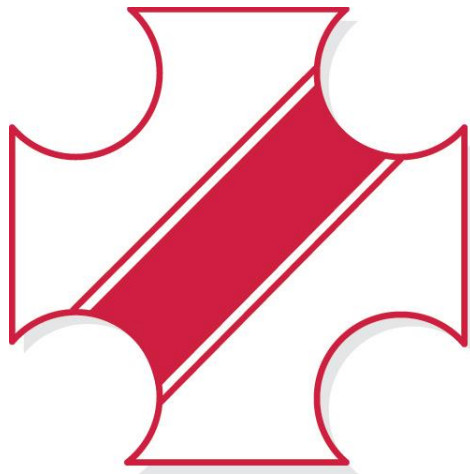


Policies and Guidelines  
for the  
Pastoral and Liturgical  
Ministry of Deacons  
in  
The Episcopal  
Diocese of Massachusetts



September 2018

## INTRODUCTION: About these Guidelines

Q. What is the ministry of a deacon?

A. The ministry of a deacon is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as a servant of those in need; and to assist bishops and priests in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

~ The Catechism, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 856

In the Gospel of Luke [22:24-27] Jesus tells his disciples, “Let the leader be among you as one who serves.” The Prayer Book affirms such servanthood as the defining characteristic of the sacred order of deacons. As noted in the Catechism, the particular responsibility of the deacon is to be “a servant of those in need.” [BCP, p. 856] The Preface to Ordination Rites similarly notes that it is the “special responsibility of deacons to minister in Christ’s name to the poor, the sick, the suffering and the helpless.” [BCP, p. 510]

Thus, the primary context for the ministry of the deacon is not within the walls of our churches, but in all of those places in the world where service to those in need is carried out, and in creating bridges between the church and such places of servanthood.

The Catechism is clear, however, that the deacon also serves “to assist bishops and priests in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.” It is in the context of providing such liturgical and sacramental assistance that questions occasionally arise regarding the appropriate role and function of the deacon. In what ways do we appropriately maintain the clarity of the deacon’s role as one of “assistance” as distinct from the sacramental primacy of the priest and bishop? The following guidelines are intended to provide clarity about this distinction, as practiced in the Diocese of Massachusetts.

The following caveats should be clearly noted:

1) *Appropriate lines of authority in the local context must be honored.*

This document and the Prayer Book upon which it is based provide guidelines for what the those in diaconal orders are *permitted* to do, not

what the deacon in a local context is *entitled* to do. In all cases the specific function of the deacon is determined in conversation with, and by the permission of, the priest or bishop in whose parish (or other institution) the deacon is serving.

Ormande Plater emphasizes this with charming clarity in his foundational book on the diaconate, “As humble servants deacons should remember that their role in the liturgy involves submission to the customs of the parish and practices of the priest, peculiar as such customs and practices may be (and often are.)” [Ormande Plater, *The Deacon in the Liturgy* (Boston: National Center for the Diaconate, 1981), p. 3.]

Thus, the deacon’s functioning in any congregation is subject to the supervision and authority of the congregation’s rector or priest-in-charge. The deacon serving in a congregation does not conduct pastoral/liturgical functions outside the knowledge of that priest.

2) *Canonical residence must be noted.*

These policies and guidelines apply to the exercise of diaconal ministry in this diocese, and pertain primarily to those who are canonically resident in the Diocese of Massachusetts.

Deacons who are licensed in this diocese but canonically resident in another diocese must confer with their canonical bishop where these policies are concerned. The functioning of such deacons must conform to the wishes of their own bishop, as well as the policies of the Diocese of Massachusetts.

Similarly, deacons canonically resident in the Diocese of Massachusetts who have occasion to function in another diocese (with the permission of the Bishop of that diocese) should check to determine what policies may pertain in that diocese.

3) *An established pastoral context is presumed.*

The deacon’s participation in pastoral offices is predicated on participation in a parish or other community of worship, and typically reflects a prior relationship with the individual(s) receiving the ministrations. The permissions granted in these guidelines are not intended to authorize the deacon to freelance in baptismal, wedding, or funeral services.

## I. REGARDING HOLY BAPTISM

*“Holy Baptism is appropriately administered within the Eucharist as the chief service on a Sunday or other feast.” [BCP, p. 298]*

The normative assumption is that when baptism is conducted in the context commended by the Prayer Book (as above), the priest of a congregation will be present to celebrate the baptism.

The Prayer Book rubrics (p. 307) authorize deacons (or assisting priests) to perform the actual immersion or aspersion of the baptismal candidate, using the words of the traditional Trinitarian pronouncement. The implementation of this rubric, with permission of the rector/priest-in-charge, is an altogether appropriate way to respond to pastoral requests for a deacon to participate in the baptism of a candidate with whom the deacon has a significant pastoral or relationship.



Prayer Book rubrics (p. 312) also permit a deacon to preside at a baptism on any of the four specially-commended dates for baptism (Easter Vigil, Pentecost, All Saints, and the Baptism of Our Lord), “when the ministry of a bishop or priest cannot be obtained,” and with the specific authorization of the bishop. However, it is expected that this would be an exceptionally rare arrangement. The deacon, in securing such authorization of the bishop, should review with the bishop, in advance, precisely which functions and signs in the liturgy should be performed by the deacon, and which are to be reserved for some subsequent occasion at which a bishop or priest presides.

## II. REGARDING MARRIAGE

*A priest or a bishop normally presides at the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage, because such ministers alone have the function of pronouncing the nuptial blessing... [BCP, p. 422]*

In accordance with this Prayer Book rubric, it is not expected that deacons will regularly perform marriages in this diocese.

In the case of a pastoral relationship between a deacon and a couple within a parish in which the deacon serves, the deacon should serve together with the rector/priest-in-charge, observing the Prayer Book instructions (p. 422) regarding those portions of the marriage service which may appropriately be conducted by a deacon, with the nuptial blessing (and Eucharist, if included) reserved to the priest of the parish.

*Where it is permitted by civil law that deacons may perform marriages, and no priest or bishop is available, a deacon may use the service ... omitting the nuptial blessing ... [BCP, p. 422]*

Where an exceptionally significant pastoral relationship exists between a deacon and a couple to be married outside the deacon's assigned parish, a deacon may officiate at a marriage ceremony under the following conditions:

- If the wedding is to be held at a church in which either party of the couple is a member, the couple must make a direct request to the rector/priest-in-charge to invite the deacon to perform the wedding, and secure such permission in writing. The deacon should obtain written confirmation of that permission from the rector/priest-in-charge, and determine what parish guidelines and practices will pertain.
- If the wedding is to be conducted in a parish of another diocese, the permission of the Bishop of that diocese should also be obtained.
- If the wedding is to be held off-site from any church, the deacon should address a letter to the Bishop Suffragan describing the pastoral context and plans for such a ceremony. An off-site ceremony conducted in the Diocese of Massachusetts should be recorded in the Register of Church Services



and in the Marriage Register of the parish in which the deacon serves. A marriage conducted outside the diocese should, if possible, be entered in registers of a nearby parish.

In all cases in which the deacon is officiating (and not assisting) at a marriage the deacon must adhere to the BCP rubrics regarding those portions of the ceremony which require the presence of a priest or bishop, notably the blessing of the rings (p. 427), the nuptial blessing (p. 431), and celebration of Holy Eucharist. As with any pastoral office in which the deacon is officiating, language or hand gestures associated with priestly blessing should be avoided. The deacon may officiate in clericals or in cassock/surplice, with or without a stole. The cassock-alb is less appropriate, being a Eucharistic vestment.

Since ordained deacons are considered to be clergy within the laws of the Commonwealth, under the direction of their bishops, it is not necessary for the deacon to apply to the Commonwealth for a one-time license to conduct a marriage. If the wedding is to be conducted in another state, the deacon is responsible for determining in advance what legal requirements pertain in that state.

Deacons must be familiar with the requirements for the couple to obtain a marriage license, and the deacon must complete and file any clergy report after the ceremony, in accordance with Commonwealth law or that of the pertinent state.

The deacon must assure that the couple has received pre-marital counseling from an ordained priest or other certified counselor.

If either party in the couple has been previously married, a letter to the Bishop Suffragan of Massachusetts and the complete application for permission to conduct a re-marriage, with all required documents, *must be submitted not less than 45 days prior to the intended marriage date*. If either party has been divorced twice, then a professional counseling consultation is required along with the Bishop's permission. Again, all paperwork must be received by the Bishop Suffragan not less than 45 days prior to the service.

Deacons licensed in Massachusetts from another diocese must obtain the permission of both the Bishop Suffragan of Massachusetts and their own canonical bishop to officiate at a re-marriage.

### III. REGARDING THE HOLY EUCHARIST

*At all celebrations of the Liturgy, it is fitting that the principal celebrant, whether bishop or priest, be assisted by other priests, and by deacons and lay persons.*  
[BCP, p. 354]

The Prayer Book rubrics, and the canons of the Church, envision deacons as fulfilling an assisting role, and not as normative officiants at the service of Holy Eucharist.

*Additional Directions* in the Prayer Book provide (p. 407) for deacons to preside, “in the absence of a priest” for portions of the service included in the Service of the Word, omitting blessings; however, this does not refer to the Eucharistic portion of the liturgy. A further rubric (p. 409) provides for “administration of Communion by a deacon to a congregation when no priest is available.”

In the Diocese of Massachusetts, interpretation and application of this phrase, “*when no priest is available,*” is understood to refer to particular and unusual circumstances in which a planned liturgy of Holy Eucharist is interrupted by the absence of a priest previously scheduled, or their last-minute inability to officiate at the planned service. The application of this rubric is not to be a substitute for supply coverage during a priest’s scheduled absence. In such circumstances, when a supply priest is not available, Morning Prayer (without administration of communion) is an appropriate option.

Thus, deacons will preside at a service which includes holy communion only in extremely unusual or emergency circumstances. Permission for any unusual circumstance known in advance should be obtained from a bishop. In cases of deacons who serve in an emergency, the circumstances *must be communicated to the Bishop Suffragan immediately following the service, and to the Archdeacons within three days.*

The following guidelines provide instruction for a deacon to administer holy communion from the reserved sacrament, under circumstances described above.

The term “Deacon’s Mass” is **not** to be used, as it suggests a measure of normative practice or imprimatur not consistent with the Prayer Book and canons.

The deacon must assure that there is an adequate supply of the pre-consecrated elements in advance of the service. If necessary, elements must be subdivided and apportioned in smaller measure to assure that all present can receive.

The deacon will follow the Order of Service given on the following page.





## **An Order for Deacons to Administer Holy Communion from the Reserved Sacrament Under Special Circumstances**

- The Service of the Word may be conducted as usual (employing “us/our” at the Absolution).
- The table is prepared with the pre-consecrated elements.
- The Deacon invites the congregation to **turn to page 396** in the Book of Common Prayer.
- The Deacon reads the following explanatory words aloud to the gathered congregation:

*Dear friends in Christ: We are gathered to worship God and to receive the nourishment of Christ's sacrament. In the absence of a priest for the Prayer of Consecration, we receive these gifts of Bread and Wine which have been previously consecrated in a service of Holy Eucharist at \_\_\_\_\_. In so doing, we are united to one another, to the worship of our parish church, and to the mystical Body of Christ.*

- The Deacon continues with one or more of the Scriptural Sentences on p. 396-397, and the Collect on p. 397.
- The Confession and Peace are here **omitted**, having been previously offered during the Service of the Word.
- The Lord's Prayer is said.
- There is no Breaking of the Bread, nor Fraction Sentence, nor Fraction Anthem.
- The service continues with the Invitation (“The Gifts of God...”), the administration of the sacrament, and the Post-communion Prayer on p. 399.
- The service concludes with the Deacon's dismissal.

## IV. REGARDING THE RITE OF RECONCILIATION

### *(“Private Confession”)*

*The ministry of reconciliation, which has been committed by Christ to his Church, is exercised through the care each Christian has for others, through the common prayer of Christians assembled for public worship, and through the priesthood of the Church and its ministers declaring absolution. ... The absolution in these services may be pronounced only by a bishop or priest. Another Christian may be asked to hear a confession, but it must be made clear to the penitent that absolution will not be pronounced; instead, a declaration of forgiveness is provided. [BCP, p. 446]*



Deacons should be thoroughly familiar with the guidelines and definitions found in the Prayer Book at page 446. Included in those guidelines, and in the rubrics of the two forms provided, are provision for deacons to use a Declaration of Forgiveness in place of the Absolution.

If exercised in the context of a parish assignment, as with all pastoral duties, the deacon should follow the guidance of the rector/priest-in-charge.

All clergy, including deacons, are mandated reporters of the abuse of minors, physically or cognitively challenged persons, and the elderly. Any person acting as confessor should be sure, in advance of hearing a confession, that the person confessing is aware that in such cases of mandated reporting, there are laws that supersede the otherwise absolute confidentiality of the confessional.

It is expected that the deacon will seek counsel from the Bishop in case of concern regarding distinctions between general pastoral counseling and sacramental confession, or any legal issues that arise in connection with mandated reporting.

## V. REGARDING ANOINTING, BLESSINGS, AND IMPOSITIONS

This section covers the following:

- *Healing prayer with oils.*
- *Blessings at the Communion Rail in lieu of receiving the Eucharist.*
- *The imposition of ashes.*
- *The anointing of the dying under emergent circumstances.*



As described in the introduction to this document, the deacon's role is one of servant ministry and sacramental assistance, while it is the calling of the priest "to bless and declare pardon in the name of God." [BCP, p. 856] Thus, the various forms of blessing and anointing practiced in the life of the church are not normally liturgical functions of the deacon.

Insofar as practices vary in local communities with regard to the assisting role of deacons and lay persons, the deacon should follow the direction of the rector/priest-in-charge. Occasional pastoral emergency situations also require the exercise of individual judgment. The bishops offer the following guidelines.

- The deacon may use healing oils with prayer for a person requesting it or during a communion call when appropriate and under the supervision of a priest;
- A prayer of anointing, or a prayer at the altar rail, should be worded as a declaration of God's blessing ("God blesses and heals you ...") rather than the declarative forms used in priestly blessings;
- It is the preference of the Bishops that hands not be laid on the person's head or the symbol of a cross be etched onto the forehead, insofar as these are tied to the bestowal of blessing; however, the Bishops are aware that flexibility may be required (such as Ash Wednesday practice, in which the sign of the ashen cross is expected versus a 'smudge' of ash).

In summary, the exercising of options such as an assurance of pardon, or the offering of a prayer in lieu of communion at the communion rail, the deacon remains at all times mindful of the change in pronouns required by Prayer Book rubrics, and avoids hand gestures or action that imply priestly functions of consecration, blessing, or absolution.

## VI. DOCUMENTATION AND FINAL NOTES

### Required Documentation

Deacons must note the following requirements:

- Any marriage, baptism or funeral conducted by a deacon should be recorded in the parish's Register of Church Services (usually the red covered book) and in the appropriate sacramental register of the Church in which the deacon is serving, or other parish church in which the service is conducted.
- A register will be maintained by the Archdeacons, recording Pastoral Offices at which deacons officiate in extraordinary circumstances such as baptisms, weddings, anointings of the dying, and funerals. Such services should be reported to the Archdeacons **within 72 hours**.



### A Final Word

The expanded ministry of the deacon from an assisting role to that of officiant on the occasions described in this document is approved by the bishops with the understanding that these will be relatively unusual instances and not routine practice. Rubrics such as “if the ministry of a priest cannot be obtained” or “when necessary” should not be taken loosely as a blanket permission to ignore the traditional and rubrical distinction between orders.

The unique and special charism of each of the holy orders is underscored and celebrated when we respect the lines of differentiation between and amongst those orders.

God's blessing on you and your ministry with the people of God!