

The Distinctive Diaconate in the Contemporary Church of England

A presentation of my MLitt Dissertation (completed July 2025)

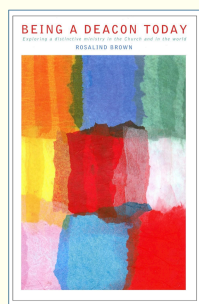
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Introduction

If I look back to perceive where the idea for my dissertation originated, I can pin point a morning nearly eight years ago when I woke up startled by the memory of an unusual dream. I saw myself as a 'vicar' and I knew I had a PhD. I remember thinking at the time how odd this was: I wasn't even a member of the Church of England and although I had led worship with a band where I was the only one *without* a PhD (they are not so uncommon in Cambridge) I had never considered this as something for myself. As it turns out, next month I will start a PhD at Darwin College in Cambridge and in July I will be ordained deacon in the Church of England.



Being a Deacon Today

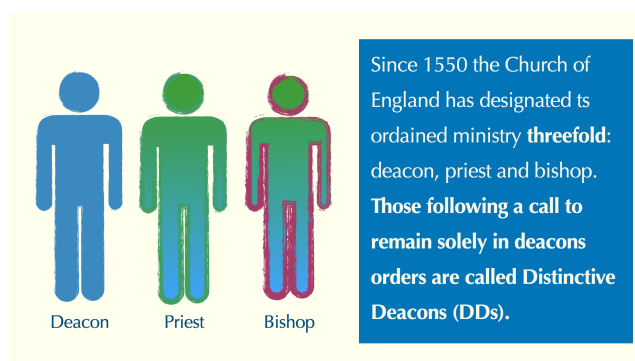
Rosalind Brown

(Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)

One focus of this panel is *lived theology* and so I begin on this personal note because since that morning in December 2018 the exploration of my vocation has been intrinsically linked to my academic studies. I was in the discernment process for a number of years without ever hearing the term 'distinctive deacon' (a common experience, as I have subsequently discovered).

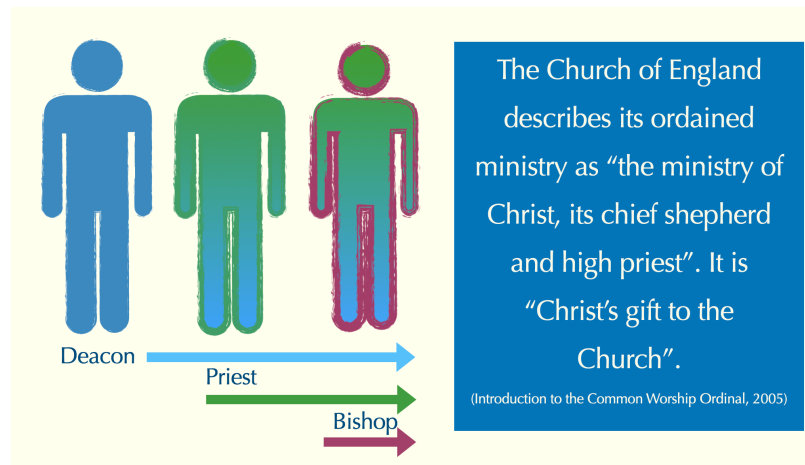
In the summer of 2024 I read Rosalind Brown's "Being a deacon today" - as I read I realised my calling was as a deacon. I knew that the ordained ministry of the Church of England is threefold: deacon, priest and bishop, but I didn't know this: to distinguish those who are called solely and fully to the diaconate, the Church of England adds the word *distinctive*.

My calling became the subject for my dissertation because my experience left me with questions - why was the church's communication surrounding the diaconate so poor? Where might clarity for an understanding of the diaconate be found? This was the impetus for my research and the work I am going to present today in three sections. First, I will describe the contemporary context for the diaconate in the Church of England where a complex history has led to a muddle theology and inaccurate language. Secondly, I show that clarity is found within the Anglican Ordinals focusing in particular on the one used today from *Common Worship*. Lastly, I discuss the innovation of this Ordinal which, for the first time, references the footwashing from the gospel of John as the pattern for deacons. I'll comment on how the footwashing is an outworking of "great



love” which can be seen as sacramental and formational. I draw on the work of David Ford who characterises Christ’s action as an example to be “endlessly improvised upon”.¹

1. The contemporary context for the diaconate in the Church of England



The Church of England describes its ordained ministry as “the ministry of Christ, its chief shepherd and high priest”. It is “Christ’s gift to his Church”.² Since the 1550s the Church has designated its ordained ministry threefold, sequential and cumulative: all are ordained deacon, most are then ordained priest and a few ordained bishop. So far, so good, all very neat and tidy. However, this experience recounted by Canon Rebecca Swyer, a DD in Chichester, is all too familiar:

First, a priest helps [a deacon] put some chairs away or does a bit of washing up, and with a smile says “once a deacon, always a deacon”. Second, a deacon will be asked “when are you going on to *full* ordination?”.³

She writes that “both scenarios distort the nature of the diaconate and demonstrate the rather negative and limited understanding in the Church of England about this ancient order of ministry.”⁴ There is no doubt that the Church of England today finds itself in a situation where it struggles to hold the tension between the majority of clergy, who inhabit the office of deacon for a time before being ordained to the priesthood, and those who have discerned a call to remain solely in deacon’s orders for a lifetime. The Network of Distinctive Deacons estimates there are approximately 160 Distinctive Deacons presently ministering in the Church of England. At the time of writing my dissertation the church did not hold a database of distinctive deacons, although I am pleased to say that on reading my work Bishop Pete Wilcox has taken steps to rectify this.

So why this ambivalence to the diaconate within the church? No doubt its turbulent history since the Reformation is a factor. Although deacons have their roots in the early church, the

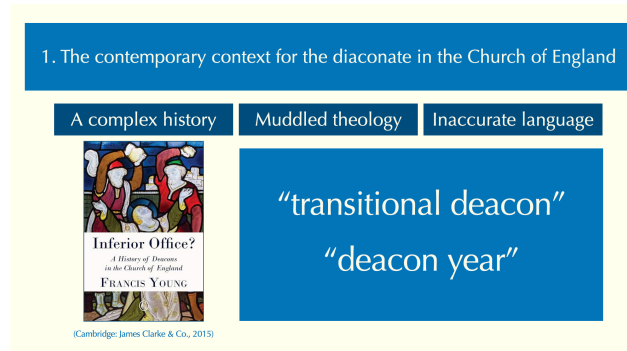
¹ David Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2021), 259.

² “Introduction by the House of Bishops,” in *Common Worship: Study Edition* (Church House Publishing, 2021), 4.

³ Rebecca Swyer, “Discerning Vocation to the Distinctive Diaconate: Canon Rebecca Swyer,” CofE Network of Distinctive Deacons (blog), accessed May 22, 2025, <https://cofedeacons.org/are-you-being-called/discerning-vocation-to-the-distinctive-diaconate-rebecca-swyer/>.

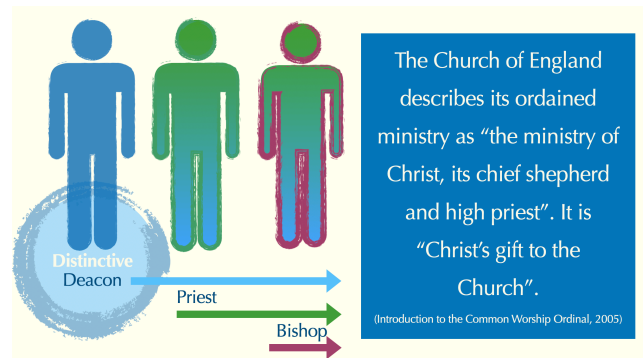
⁴ Swyer, “Discerning Vocation to the Distinctive Diaconate”.

history of the Church of England chronicles a cyclical pattern of calls for abolition and renewal of the diaconate for various cultural reasons.⁵ In the words of Francis Young, the

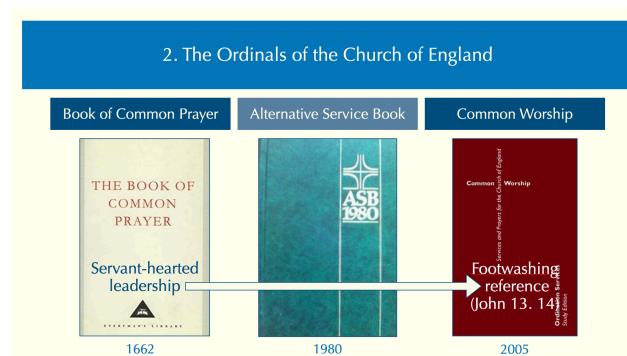


“meaning and significance of deacons has undergone transformation many times . . . making it well-nigh impossible to give a simple definition of what an Anglican deacon is . . . the roles taken by deacons have proved particularly fluid.⁶ The church is often lazy in its use of language surrounding the diaconate. It is common to hear use of the terms “transitional deacon” and “deacon year”. There is no such thing as a “transitional

deacon” for priests and bishops remain deacons and once ordained all years are “deacon years”. To be clear there is only one office of deacon, but it is experienced today primarily in *two* ways: by those who know they will move on to the priesthood (the majority) and by those who are called to remain in deacon’s orders (a much smaller, but growing, cohort), called distinctive deacons.⁷



2. The Ordinals of the Church of England



Servant-hearted ministry is clear from the first Ordinal of the Reformation, through the ASB brought into sharper focus in the twentieth century with the specific reference to the footwashing. It is this liturgy that expresses the theology of the diaconate and has deacons ministering in the pattern of Christ “who washed his disciples’ feet,”⁸ alongside priests who care for the church in the manner of Jesus the “Good Shepherd

who laid down his life”, expressed by a second Johannine reference in the Ordinal.⁹

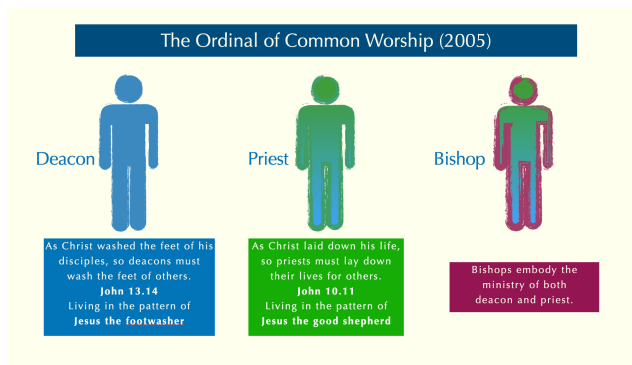
⁵ Francis Young, *Inferior Office? A History of Deacons in the Church of England* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2015), xi-xiii.

⁶ Francis Young, *Inferior Office? A History of Deacons in the Church of England* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2015), xviii.

⁷ There is a further subset of the second way: some who are called to remain solely in deacon’s orders do so within an individual church context where its theology only permits a male priesthood.

⁸ “The Ordination of Deacons,” 10.

⁹ “The Ordination of Priests, also called Presbyters,” in *Common Worship: Study Edition*, 32.



The Ordinal has a clarity which is often not found in the Church's communications. The offices of deacon and priest are described by concepts that are simple and theologically deep, "footwasher" and "good shepherd":

Deacons are ordained so that the people of God may be better equipped to make Christ known. Theirs is a life of visible self-giving. Christ is the pattern of their

calling and their commission; as he washed the feet of his disciples, so they must wash the feet of others.¹⁰

They (Priests) are to set the example of the Good Shepherd always before them as the pattern of their calling.¹¹

Why did the *Liturgical Commission* strengthen the understanding of the diaconate in this way, with this new and explicit reference to the Gospel of John in this liturgy now used by all ordinands?

3. The Common Worship Ordinal and the Gospel of John

The *Liturgical Commission* papers surrounding their preparation of Common Worship will not be in the public domain until 2035, but an accompanying commentary cites their reasons for replacing the ASB Ordinal after only twenty years. One was a desire to define the *differences* between the offices of deacon, priest and bishop. In regard to the diaconate they took note of the scholarship of John Collins.¹² Collins examines the word *diakonos* in the context of Greek sources across the classical and Hellenistic eras and concludes:

These linguistic and semantic investigations are recognised as having established that when the ancient Greek used these words they were never trying to express a notion of loving and caring service. This evaluation applies equally to the authors of the New Testament and other early Christian documents.¹³

Collins' analysis leads him to conclude that the characterisation of service as foundational to the ministry of a deacon is problematic because:

If service is the defining characteristic of deacons, in what way does their involvement in works of service distinguish them from any other member of a Christian community, all of whom are called by the gospel to attend the needs of those around them? And why are deacons commissioned to such a service by the solemn ritual of ordination? Ordination makes them part of the clergy, but do they need to belong to the order of the clergy in order to feed the hungry and the sick?¹⁴

¹⁰ "The Ordination of Deacons," in *Common Worship: Study Edition*, 10.

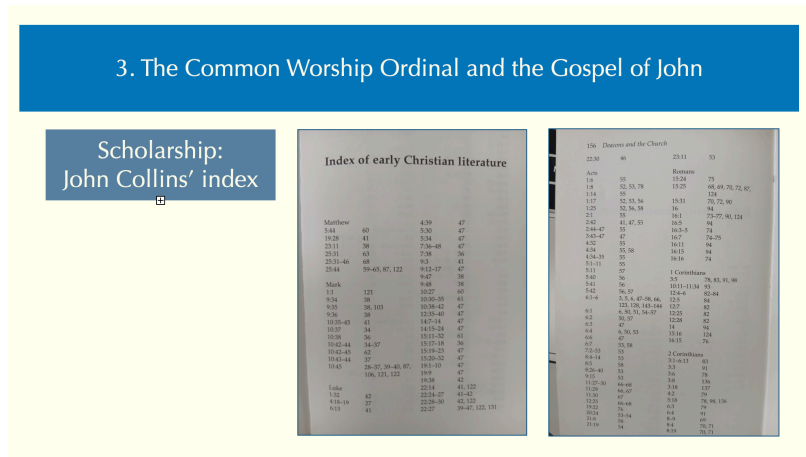
¹¹ "The Ordination of Priests, also called Presbyters," in *Common Worship: Study Edition*, 32.

¹² "Commentary by the Liturgical Commission," 122.

¹³ Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections between Old and New*, 13.

¹⁴ Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections between Old and New*, 12.

Collins' historical approach is perhaps an illuminating discussion one wants the meaning of *diakonia* in the context of the early church to be the defining concept for a contemporary understanding of the office of deacon and his method is indeed thorough. However Collins' index of early Christian literature shows its limitations. Here is the index from Collins' book which I've included as I remember so clearly turning to this for the first time and being taken-a-back: where is the Gospel of John? Of course, Collins' index can only contain



references to the Synoptics, for the word *diakonia* does not appear in the Gospel of John. It is interesting that the *Liturgical Commission* do not choose the restraints that would have been implied by one of the Synoptics' *diakonia* passages for an overarching metaphor in the Ordinal. They embrace the expansive

example of Christ who washed his disciples' feet, set liturgically in the context of whole body ministry.¹⁵ Thus, deacons are not tied to a calling that primarily requires engaging with the meaning of *diakonia* in the early church (which is contested in the scholarship¹⁶) but are set Christ's footwashing example as the pattern to follow.

The more I read and reflected on Christ's example of the footwashing I began to comprehend the breath and depth of his action and how one lifetime seems insufficient to fully live this out. Augustine writes about it in this way:

We ought, dearly beloved, carefully to mark the meaning of the evangelist; because that, when about to speak about the pre-eminent humility of the Lord, it was his desire to commend His majesty. . . . Because so great is the beneficence of human humility, that even the Divine Majesty was pleased to commend it by His own example; for proud man would have perished eternally, had he not been found by the lowly God.¹⁷

In this final section of my paper I will focus on three aspects of the footwashing that are useful in developing an upstanding of the diaconate. Firstly, I look out how Christ himself described it. I will then consider its sacramental nature and finally I will reflect on footwashing as part of formation.



¹⁵ “The Ordination of Deacons,” 29.

¹⁶ John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections between Old and New* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2002).

¹⁷ Augustine, *Works, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: T & T Clark Eerdmans, 1979), 300-301.

Christ's footwashing is not the first footwashing in the John's Gospel. Mary anointed and washed the feet of Jesus in the house of Simon the Pharisee. At one level, Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet with oil and with her tears makes up for the omission of a social nicety by Simon, but just as Jesus was later to transform this social convention into something far more meaningful, so Mary's act is profound. It is in response to her offering that Jesus' voices his view, declaring it to be an act of "great love".¹⁸ This acts of "great love" is one that transform an edge place into the place of welcome. In the hands of Jesus, the "great love" enacted in his footwashing has aspects that are personal, inclusive, communal, and, the one if I will focus on now: sacramental.

David Ford, <i>The Gospel of John: a theological commentary</i> (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2021)	
John	Luke
Footwashing John 13. 1-18	Eucharist Luke 22.14-23
Bread Sermon John 6. 53-56	Footwashing reference Luke 22. 27

For this aspect of my research I found David Ford's intertextual approach to the Gospel of John, laying it alongside Luke, most helpful. Ford asserts that the earliest readers of John knew the Gospel of Luke. John gives preeminence to the footwashing and highlights the Eucharist with his "Bread Sermon" after the narration of the miracle, beginning "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood,

you have no life in you . . ." (John 6. 53-56 - NRSVA). Luke, on the other hand, has the institution of the Eucharist¹⁹ set alongside the "verbal equivalent" of the footwashing only a few verses later:

For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. Luke 22. 27 (NRSVA)

Ford writes that in his omission of the Eucharist, John increases the emphasis on the footwashing, sending a message to the churches of his time:

Beware of becoming so caught up in worship, in the celebration of the Eucharist, and in communion with Jesus, that you fail to follow it through in lives of service to one another, and in building communities where authority is a form of humble, loving service. Communion with Jesus happens through both celebrating the Eucharist and improvising on the footwashing.²⁰

Communion with Jesus happens through both celebrating the Eucharist and improvising on the footwashing. Celebrating the Eucharist: a primary function of priest, *improvising on the footwashing*: the pattern for the deacon. Ford poses a question, *how might sharing in bread and wine of the Eucharist be related to practical loving service?* The Church of England can answer this way: in the ministry relationship and example of deacon (the footwasher) alongside the priest (the Good Shepherd, who lays down their life, with a foundation of the diaconal ministry). Collins is right of course, people do not have to be ordained to carry out servant-hearted ministry but the working out of these two offices with Jesus as "the pattern of their calling and commission" alongside each other in the local church is a fuller representation of Christ.

¹⁸ Luke 7. 47 (CEB)

¹⁹ "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Luke 22. 19 (NRSVA)

²⁰ Ford, *The Gospel of John*, 259.

Ford's question: How might sharing in the bread and wine be related to practical loving service?

Deacon

Priest

Footwashing

John 13. 1-18

Footwashing reference

Luke 19. 27

Eucharist

Luke 7. 47

Bread Sermon

John 6. 53-56

To conclude this final section of my paper I will turn to footwashing and formation. Whilst the impetus of the footwashing certainly results in a leadership of personally *giving*, it is also one of personally *receiving*, in which is contained wisdom individual formation, essential for a fruitful ministry. Footwashing requires the hands of one and the feet of another and all can be the giver and receiver. The Ordinal has an option for the bishop to wash the ordinands' feet reminds candidates that effective ministry is sustained if deacons know how to receive *from* Christ as well as minister *like* Christ. The bishop follows Jesus' example: he didn't show his disciples how to minister in this way by only having them watch him wash someone else's feet, they themselves also experienced the footwashing. The footwashing is a rich and challenging pattern in which to minister and one would quickly run out of personal resources if not receiving from Jesus *the* footwasher. Jesus makes this clear to Peter when he protests at Jesus' suggestion that he should wash Peter's feet when he says, "unless I wash you, you won't have a place with me."²¹

Conclusion - moving on to PhD Research

Before I take questions here is the plan for my PhD research:

1. To establish the theoretical foundations of the diaconate in general and the distinctive diaconate particular.

What theological case can be made for the distinctive diaconate?

Does the Church of England currently conceive of the distinctive diaconate in a way consonant with this theological vision?

Does the *practice* of the Church of England with regard to the distinctive diaconate reflect its own theoretical understanding?

2. In-depth semi-structured interviews with current distinctive deacons underpinned by themes and questions gleaned from:

Historical overview

The Ordinal

Formation Framework and other texts

3. Is it possible to bring clarity to that which is common to all ordained ministry, that which has a diaconal foundation, and which is indeed 'distinctive' about distinctive deacons? Is it possible to clarify what the Church means when it uses the terms deacon and distinctive deacon today?

²¹ John 13. 8b (CEB)

Potential research output from this research are as part of the development of church communications surrounding the diaconate, Formation Frameworks and resources for those in discernment, training and ministry. And most importantly, that the footwashers of the church can be more effective in making 'edge places' within and without its walls places of welcome.