

Expanding the Diaconate to Build Up the Body of Christ
Randa Karadsheh Anderson, Ph.D.

How can an expanded diaconate, both male and female, build up the body of Christ? I was invited to answer this question from my professional view as a clinical psychologist, and so I am going to begin from that viewpoint exclusively, but later I will also share my views as someone who has been active in parish ministries since I was a teenager.

As I said, I am a clinical psychologist and a member of the Orthodox Christian Counseling Institute, which is a professional network of psychologists and counselors here in the Chicago area. We offer outpatient psychotherapy in the context of the Orthodox faith. Clients come to us because they trust us that we will provide counsel that is consistent with and inspired by Church teachings. This is particularly important when it comes to moral issues that someone may be struggling with. And while I consider myself well educated when it comes to the basics of the faith, admittedly, I lack the formal seminary theological education to answer some of the truly tough questions that many of my clients bring to therapy.

My clients share with me their deepest struggles and often those struggles are spiritual in nature, as well as emotional. They wrestle with big questions, like "How can we say God loves us when he doesn't rescue us from our pain?" or smaller, practical situations like what spiritual book to read during Lent or how to teach their children to fast. Because they know I am Orthodox also, they look to me for answers sometimes in the same way they look to their priest for those answers. Let me tell you that I take that responsibility very, very seriously, as do all of my colleagues in OCCI. I'm fine with the practical questions, but I believe that the deeper issues need to be brought to their priest or spiritual father, and I regularly encourage them to do so and even keep them accountable in that way.

But imagine if we had deacons who were also mental health professionals. In my experience, this would be a natural merging of two vocations, as clergy are often the first to be contacted when there is a mental health emergency or need for counseling. Unfortunately, our parish priests often are far too busy to do as much counseling as is needed in our communities. A permanent diaconate, both male and female, would increase the number of trained clergy who could be available to help those with mental health needs. Let me put forth some examples where I believe having more ordained deacons who are also mental health professionals would greatly contribute to the building up of the Body of Christ:

The first example is of supporting couples in their marriages through regular psychoeducation and counseling. A deacon who is also a licensed marriage and family therapist would be a tremendous asset at any and all parishes. The deacon could run premarital counseling sessions and classes. The deacon could lead couples retreats and seminars. The deacon could also offer regular office hours at a parish for couples to seek professional guidance when they hit a bump in the road of their marriage. Think about how having a deacon/therapist regularly available to assist couples on their marital path would remove the stigma for couples of seeking counseling. So often when a couple comes in for therapy it's only after serious damage has already been done to their marriage--perhaps an affair or such a serious breakdown in communication that they aren't even speaking to each other. What if the church in its desire to preserve sacramental marriages could offer deacons to tend only to marriages? I have to imagine that the rate of divorces would decrease dramatically. The positive effects for children would be immeasurable.

A deacon who is also a trained counselor could offer grief counseling and bereavement groups within their communities. Certainly most priests are skilled in helping people through grief, but grief can sometimes be complicated and prolonged and need professional counseling. In fact, many priests already refer for counseling when the grief precipitates a major depression or serious adjustment problem. But having a counselor who is also a deacon knowledgeable in theology would be helpful for when people ask questions like why God would allow their young

infant to die or their husband to commit suicide. A deacon who is both counselor and ordained spiritual guide would be incredibly beneficial to address both the emotional and spiritual needs that people have in such a difficult time.

And what about serious crises of trauma, such as rape? Here is where having a specific FEMALE diaconate would be especially helpful. And I'd like to transition now to talking about when a female deacon who is also a mental health professional would be especially helpful in our parishes. When a woman is traumatized by rape, she most often will seek the care of a woman. In fact, for some rape victims, simply being around a man can retraumatize her. So if we want a woman to seek spiritual help following a traumatic event such as rape or assault, wouldn't it follow that having an ordained FEMALE deacon to turn to would be most helpful? Not that a priest couldn't offer care and many of them do this well. But for the female trauma victim there is comfort and less threat in seeking help from another woman.

What about a woman who has fallen in sexual sin and knows she needs to confess and seek practical help, but is terrified to approach her male priest? I'm thinking about a situation such as a teen who gets pregnant. Can you imagine how wonderful it would be if a pregnant teen could go to her female deacon for moral and spiritual counsel? That deacon could help her approach her priest for confession and serve as a liaison, ensuring that the teen experienced sacramental forgiveness, as well as spiritual counsel. The deacon could even accompany her when she tells her parents of her pregnancy.

A female deacon could also be available for counsel and assistance in other situations that are uniquely female. There are many to consider, such as when a woman might contemplate abortion and need to hear how to get help and support with her pregnancy instead. Suffering domestic abuse or being abandoned by her husband are other times the unique comfort of a female deacon would be more readily sought after and accepted. Following a miscarriage, a woman might appreciate the support of a female deacon. These are all scenarios where a woman might not be comfortable seeking counsel from a male clergyman. ***Having a female deacon as the face of the loving Church to guide women going through uniquely female crises would certainly build up the body of Christ by helping women stay on the righteous path in a way that glorifies God.***

I want to take a moment and share a case example with you to illustrate how within a therapy session emotional and spiritual conflicts can merge together. This example is of a client I had several years ago. I'm changing her name to protect her identity. Sue was a 23 year old who suffered from serious anxiety, such that she would lose sleep at night lying awake worrying and would sometimes have panic attacks at work. As her therapy progressed, and she got better at managing her anxiety with the techniques I taught her, she began to dig deeper into her underlying problem. Sue was a regular churchgoer and was actively involved in her parish. But interestingly, she shared with me that she was actually afraid to pray because in that quiet moment of facing God she was genuinely frightened and would panic. Because of this fear, she also refused to go to confession, despite the fact that she liked her parish priest and felt comfortable with him. What would her experience have been like in therapy if her therapist had been an ordained deacon? Perhaps the deacon would have been able to accompany her to confession with her priest and helped her through that process, sort of an "exposure" therapy, but within the church. I think this type of intervention could have been very helpful to her. To this day, I know I helped her manage her anxiety in most situations, but I'm not sure we ever resolved the deepest and perhaps most important problem.

I'd like to switch gears a bit now. I've shared with you my thoughts about how an expanded diaconate could build up the body of Christ when it comes to having deacons who are also mental health professionals, and clearly I see that need from within my professional view as an Orthodox psychologist. But I also want to share with you my thoughts as someone who has been actively involved in parish ministry since I was a 16 year old Teen SOYO (youth group) president. When I look back on situations where I have worked with or needed to work

with a priest on ministry, I can see where having more deacons available to assist with ministry would clearly help build up the body of Christ.

Let me give you just one of what could be many examples from my own experience and then I will offer other ideas as well. When I was 22 years old I moved to Chicago to pursue my graduate studies at the University of Chicago. I knew NO ONE here. I was moving away from all of my family and friends out west in Arizona and California to the big city, lured by the promise of a fine education. When I arrived, I learned that there was no Orthodox Church in Hyde Park. Perhaps, led by the Holy Spirit, I went to the fall activities fair in the student union and met two graduate students from the School of Divinity who were working on establishing an Orthodox Christian Fellowship. They had started the wheels in motion to become an official campus organization, and I eagerly jumped on board to help. Our biggest problem at the time was finding a priest willing to come to our meetings regularly and guide us. I spent a great deal of time on the phone with the director of youth ministry for the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Chicago, asking for his help in finding someone. He tried so very hard for us. I recall him talking about attending clergy meetings and begging for someone to come to campus. His attempts did yield response, and we did eventually have priests come and serve liturgies on campus for us and lead meetings, but there wasn't a lot of continuity. But what if there had been deacons available? Deacons who are not responsible for entire parishes could more easily come and serve college campuses. Deacons could lead bible studies, prayer services and offer spiritual guidance at a time in a person's life when the most questioning occurs. As my own son, who is a college student, said to me "most college students don't care about church, Mom." We all know this can be true, but what if there were deacons assigned to serve college campuses and be available not only to our own Orthodox students living away from home, but also as an outreach to the unchurched "nones" on every campus? Perhaps with personal outreach on campus, college students would actually care more about Church. And if that deacon were a female, imagine how "relevant" our Church would be to college students who are especially sensitive to gender inequalities.

In my own parish, we recently have identified people in our parish that the majority of parishioners view was "underserved." These include young adults, widows, and non Orthodox spouses. I've already touched on young adults in terms of college students and widows when I talked about deacons offering grief counseling, but what about outreach to people who are NOT Orthodox, such as the non Orthodox spouse of an Orthodox person? There are many ways a deacon could assist a priest with outreach to non Orthodox individuals, including personal visits and phone calls, as well as offering inquirers classes and bible studies.

Youth work, visits to elderly and homebound, ministry to those in prison, outreach to those struggling with alcohol and drug abuse, assistance to those with financial problems, development of educational materials. The possibilities for both spiritual and practical assistance by a deacon are really as broad as our imaginations. Because most deacons would also have full time jobs in the secular world, it would make sense for them to have a specific area of expertise that they could offer to a parish on both a spiritual and practical level based on their professional experiences. Working under the guidance of their parish priest, deacons could fill voids that priests often wish they could fulfill themselves.

Our parish priests are very hardworking and I don't envy the demands that are placed on them every day of the week. They are expected to be not only Liturgists offering multiple worship services and sacraments a week, but they are also expected to be parish administrators-- they are essentially CEOs of a most unique business. They might have to be the ones to negotiate contracts with service providers, such as the phone or insurance. They attend and influence meetings of the parish council and the ministries. They teach through not only their sermons, but also bible studies and through their work with the church school . The priest is often the first person who is called when a family has a medical or mental health emergency, so they are expected to be competent and comforting counselors also. Sometimes

they find themselves serving as social workers, assisting a person in financial need. How many roles do we expect this one man to play, often without formal training in these various areas of expertise? Clearly an expanded diaconate could assist the priest in truly providing care to all people, both within and outside of the Orthodox community.