



# THE LEADERSHIP OF MINISTERS OF WORD & SERVICE

IN THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA



Evangelical  
Lutheran Church  
in America

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## Executive Summary

In February 2025, the Research and Evaluation team convened a group of stakeholders to design a survey for deacons actively serving in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The purpose of this study is to better understand the leadership of deacons, their experiences, and how congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization might better resource and support their ministries. This report outlines key findings from our study and explores important differences that exist in an evolving form of public ministry.

The report begins with a demographic profile of active deacons today. It then turns to experiences of deacons within their current calls and the wider church. The most important finding from our study is this: **While deacons tend to have positive experiences locally, many of their most pressing challenges come from their experiences of the wider church.** For many, this will not be new information. Anecdotally, we have long known this to be the case. However, this report provides a first-of-its-kind analysis that shows this reality to be widespread and systematic. The report continues with important findings related to areas of ministry where deacons serve, how deacons lead in the worshipping assembly, their contributions to pastoral leadership, and their perspectives on current symbols for their public ministry.

**Cover Image:** ELCA deacons leading Thanksgiving for Baptism at the 2019 Churchwide Assembly. Used with permission.





## Key Findings

- 1.** Ministers of Word and Service are demographically similar to their colleagues serving as ministers of Word and Sacrament, though they are far more likely to be women and are better educated than in the past.
- 2.** The experiences of deacons appear split. Within the context of their daily work in ministry, deacons have the kind of respect, support and experiences we would expect for our professional public leaders. When it comes to their experiences within the wider church — that is, among bishops, ministers of Word and Sacrament and the ELCA more generally — deacons struggle to find support and understanding.
- 3.** Deacons today serve in a wide range of ministry leadership but play a critical role in faith formation — especially with youth and intergenerationally. They work in education, administration, worship/music, chaplaincy and social justice.
- 4.** ELCA deacons today have a significant role in worship, with 60% regularly serving as worship leaders across a diverse set of roles and 45% regularly preaching in a variety of contexts.
- 5.** Deacons may occasionally, temporarily fill in as pastoral leaders, but our findings suggest that, overwhelmingly, deacons serve in their own distinct forms of public ministry.
- 6.** Though individual circumstances may differ, deacons' perspectives on the public symbols used for deacons reflect a broader concern for greater recognition of deacons' leadership within the church's public ministry.



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*Dedicated to*

*Deacon Sue Rothmeyer*

*Secretary of the ELCA (2019 – 2025)*

*Churchwide staff (1995 – 2025)*



# The Leadership of Ministers of Word and Service

## Introduction

The leadership of deacons in Christ's Church has a long history dating back to New Testament times. The witness of Scripture, however, does not offer a clear prescription for the role deacons ought to play; rather it testifies to the need for a variety of forms to meet the needs of different times and different places. We must continually reflect on and discern how best to support the ministry of deacons, a truth more recently reaffirmed by our ecumenical partners and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) alike. Both ground the Church's ministry in the service of all the baptized.

For example, in its seminal report, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," the World Council of Churches describes deacons as those who "represent to the Church its calling as servant in the world" and goes on to say that deacons embody in their leadership "the interdependence of worship and service in the Church's life."<sup>1</sup> Two decades later, the LWF report "The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church" described the responsibility of deacons "to inspire, equip, train and guide congregations and the church as a whole to carry out their diaconal witness."<sup>2</sup> We often use Martin Luther's expression "the priesthood of all believers" to describe the Church's calling to proclaim the gospel, but as the LWF report reminds us, we also share a deaconhood of all believers — a calling to live out the gospel in a broken world.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has been reflecting on this call throughout its history. Indeed, the ELCA report *Together for Ministry* set the stage for diaconal ministry in the church, casting a vision for it to become "a ministry of service and witness, exemplifying the life of Christ-like service to persons in need and leading and equipping the baptized for their life of service within and beyond the congregation."<sup>3</sup> Since then, this church has continued to discern and adapt its diaconal ministry with important developments such as consolidating three former lay rosters into a unified ministry of Word and Service (called deacons) in 2016 and adopting ordination as its entrance rite in 2019. Several years removed from these significant changes, this report is an effort to step back and listen to deacons serving in the ELCA today in light of the church's ongoing reflection on their important leadership. The report shares findings of a survey conducted from March to May 2025. The survey was sent to all active deacons serving in the ELCA, and 255 replied, a response rate of 57%. The survey explored such topics as:

- Experiences of deacons in their current calls.
- Experiences of deacons by the wider church.
- Areas of ministry where deacons serve.
- The role of deacons in worship leadership.
- The role of deacons in pastoral leadership.
- Public symbols of our ministry of Word and Service.





The report outlines six key insights and explores many others through its analysis of important differences across gender, age, roster tenure and ministry context.

This survey was developed in partnership with stakeholders who included deacons serving in a variety of contexts and representatives from the ELCA Deaconess Community and the Lutheran Diaconal Association. The purpose of this study was to better understand the leadership of our deacons today and their experiences serving in this unique form of public ministry. We hope that these findings will point toward additional ways this church can support and provide resources for the leadership of ministers of Word and Service.

Tim Snyder, Ph.D.

October 15, 2025

Commemoration of Teresa of Avila



## Demographics

Respondents to the survey were asked a series of standard demographic questions commonly used by the churchwide organization's Research and Evaluation team. Comparing the responses to these questions with roster data gives us confidence that the survey sample is representative of ministers of Word and Service by age, race/ethnicity and gender. The following page provides a demographic profile of deacons today and allows us to compare them to their pastor colleagues.

Given the history of Lutheran deaconesses in North America and of women's ordination, it's no surprise that the roster of Ministers of Word and Service is disproportionately composed of women. Indeed, 80% of our respondents identified as women whereas just 18% identified as men. Like other rostered ministers, deacons skew older: there are twice as many respondents older than 60 (33%) as there are respondents younger than 40 (14%). Considering the overall racial and ethnic demographics of the ELCA, it is also not surprising that 95% of respondents identified as European-descent/white.

This survey also provides important demographic insights into the educational background of deacons. Educational requirements varied in the predecessor forms of rostered ministry that we now call the diaconate, but today's deacons are highly educated; almost 90% hold a master's degree or higher.

Finally, deacons responding to our survey were almost evenly split between those who joined the roster less than 10 years ago (49%) and those who joined earlier (51%). Though many respondents (35%) were veteran ministry leaders with more than 15 years of experience, it is encouraging that more than a quarter of respondents (27%) are new, having served less than five years.

### Key Finding #1

*Ministers of Word and Service are demographically similar to their colleagues serving as ministers of Word and Sacrament, though they are far more likely to be women and are better educated than in the past.*

In conclusion, deacons broadly reflect the demographic profile of the ELCA, and the insights noted above will help identify meaningful internal differences among deacons in the analysis that follows. Because of small sample sizes, this report cannot offer analysis of internal differences by race/ethnicity or Indigenous identity. Furthermore, when a section does not include further comment on such differences, this is because our analysis found no meaningful differences. The following section explores ministry experiences of deacons today.



## DEACONS BY THE NUMBERS



**80%**

identify as women



**18%**

identify as men



**95%**

identify as white



**5%**

identify as BIPOC



**60%**

over the age of 50

**40%**

under the age of 50



**90%**

master's degree or higher

**10%**

bachelor's  
degree



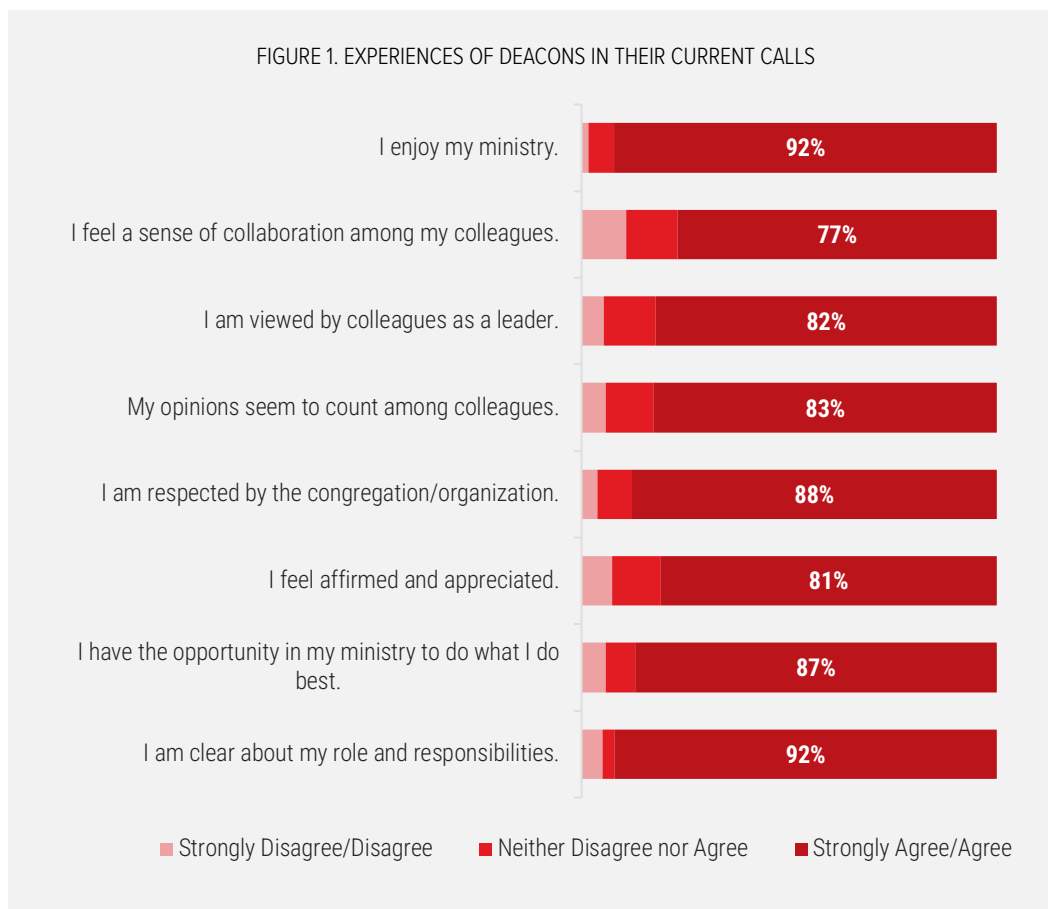
### Survey Respondents v. Roster Data

According to official ELCA roster data, 80% of deacons identify as women and 20% identify as men; 96% identify as white; and 60% are over the age of 50. Similarities between survey and roster data give us strong confidence in these findings.

## The Experiences of Our Ministers of Word and Service

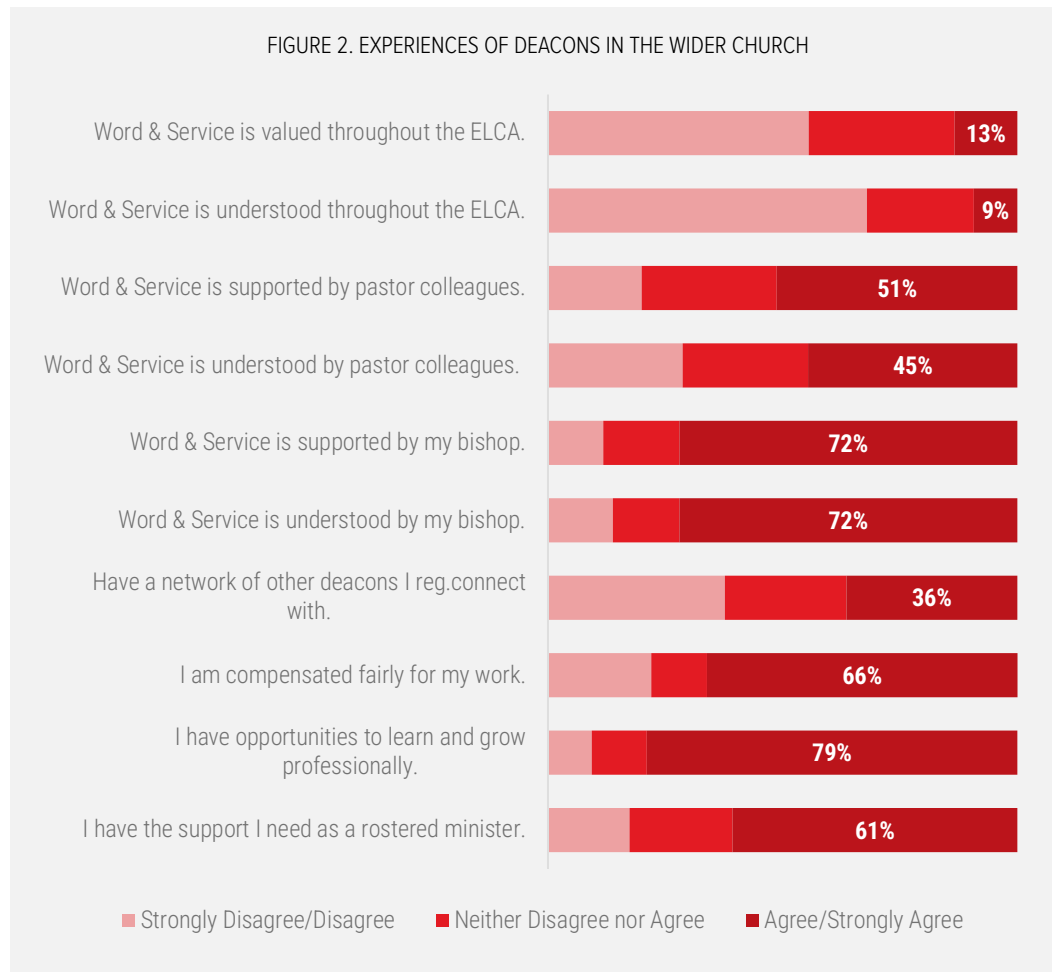
Through this survey, our researchers sought to better understand the lived experiences of deacons. We wanted to know about their experience serving — whether it was mainly a positive experience or a negative one. We were especially interested in experiences that may be limiting their impact as ministry leaders. To explore this, we asked deacons to respond to a series of statements about their current calls and the wider church.

Figure 1, below, shows that deacons report a wide range of positive experiences in the ministry of their current calls. They overwhelmingly enjoy their ministries, have clarity about their role and responsibilities, feel respected by their congregation or organization and, perhaps most important, have the opportunity to do what they do best. Deacons also report largely positive experiences among their closest colleagues, feeling affirmed and appreciated. Considered together, these findings suggest that within the daily work of ministry, deacons have positive, supportive experiences of leadership in this church.





When we asked deacons about their experiences of ministry leadership in the context of the wider church, their responses were far less positive (Figure 2). Responses about their opportunities to learn and grow professionally were mostly positive; about 80% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. However, only two-thirds of deacons said that they were compensated fairly, and only 6 out of 10 said they had the support they needed.



The most challenging responses, however, came from a series of statements about whether the ministry of Word and Service is understood and supported. Only 72% of respondents said that their bishop understood and supported their ministry leadership. Even fewer said that ministers of Word and Sacrament understood their ministry leadership (45%) and supported it (51%). Only 13% of respondents agreed that ministry of Word and Service is valued throughout the ELCA, and only 9% agreed that it was understood throughout the ELCA.



## Key Finding #2

*The experiences of deacons appear split. Within the context of their daily work in ministry, deacons have the kind of respect, support and experiences we would expect for our professional, public leaders. When it comes to their experiences within the wider church — that is, among bishops, ministers of Word and Sacrament and the ELCA more generally — deacons struggle to find support and understanding.*

### Differences by Age, Gender, Tenure and Context

To further understand these experiences, we compared responses to the items in Figures 1 and 2 by gender, age, tenure and ministry context. When it comes to deacons' experiences of their current calls, there is remarkable consistency across these variables — with two exceptions.

One, our youngest deacons report fewer positive experiences across a range of situations than older deacons do. That is, those in their 30s were less likely to feel respected by their congregation or organization, to have their opinions heard, to be viewed as a leader by their colleagues and to feel a sense of collaboration with their colleagues. Two, in several ways, deacons serving in congregations appear to fare better than those serving outside of congregations. They are more likely to have opportunities to do what they do best and to feel that their opinions matter, that their colleagues view them as a leader and that they have the respect of their congregation or organization.

This further analysis suggests that, overall, the experiences of deacons in their current calls are quite positive. Deviations from that may suggest opportunities for us to further support and provide resources to deacons.

When it comes to deacons' experiences of the wider church, differences among gender, age, tenure and ministry context are more pronounced. For example, men were more likely than women to report that they were fairly compensated but less likely to have a network of deacons with whom they connect. The former is further evidence that gender-based discrimination continues to affect the compensation of rostered ministers, whereas the latter is somewhat concerning, given that men's under-representation among deacons already isolates them.

A similar pattern emerged regarding age. Deacons in their 30s were less likely than others to say that they are fairly compensated but more likely to have a network of deacons with whom they connect. Our youngest deacons were far less likely than older deacons (60 years and older) to say their bishops and pastor colleagues understand and support deacons or that ministry of Word and Service is understood and valued throughout the ELCA. Over time,



greater experience may temper their perspectives, but it seems equally possible that these differences reflect evolving expectations. Since the unification of the diaconal roster, deacons themselves have advocated fiercely for additional resources and recognition. No one should be surprised that our younger deacons expect more from their church.

In summary, deacons often have very positive experiences in their current call but face significant challenges in the wider church — especially when it comes to their ministry being understood, valued and supported. These challenges offer this church the opportunity to renew its commitment to ministry of Word and Service and the special leadership deacons offer as public ministers of the ELCA. The next section further explores that special leadership.

**Photo:** Deacon Lewis Eggleston joins a delegation from the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod for DC World Pride. Used with permission.





## Leadership in Ministry

### Specialized Leadership in Ministry

Ministers of Word and Service in the ELCA exercise leadership across a wide range of ministries. A distinguishing characteristic of their formation for leadership is that they receive specialized training in focused areas of ministry. As candidates, deacons identify one or more areas of ministry in which to specialize, and often they continue to lead throughout their ministries through a constellation of specializations.

In this section, we consider insights from a series of survey questions that explored the areas of ministry where deacons serve. Deacons were invited to select items from the list of ministry specializations used in the candidacy process. Recognizing that no list captures all the ways in which deacons serve, we included an “Other” category in our question about ministry. Figure 3, below, shows the top 10 areas of ministry where deacons currently serve.

FIGURE 3. TOP TEN AREAS OF MINISTRY SERVED BY DEACONS

Area of Ministry	%	#
Faith Formation	38%	87
Education	33%	76
Administration	30%	70
Youth and Household	28%	65
Music and Worship	28%	64
Intergenerational Ministry	22%	51
Spiritual Formation/Direction	20%	46
Chaplaincy	19%	44
Ministry with Older Adults	17%	39
Public Policy/Advocacy	11%	26

### Differences by Age, Gender, Tenure and Context

These top 10 areas can tell us much about the leadership of deacons, but there are differences worth considering. In our analysis, we were able to identify important differences





by age, gender, tenure (length of service on the roster) and context (whether or not deacons serve in a congregation).

Some areas of ministry skew younger whereas others skew older. For example, nearly half of deacons under 40 serve in faith formation, compared to 23% of deacons older than 60. A similar dynamic is found among those serving in youth ministry, intergenerational ministry and, to a slightly lesser extent, education. In all these areas, the proportion of deacons serving decreases with age. One obvious reason for this is that these specializations often involve working with young people. Deacons of any age have the potential to relate well to young people, but it does make sense that these specializations would skew younger. A similar breakdown appears among those serving in public policy, advocacy and social justice. In our survey, 15% of respondents under 40 serve in these areas, compared to 7% of those older than 60.

The inverse is true for those deacons serving in music/worship and in ministry with older adults. Thirty-seven percent of deacons older than 60 serve in music/worship, compared to less than a quarter of younger deacons. It makes sense that older deacons might serve among older adults; why more of them serve in music/worship is less clear. Thirty-seven percent of deacons older than 60 serve in music/worship but less than a quarter of younger deacons do so. One possible explanation is that, because the Word and Service roster now requires a master's degree, more theological training and Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), fewer church musicians have pursued candidacy. Many church musicians serve their congregations part-time; perhaps the increased professionalization and standardization make it difficult for these leaders to become rostered.

Given that significantly more deacons identify as women than as men, one might assume significant gender differences among these specializations. According to our survey, however, gender most often plays no significant role among the top 10 areas of ministry — with a few exceptions. Faith formation and youth ministry skew female: 39% of women deacons serve in faith formation, compared to 24% of men deacons, and 29% of women deacons serve in youth ministry, compared to 18% of men deacons. The inverse is true among deacons serving in administration and music/worship: 39% of men serve in administration, compared to 28% of women, and 39% of men serve in music/worship, compared to one-quarter of women.

There are no clear explanations for any of these differences.

Positions in congregational faith formation and youth ministry tend to be program staff or part-time, so perhaps gender dynamics in U.S. society make women more likely to serve in these roles. For example, though women have gained significant economic influence at home in recent decades, a 2022 Pew Research Center survey found that in 55% of opposite-sex marriages, the husband was the primary or sole breadwinner. Perhaps some aspects of faith formation and youth ministry are shaped by gendered perceptions of nurturing and caregiving. These dynamics and similar results are evident in teaching, for example, where a 2024 survey found that 77% of teachers are women but only 23% are men. These gendered perceptions may also explain why a disproportionate percentage of male deacons work in administration and music/worship, which are less often viewed as “women’s work.”



Length of service, or tenure, provides some additional insight into how the leadership of deacons may be shifting. Whereas faith formation has long been supplied by deacons, only 30% of our newest deacons do this sort of work, compared to over 40% of deacons who have served between 6 and 15 years. This could reflect fewer faith formation positions than in prior years or simply a diversification of ministry areas among newer deacons. Typically, those who serve in music/worship have been deacons for 11-15 years and began their ministries before the ELCA consolidated the lay professional rosters. Four out of 10 deacons with this length of tenure serve in this area, compared to just a quarter of those with tenures of less than 10 years. This seems to further support the theory that recent changes to the requirements for ministry of Word and Service have inadvertently discouraged church musicians from becoming deacons. Finally, compared to deacons with tenures longer than 10 years, a greater percentage of newer deacons are choosing to serve as chaplains. This may reflect a growing acceptance of deacons serving in a capacity once reserved for pastors.

Whether a deacon serves in a congregational call versus a non-congregational call can help us better understand differences among deacons. For example, it makes sense that congregations account for a disproportionate percentage of calls in faith formation, education, youth ministry, music/worship, intergenerational ministry, and ministry with older adults. Likewise, it makes sense that non-congregational settings account for a disproportionate percentage of calls in chaplaincy, public policy, advocacy and social justice.

### **Key Finding #3**

*Deacons today serve in a wide range of ministry leadership but play a critical role in faith formation — especially with youth and intergenerationally. They work in education, administration, worship/music, chaplaincy and social justice.*

### **How Specializations Change Over Time**

In addition to the areas of ministry in which deacons currently serve, the survey asked about the specializations that deacons had discerned for themselves during candidacy. We found significant overlap between the specializations identified by deacons during candidacy and those practiced where deacons currently serve, specifically in faith formation, youth ministry, music/worship, chaplaincy, education, administration, spiritual direction, and public policy and advocacy. All eight of these were among the top 10 specializations identified during candidacy, and at least 10% of deacons say they serve in these areas today. To better understand how the ministry leadership of deacons may evolve after ordination, we invited survey respondents to share why they serve in their current area of ministry. Though many deacons have specialized formations, the trajectory of their ministry often develops and evolves. From 137 open-ended responses, three themes emerged regarding these developments.



## HOW SPECIALIZATIONS CHANGE OVER TIME



### Sense of Call

Responding to God's call and new ministry needs.



### Further Specialization

New skills, capacities, or certifications for ministry.



### Scarcity of Calls

New directions when a call is not available in that area.

First, as we might expect, deacons regularly discern how God may be calling them in a new direction. Sometimes this “unfolding sense of call” develops as deacons respond to newly identified needs in their ministry and community. Second, many deacons further specialize throughout their ministry. Some find positions that call upon a wider range of skills than before. Others follow their interests to develop new skills and obtain new certifications or degrees. Still others delve even deeper into their initial areas of ministry, developing highly specialized skills such as pediatric counseling or long-term end-of-life hospice care. One variation on this theme is that some deacons begin their ministries in specialized fields only to broaden their focus over time. Many who serve in congregational ministry may have begun in youth ministry but later added young-adult ministry and an emphasis on equipping parents and families. Over time, a deacon with those greater specializations may shift to a call where they are responsible for all areas of faith formation and discipleship.

Finally, though this is uncommon, some deacons begin by specializing in an area of ministry only to discover that there are few, if any, positions available to them. This lack of demand can be driven by congregational economics; in recent years, fewer congregations can afford to pay a full-time rostered minister. Other times, there simply are not many positions in a given area of specialization. A few respondents shared that others’ misconceptions about what deacons can and cannot do contributed to the scarcity of call opportunities for them. The following two sections explore additional leadership roles of deacons in worship and pastoral ministry.

Text







**Photo:** Photo by RDNE Stock project from Pexels  
([www.pexels.com](https://www.pexels.com)). Used with permission.



## Leadership in Worship

The role of deacons in worship has evolved over time. Recently, as many churches have sought to revitalize their diaconates, they have emphasized the ways in which the leadership of deacons in the Christian assembly might reinforce their distinct charisms. In both the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions, deacons are prescribed very specific roles. The World Council of Churches (WCC) report “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” offers a more descriptive take on the role of deacons:

Deacons represent to the Church its calling as servant in the world. By struggling in Christ’s name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in the Church’s life. They exercise responsibility in the worship of the congregation: for example by reading the scriptures, preaching and leading the people in prayer.<sup>4</sup>

In the ELCA today, the role of deacons in worship leadership is less clear. One reason for this is that many of the specific roles assigned to deacons in other traditions are those Lutherans have emphasized for assisting ministers, lectors and other lay leadership in worship. An overly prescriptive approach might have the unintended consequence of prioritizing deacons over other lay leaders — an especially unfortunate possibility, given that a key responsibility of deacons is to “equip the baptized for ministry in God’s world that affirms the gifts of all people” (ELCA Constitution 7.61.02.d).

To invite further reflection on the role of deacons in worship, this survey asked a series of questions to help the church better understand the variety of ways in which deacons lead within the Christian assembly. Even without guidance or a prescribed role, deacons in the ELCA indeed play a significant role in leading worship.

FIGURE 4. FREQUENCY OF WORSHIP LEADERSHIP BY DEACONS

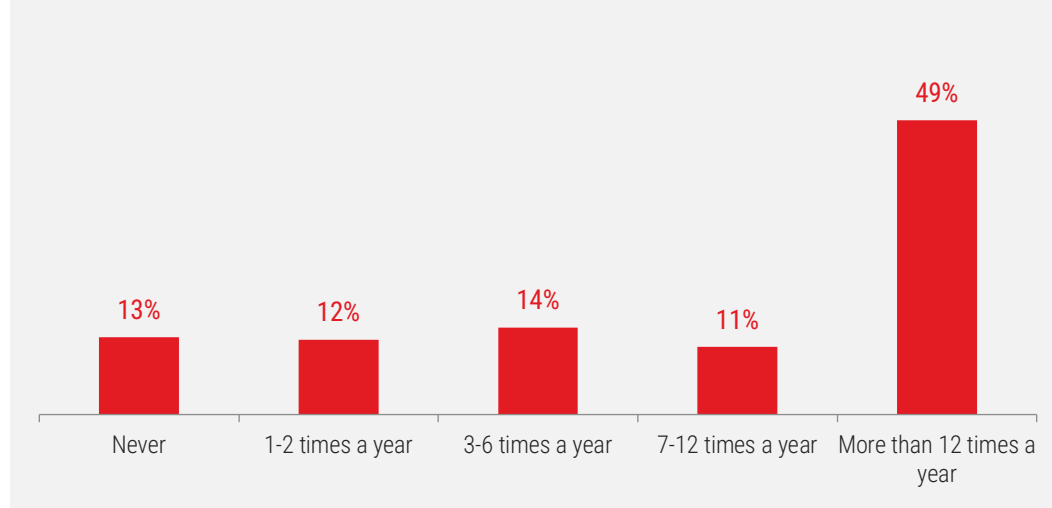


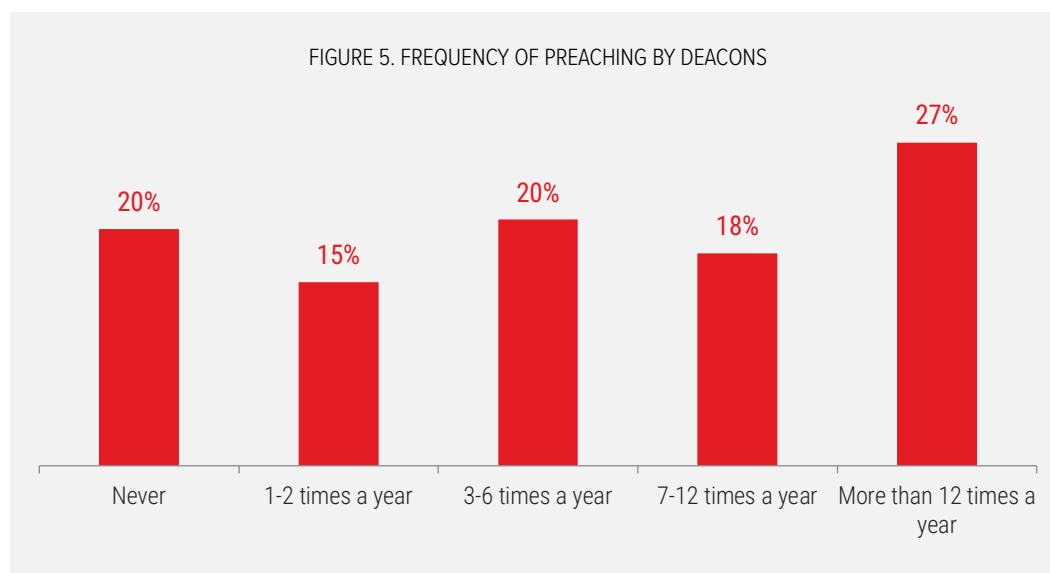
Figure 4 shows that 6 out of every 10 deacons regularly serve in worship, whether as primary worship leader, assisting minister, cantor or musician, or in other, similar roles. Only 13% reported never leading in worship.

#### Key Finding # 4

*ELCA deacons today have a significant role in worship, with 60% regularly serving as worship leaders across a diverse set of roles and 45% regularly preaching in a variety of contexts.*

Whether a deacon serves within or beyond a congregation may impact their opportunities to lead in worship. For example, a deacon called by a synod to serve as a social worker may have few — if any — such opportunities. Indeed, when we compared the responses of deacons called by congregations to those called by synods and the Church Council, those serving in congregations were almost twice as likely to say they often lead in worship than those serving beyond the congregation; those serving beyond congregations were twice as likely to say they rarely or never lead in worship than those serving in congregations

Though Lutherans believe that proclamation of the Word takes many forms, we should not be surprised that many deacons regularly lead by preaching. Figure 5 shows how often deacons preach in their respective contexts: a congregation, a hospital chapel or a summer camp's outdoor chapel. Our survey found that 45% of deacons preach often whereas 20% preach sometimes and 35% rarely or never preach. Interestingly, whether deacons serve in a congregation has very little impact on the frequency of preaching.



In summary, deacons offer significant leadership in worship and do so without a clearly prescribed set of liturgical roles. Most often, they serve among pastors and other lay ministers, supporting the participation of the whole congregation. Many deacons also practice their call to proclaim the gospel through preaching. Still others practice their proclamation through their action and service. The following section explores how deacons may function from time to time in today's changing landscape of pastoral leadership.



**Photo:** Deacons leading Thanksgiving for Baptism at 2019 Churchwide Assembly. Used with permission.

## Deacons as Pastoral Leaders

Given the changing need for pastoral leaders in the ELCA, our survey sought to understand whether — and, if so, how — deacons may be filling roles once filled by pastors. To this end, we explored whether deacons ever serve as pulpit supply ministers or currently serve as synod-authorized ministers (SAMs). Though a variety of roles might be filled by either a deacon or a pastor, these two are distinctively pastoral leadership roles.<sup>5</sup> Our findings suggest that deacons are not regularly serving as pastoral leaders. About 20% of deacons say they regularly serve as pulpit supply ministers. Figure 6 details how often deacons serve in this way. Given that the norm is weekly celebration of Holy Communion, it makes sense that most pulpit supply is led by pastors. That said, when deacons serve as pulpit supply ministers leading liturgies such as Daily Prayer or Service of the Word, they are not necessarily leading as pastoral leaders. This kind of worship leadership fits well with their call to diaconal leadership.

Deacons who serve as synod-authorized ministers are even less common. Only 10% of respondents said they are currently serving as a SAM. Figure 7 details how often deacons serve in this way. Most deacons who serve as SAMs do so in congregations that have already called them for diaconal service; only when the need arises are they authorized for sacramental ministry by a bishop.

### Key Finding #5

*Deacons may occasionally, temporarily fill in as pastoral leaders, but our findings suggest that, overwhelmingly, deacons serve in their own distinct forms of public ministry.*

In summary, despite the changing needs of pastoral leadership in the ELCA, deacons do not appear to be a significant strategy for addressing these challenges. Deacons have their own callings, and though there are situations where their leadership can temporarily help the church fill a pastoral need, our survey suggests that this happens only in very limited circumstances. The following section explores the symbols used to identify deacons as public ministers of this church



FIGURE 6. FREQUENCY OF PULPIT SUPPLY BY DEACONS

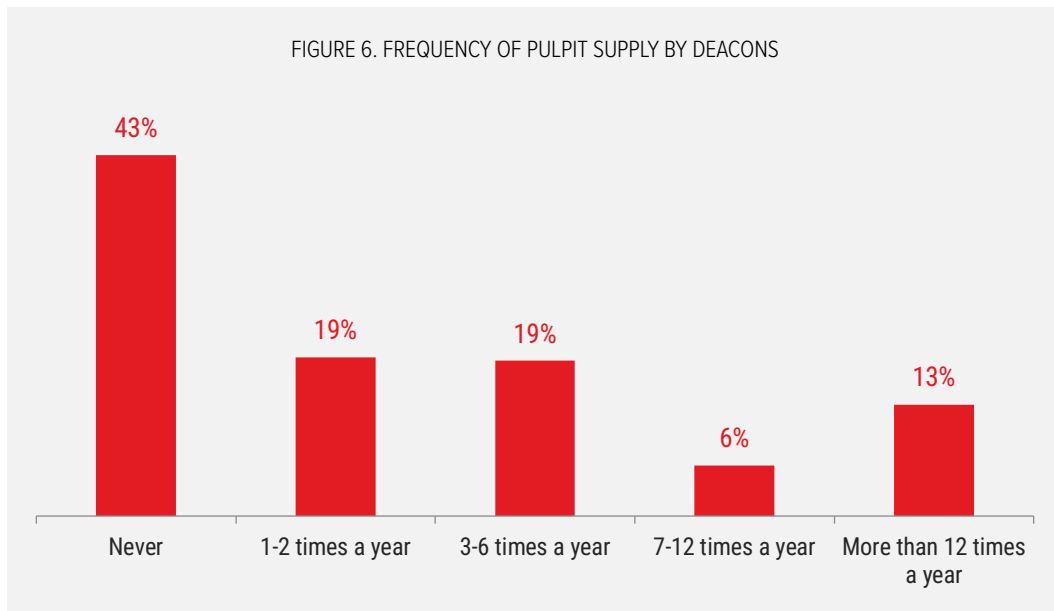
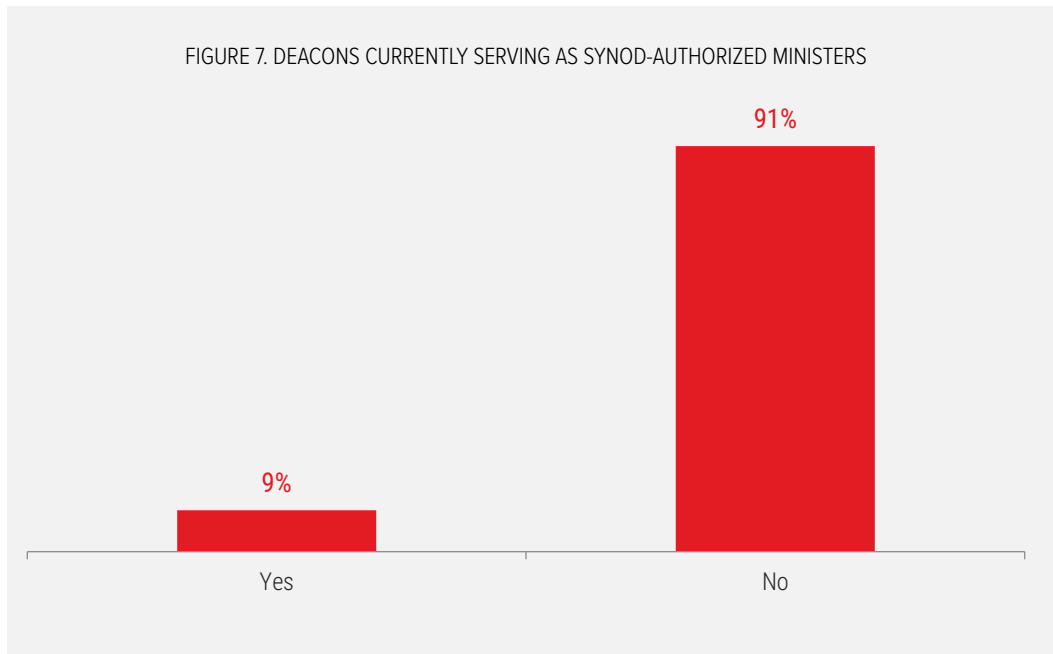


FIGURE 7. DEACONS CURRENTLY SERVING AS SYNOD-AUTHORIZED MINISTERS



## Symbols of Public Ministry

Though Lutherans have engaged in and benefited from recent ecumenical reflection on the role of deacons, we have not adopted the threefold “order” of ministry outlined in “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.” Rather, for Lutherans, there is one public office of ministry, and deacons and pastors serve in that office together, through their distinct callings. For this reason, the Entrance Rite Discernment Group in 2018 recommended the use of “ordination” as the rite of setting apart both ministers of Word and Sacrament and ministers of Word and Service. The group also recommended that, at ordination, deacons be presented with a deacon’s stole and a cross (subsequently designed as a pin to be worn outside the assembly’s worship). In designing this survey, stakeholders currently serving as deacons asked that we explore whether these public symbols have proved useful in practice. Given the inconsistent practice of ELCA deacons wearing a tabbed (e.g. “clerical”) collar, our stakeholders also asked us to explore the usefulness of that public symbol. This section explores our survey findings concerning these three symbols.

When we asked deacons whether the public symbol of a deacon’s pin is useful for their ministry, we found a strong consensus that it is not. Figure 8 shows that only 10% consider it useful whereas over half do not. To the contrary, when we asked deacons whether the public symbol of a deacon’s stole was useful for their ministry, we found a strong consensus that it is. Figure 9 shows that two-thirds of deacons consider the stole useful whereas only 13% do not. Regarding the tabbed collar, we took a more measured approach and asked deacons whether there are contexts in which wearing a collar is or would be useful for their ministry. This approach was meant to acknowledge that in parts of the ELCA, deacons are free or even encouraged to wear a collar. In other parts, however, they are discouraged from wearing a collar. On this matter, deacons did not express the same level of consensus; a majority agree whereas about a quarter disagree (Figure 10).

Taken together, these findings suggest that, overall, deacons find the stole to be an effective symbol of their public ministry when serving in a liturgical or ecclesial setting. Beyond the worshiping assembly, however, the same cannot be said. Given this survey’s findings concerning deacons’ experiences in the wider church, it seems reasonable that many deacons may desire stronger, more widely recognizable symbols for their public ministry beyond worship. Additionally, the survey found consensus on the deacon’s stole, a symbol used primarily in liturgical contexts, where the actual role of deacons lacks clarity. Meanwhile, there is no consensus on the deacon’s pin, a symbol used beyond the church, where the role of deacons is clear.

### Key Finding #6

*Though individual circumstances may differ, deacons’ perspectives on the public symbols used for deacons reflect a broader concern for greater recognition of deacons’ leadership within the church’s public ministry.*





FIGURE 8. USEFULNESS OF DEACON PIN FOR MY MINISTRY

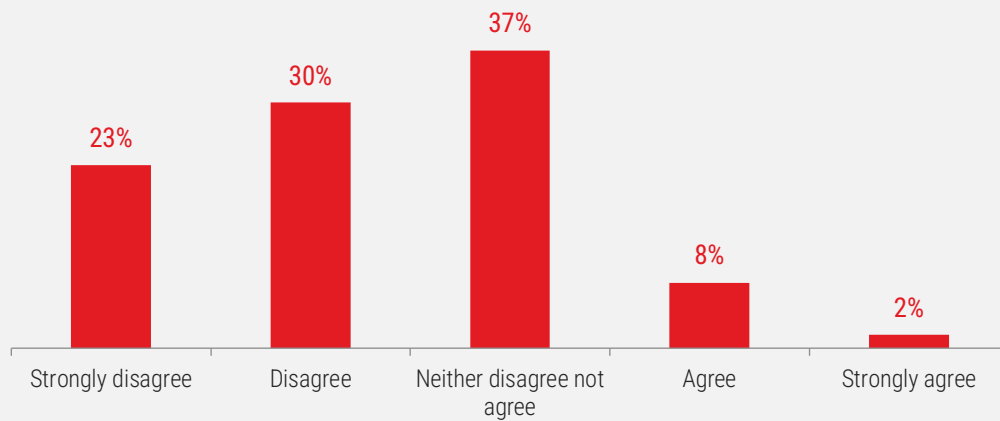


FIGURE 9. USEFULNESS OF DEACON STOLE FOR MY MINISTRY.

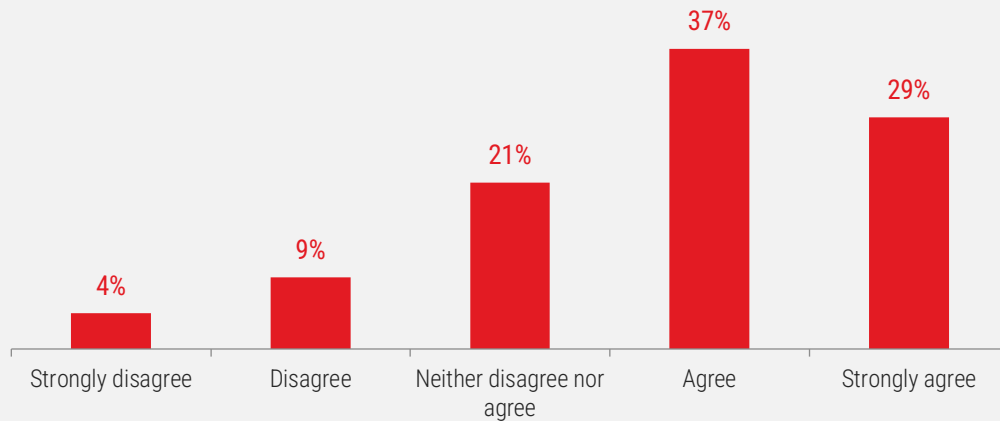
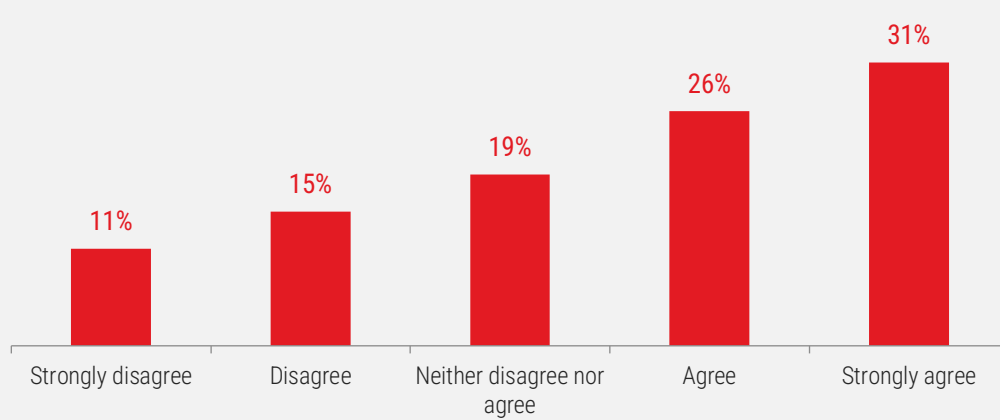


FIGURE 10. USEFULNESS OF TABBED COLLAR FOR MY MINISTRY



## Differences in Age, Gender, Tenure and Context

We should point out that deacons' perspectives on these public symbols differ significantly across age, gender, tenure and context. For example, women serving as deacons were half as likely as men to consider the deacon's pin useful. Furthermore, they were more likely than men to consider the stole useful or to think a tabbed collar is or would be useful. These differences suggest that, given ongoing gender discrimination, women have a clearer notion than men about the impact of such public symbols.

We also found that our older deacons tend to view the existing public symbols more favorably but to view the tabbed collar less favorably. Younger deacons had favorable views of the stole but also favored the tabbed collar more than any other segment did. As the diaconate continues to evolve in the ELCA, younger deacons may view the need for public symbols differently than their predecessors did.

This interpretation is further supported by our sorting of responses by deacons' tenure on the roster. Newer deacons were even more skeptical of the deacon's pin whereas longer-serving deacons were less skeptical. Deacons who had served for 15 years or less overwhelmingly considered the stole useful; deacons who had served for more than 15 years were less likely to say this. Similarly, our newest deacons are among the strongest supporters of wearing a tabbed collar whereas our longest-serving deacons are the least supportive.

Differences by context also reveal important insights into these questions. Though deacons serving in congregations were slightly less favorable toward the deacon's pin and tabbed collar, they were much more favorable toward the stole. These differences are interesting because deacons serving in congregations also serve as worship leaders much more often, so it stands to reason that the stole would be more important to them. In turn, it also makes sense that those serving beyond congregations would place more emphasis on the symbol(s) meant to communicate their ministry beyond liturgical contexts.

In summary, responses to these symbols may point to an evolving perspective on the public ministry of deacons. Though the symbols communicate important aspects of diaconal ministry, deacons seem equally concerned that such symbols communicate the deacon's role across all the public contexts in which they serve.



# menu

Main: **Chilaquiles!**  
(Mexican Egg Dish)  
- it's Gluten Free!

Sides: **Mexican Cabbage Slaw**  
**Carrot Styx w/ Dip**  
**Chips + Salsa**

Dessert: **Sopapillas w/**  
**Caramelized Bananas**

VEGETARIAN + GF Options Available

PAY-AS-YOU-CAN !!

## Conclusion

In conclusion, deacons serve in a wide range of ministry areas. Their leadership deepens public witness of the gospel in congregations and expands it beyond them. Their specialized leadership in *diakonia* brings a prophetic edge, driving the Church toward the suffering of the world and toward justice for all. Through their leadership, they empower the baptized for ministry — especially youth, families and people engaged in intergenerational ministry. Deacons' wide range of leadership in worship reminds us that the liturgy is not the work of the presider but of all those who gather around the font and table. This survey has identified significant ways in which deacons provide this church with public leadership; it also identifies areas where additional resources and attention may be needed to fully support our ministers of Word and Service.



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> World Council of Churches, “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,” Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (1982), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Lutheran World Federation, “The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church,” LWF Studies (2006), 87.

<sup>3</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Together for Ministry: Final Report and Actions on the Study of Ministry 1988-1993,” 10.

<sup>4</sup> “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,” 24.

<sup>5</sup> Here, we use the phrase “pastoral leadership” as a shorthand for all ministers – ordained and synod-authorized – who publicly lead the church’s sacramental ministry.



## Appendix A

### Stakeholder Advisory Group

Sister Dottie Almoney	Directing Deaconess, ELCA Deaconess Community
Deacon Adrainne Jean Gray	Executive Director, Lutheran Diaconal Association
Deacon Stacie Lightner	Cantor, St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church (St. Paul, Minnesota)
Deacon Dallas Shealy	Executive Director, South Carolina Lutheran Retreat Centers
Deacon Timothy Siburg	Director for Evangelical Mission, Innovation & Stewardship, Nebraska Synod, ELCA
Deacon Brianna Morris-Brock	Deacon of Children, Youth & Family Ministries, Triumphant Love Lutheran Church (Austin, Texas)
Deacon Kari Olsen	Director & Mission Developer, Shobi's Table (St. Paul, Minnesota)

### Churchwide Organization Resource Persons

Deacon Sue Rothmeyer	Secretary
Deacon Krista Anderson	Program Director, Support of Ministers of Word and Service
Adam DeHoek, PhD	Senior Director, Research and Evaluation
Tim Snyder, PhD	Researcher/Evaluator









Research and Evaluation  
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