

January 26, 2012

Rev. Kim Cape
General Secretary
General Board of Higher Education and Ministry
P.O. Box 340007
Nashville, TN 37203

I am an ordained deacon in the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference with a primary appointment as professor of Christian Mission and Director of UMC studies at Palmer Theological Seminary (of Eastern University) and a secondary appointment at Upper Darby New Life UMC. I am writing to express my disagreement with proposed changes to paragraph 331 in the *Book of Discipline* that the GBHEM is sponsoring for General Conference.

You may recognize my name from a book I wrote with GBHEM staffperson Paul Van Buren nearly 15 years ago, *The Deacon: Ministry through Words of Faith and Acts of Love*. My research on the diaconate over the years has given me the opportunity to reflect more broadly and deeply about the diaconate than many persons in the UMC connection. I would like to identify some of the reasons for being opposed to the proposed changes in paragraph 331.

First, this proposal makes changes in the diaconate for the sake of consistency with elders who are appointed beyond the local church. I believe the Disciplinary guidelines for ABLC elders are available for persons primarily to cover special circumstances. It is generally recognized that the ABLC provision is an exceptional one and has not been seen as infringing on the normative theology of the ordained elder's office. I think paragraph 331's attempt to provide consistency between the ABLC provision and the diaconate, however, does infringe on the theology of the UMC diaconate for several reasons – one of which has been well-expressed by my Eastern PA Conference colleague, Deacon Susan Worrell in a letter shortly to be sent to your office about how this proposal limits the deacon's self-understanding of her/himself as a "bridge" between church and world.

Second, recent theological work (by Kenan Osborne, James Keating, and others) on the permanent diaconate in the Roman Catholic Church has stressed the theologically interrelated nature of bishops, elders (priests), and deacons in the body of Christ. The restoration of the permanent diaconate in the church should help us to understand the nature of the church and Christian mission in a more integrated – and more beautiful – way. I do not see the diaconate as merely optional for the church's self-understanding. I think its presence enriches our ecclesiology and can enrich our worship. I think this legislation, however, increases the likelihood of us seeing the diaconate as optional rather than integral to our understanding of the church because it would, in effect, minimize our leadership role in local congregations.

Third, deacons in the early church were defined not only by their concern for the poor but perhaps even more centrally by their work as "go-betweens" for the bishop and other persons who have a ministry of oversight. A lively accountability relationship with a local congregation is an important expression of our identity as "go-betweens." This go-between self-identity has historically been expressed liturgically in many different ways such as in the leading of intercessory prayers and in our activities at the Lord's Table. I think this legislation dilutes our ability to serve in this go-between fashion as it limits the extent

to which we are held accountable to congregations. An annual charge conference report is a rather anemic expression of accountability. (Incidentally, I like the language of “go-betweens” rather than “bridge” as it is a less static, more relational, and more biblical image -- see John N. Collins’s *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*).

Finally, I think it is safe to say that our Anglican and Catholic permanent deacon colleagues (who have an understanding of the diaconate close to our own) would find this legislation completely nonsensical. Episcopal deacons in the Pennsylvania diocese surrounding me are required to work a specified number of hours in their local parishes whether they are paid or not. It is not easy, but they do it. Furthermore, it is my understanding that the 1996 legislation for the UMC Order of Deacon sought to embrace a measure of ecumenical and theological consensus about deacons found in such documents as *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* among other places. Deacons’ role in emphasizing the “interrelationship of worship and service” is central in that document and was a key theme in the book Paul Van Buren and I wrote. I think paragraph 331 detracts from our ability to interrelate worship and service in our vocations and in the life of all the faithful.

Admittedly, many of us UMC deacons have had a hard time finding our liturgical and programmatic “place” in our congregations. I think it has been harder for us than for Episcopal and Roman Catholic deacons (whose liturgical place is spelled out pretty clearly), but I don’t think we should stop trying. One might argue that this legislation amounts to a tacit admission from GBHEM that deacons have failed to demonstrate that we are important in the life of congregations we have been trying to lead. If so, then we should confess our failure and seek to do better by the power and grace of God. This legislation seems to lessen our ability to live out with confidence the ordination prayers that were prayed over us to “take authority” in the power of the Holy Spirit. I hope it will be defeated.

I recognize that this is a remarkably busy time for you as we all prepare for the 2012 General Conference. May the Holy Spirit guide us in our time of conferencing concerning paragraph 331 and, of course, other pieces of legislation. Thank you for considering my argument here. I hope it will be useful.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ben L. Hartley". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style. The letters are connected, and there is a long, sweeping underline that extends under the name.

Deacon Benjamin L. Hartley
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