

Church Musician as Deacon?

DAVE NAGEL

by Scott Weidler

The very first issue of *CrossAccent* (January 1993) included a lead article by Paul Westermeyer, “Vocation and the Church Musician” (7–11). In this article Westermeyer urged us to see our vocation as church musicians as enough in itself, not requiring external validation for authentication of our unique ministry. Paul was reacting, in advance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) Churchwide Assembly¹ that coming summer, against a proposal for an ordering of public ministries (“roster”) that could include musicians among diaconal ministers.

I was then a young parish musician (this was several years before I began to serve at the ELCA Churchwide Office), and I teamed up with Robert Rimbo (then a parish pastor, now a bishop) to write a dissenting response that appeared in the next issue (“Vocation and the Church Musician: A Response” [July 1993]).

Life does indeed repeat itself. This coming summer, at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in August, a proposal will be made to simplify the decisions of 1993 and bring all the lay rosters (deaconess, diaconal minister, and associates in ministry) that were created in 1993 when the proposal was not approved into one roster

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together of *deacons*. Members of this new roster are described as “ministers of word and service.”

Many of Westermeyer’s concerns from 1993 are still valid today. The vast majority of musicians who serve Lutheran congregations in North America are not rostered in any way and need not feel like second-class ministers. We are all called to our particular vocations through our baptism. That is enough.

However, there are those who have discerned an inner call to a more public form of recognized ministry (“rostered” in ELCA usage). Some musicians were on a roster of a predecessor church body. Many have been received onto the Associates in Ministry roster since the formation of the ELCA in 1988. Still others are waiting for the outcome of this summer’s assembly to move

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When Christ's people, the baptized, gather for worship they receive God's love in word and sacrament, and through the gift of music, pray, praise, proclaim & recount the story of God's grace in song.

The cantor... the historical term among Lutherans, is the leader of the people's song.

THE ROLE OF THE CANTOR

The cantor is responsible for leading the musical expression of the people...the assembly, choral groups, solo singers, & instrumentalists, among whom organists have been especially important for Lutherans.

The cantor uses whatever musical resources are available, using them in a manner appropriate to the talents of those serving and the needs of the people who are served.

The cantor leads the earthly assembly in a foretaste of John's vision of the heavenly assembly in which all creatures give praise, honor, glory and power to the Lamb.

The cantor's work is a worthy service to God, God's people, and the world.

—IT IS A HIGH AND HOLY CALLING—

pastors as “ministers of word and sacrament.” While some musicians have had a hard time trying to understand how they fit on this roster, the benefit of positioning the ministries included on this new roster, including music, side by side with the Word and Sacrament roster in the ELCA constitution is significant.

Since “word” is also a part of the pastor’s description, our minds go immediately to preaching which is, of course, a significant part of a pastor’s call. For some deacons, preaching may also be a part of their ministry. However, I believe that Lutherans—perhaps more than any other Christian tradition—ought to easily understand musicians as among those who proclaim the word through song. Musicians proclaim God’s word regularly by leading congregational hymns and songs, directing the choir and instrumentalists, and often through teaching and perhaps, in some settings, an occasional sermon.

The “service” half of the phrase is usually further articulated as “service to the world.” Certainly, ministries of justice—like feeding the hungry and raising up the poor—are at the heart of a biblical understanding of *diakonia*, being a deacon. This focus on ministries in the world, beyond the walls of the church, are an important aspect of this newly emerging roster, just as it should be for all the baptized. Anyone serving in the church (including musicians, rostered or not) will, at their best, understand that their unique ministry has connections to service in the world.

This can, however, start to feel a little distant from our actual work. A document that supports this proposed change includes this statement:

it also includes service in local congregational and other gathered faith community settings through the proclamation of the Word in preaching, leading public prayer, teaching, and leading music as well as through leadership in such areas as education, administration, and youth ministry.

The connections between worship and service are clear in our Lutheran roots, especially through the German word for worship, *Gottesdienst* (literally “service of God”), which connotes a multidirectional understanding of service from God to the worshippers, from the worshipers to God, and from the assembly of worshippers to

forward with their plans to seek a place on the new roster.

Those who are currently on a lay roster of the ELCA, or those who may be discerning a call to public ministry as a musician, may be wondering where they fit within the proposed roster of ministers of word and service, *deacons*. My purpose here is not to persuade anyone to support this proposal or not. Nor do I intend to insinuate that church musicians really ought to move toward being called to this roster. Rather, as one of the musicians currently on the Associate in Ministry roster I hope to offer a few personal thoughts for clarification to questions that have arisen during conversations with some of you.

Ministers of Word and Service

Clearly, the phrase “ministers of word and service” is parallel to the common descriptor of

the world. The ALCM statement on the role of the cantor also affirms this broad understanding of the musician’s ministry: “The cantor’s work is a worthy service to God, God’s people, and the world.” I believe musicians can rightly understand their work as service to the church for the sake of the world.

Deacons

For simplicity and for ecumenical familiarity, the term “deacon” is being proposed as the term to call those on this roster. I think it’s a wise choice. People understand that deacons have a significant role in the church but are different from the pastor, even if there are so many varied uses of that term. Some parishes and synods use “deacon” locally; there are diaconal ministers and deaconesses. Other denominations use “deacon” in many differing ways; some, like the United Methodists, include musicians among their roster of deacons. It’s already a mixed bag. Perhaps it is used so often because it actually does communicate something to people. Of course, those on a churchwide roster will have very clear expectations that the whole church may or may not understand. That’s okay.

One hopes that musicians on this roster will come to discern their ministry from a diaconal perspective. They may, however, choose to be on this roster but never use the title “deacon” publicly. For example, I’m on the roster of associates in ministry, but in the congregation I served I was known as the cantor; others are known as director of music, minister of music, and so forth. Those on the clergy roster might use some form of “pastor” (senior, lead, associate) or even “chaplain” or some other title. I believe that musicians can easily find themselves on a roster of deacons while still clearly identifying as a church musician.

Finding a New Way Forward

If approved, everyone currently on one of the existing rosters, which already includes ALCM members and other musicians, would automatically be included on the new roster, if desired. The educational requirements for one to become a deacon are not yet fully determined. What to

call the rite that makes one a deacon is still under consideration. If the proposal to unify the current lay rosters is passed by the assembly in August there will be events and resources to help interpret and ensure a healthy understanding of the “word and service” roster.

As work continues on shaping the details of this new roster there still is time for ALCM members to have a voice in how future musicians who enter this public ministry may be formed and recognized. I cannot say it as clearly as Paul Westermeyer said in 1993:

The church musician’s call is not “just a job.” But such a statement is true for any of the baptized. The whole community of the baptized is called, and the individual members of it are all called to their vocations. (11)

And as Robert Rimbo and I said in our response:

While not every musician has a sense of calling that would lead him or her to such a vocation, there are many who do. (4)

If you are already on one of the rosters affected by this proposal, or if you are discerning a call to a ministry of *diakonia* through music, I urge you to stay informed about these developments in our church. They may just be life-changing.



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Note

1. The ELCA Churchwide Assembly currently meets every three years and is that church body’s primary decision-making body.

My colleague on the churchwide staff, the Rev. Cherlyne Beck, is happy to hear your input on the questions still before the church about deacons potentially including musicians. You can e-mail her at cherlyne.beck@elca.org. If you want to engage in friendly dialogue specifically about the role of musicians in the ELCA, you can e-mail me at scott.weidler@elca.org.