

DE-CENTRED MINISTRY: A DIACONAL VIEW OF MISSION AND CHURCH

by
Alison F. McRae

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry Studies

Abstract

Drawing on the ministry experiences of deacons since the renewal of the Diaconate in the Uniting Church in Australia in 1991, this thesis contends that the church's diaconal ministry is essentially an ecclesial concept, representing to the church that *diakonia* is at the heart of its identity. Using key Uniting Church reports which suggest that deacon ministry is a ministry on the margins, the thesis concludes that diaconal ministry can be seen to be a de-centred ministry. It invites the church to embrace the contributions that deacons make to the mission life of the church and to discover how, in their representative capacity, deacons embody the *diakonia* of the whole church.

The research emerges from the experiences of deacons in the UCA. It used a Grounded Theory approach to gather data and invited deacons to reflect on their ministry with people on the margins, drawing out their insights on how their ministry informs our understanding of mission and church.

It uses the research of scholars such as John Collins and Sven-Erik Brodd to explore recent ecumenical insights into the interpretation of the biblical term *diakonia*. It outlines how such insights might help us move from the ministry of Deacon being seen merely as one of humble servanthood and to embrace a more sophisticated appreciation of the term, one which affirms an essential ecclesial identity for this ministry.

On the basis of the research some conclusions are drawn about the ministry of Deacon in the Uniting Church being one which invites the church to be intentionally aware of the variety of contexts in which God's church is found. It challenges the church to free its representative expression of *diakonia* to help lead it into renewed expressions of faithfulness, for the sake of the gospel. The thesis concludes by offering some challenges to the church and to deacons about how this might be enabled to happen.

Alison McRae
April 2009