner in which its Deputies shall be chosen. (2)*

In the 'national' Canons of 2006, Canon III.7.4.(e) states that, "Deacons may participate in the governance of the Church." Whilst our 'diocesan' Canons of 2008 do not allow deacons to be members of either Standing Committee or Diocesan Council.

The Book of Common Prayer 1979, ordinal states clearly in the examination that a priest is to, "share in the councils of the Church." (531) No such statement is made for deacons(543).

The number of votes involved must also be considered. As of January 2009, the diocesan ACS database showed that in the diocese we have 80 deacons, of whom 69 are canonically resident. Of those 34 are under the required retirement age of 72. Within that group of 34 deacons 18 have "clear assignments", that is a ministry covered by a letter of agreement lodged with the Diocese. (Please note that if the vote were extended to Deacons the Commission on Ministry would expect this number to increase)

Conclusion

The Commission on Ministry being unable to reach a common mind on the subject of deacons voting at Diocesan Convention offer 3 possible resolutions.

1. That the vote be restored to deacons who are canonically resident in the Diocese of Southwest Florida, are below the retirement age of 72, and have a clear assignment covered by a letter of agreement lodged with the Diocese.
2. That no action be taken and deacons continue without vote at Diocesan Convention.
3. That from within the Community of Deacons, as defined in Canon III.7.2 of the 2006 'national' Canons, a number of deacons, to be determined and defined in Diocesan Canons, be elected to hold the 'deacons vote' at the Diocesan Convention.

Sec. 2 *"Deacons canonically resident in each Diocese constitute a Community of Deacons, which shall meet from time to time. The Bishop may appoint one or more of such Deacons as Archdeacon(s) to assist the Bishop in the formation, deployment, supervision, and support of the Deacons or those in preparation to be Deacons, and in the implementation of this Canon."* (72)

This report is respectfully submitted for consideration at Spring Convocations 2009, by the Commission on Ministry, February 19th 2009.