



“Whom Shall I Send?”

*A Discernment Guide*

THE LDA

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# What Is Discernment?

*Figuring Out. Learning. Noticing. Taking In.  
Listening.*

**You have already shown interest in the LDA, and are aware of a possible call to service ministry.** The purpose of this guide is to provide you with information and resources about Diakonia, the LDA and the practice of discernment. The guide is divided into five sections.

1. Who are LDA DEACONESSES AND DEACONS?
2. What is DIAKONIA?
3. Who is the LDA?
4. How do I DISCERN GOD'S CALL FOR ME?
5. Some FINAL THOUGHTS

At the end of each section, you will find thoughts, readings, and ideas to help you with discernment. We encourage you to take some time with these as you continue to listen for God's voice.

*"The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. **Never lose a holy curiosity.**"*  
~Albert Einstein

# Section 1:

## *Who are LDA deaconesses and deacons?*

### **LDA Deaconesses and Deacons are people who:**

- Desire and feel called to a life of service to Christ.
- Are Lutheran.
- Have theological training.
- Long for community.
- Have completed the LDA's Education and Formation process.
- See their identity as one who serves in all aspects of life and vocation.
- Recognize that service ministry can be in any setting.
- Serve Christ in ways the world needs.

### **LDA Deaconesses and deacons might be:**

- Congregational staff
- College students or second career
- Global mission workers
- Nurses
- Pastors or Chaplains
- Teachers
- Advocates or Executive leaders
- Attorneys
- Raising children
- And many more....there is no TYPICAL Deaconess or Deacon ministry!

Reflection question: have you ever considered that what you are already doing might be seen through a ministry lens? What might that look like?

## Deaconesses and Deacons have been around for a long time!

- Mark uses forms of the word "*diakonia*" to describe the service of Jesus.
- Acts 5 tells of seven people chosen to serve at tables.
- In Romans 26, Paul commends Phoebe, a Deaconess.
- Jesus knelt to wash the feet of his disciples, an act of humility. He then says, *"Now that I, your Lord and teacher have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set an example that you should do as I have done for you."*

Reflection question: what words or phrases speak to you from the following?

- Mark 10: 42-45
- Acts 6: 1-7
- Romans 16

## LDA Deaconesses and Deacons Follow Jesus' Example:

- The life, death and resurrection of Christ the Servant give impetus, shape, and content to ministry.
- It is Jesus to whom we look—Jesus, who healed the sick, fed the hungry, touched the untouchable, washed feet; Jesus, who was served by others; Jesus, who did not disdain the cross and grave.
- Jesus' words and actions teach us the radical nature of service in his name.
- Jesus' own life and service are the model for life in ministry.
- Jesus' death and resurrection empower us to join in God's work in the world.

Reflection question: from the above statements, what makes the most sense to you? What, if anything, is confusing? Consider asking the LDA to set you up with a deaconess or deacon to talk to about your discernment.

# Section II

## What is Diakonia?

- *Diakonia* is a Greek word that means “service.”
- At the LDA, we often say “Set **apart** to serve **among**” when talking about diaconal ministry.
- The LDA’s Touchstones and Hallmarks--which describe our identity, purpose, and standards--says this about deaconess/deacon ministry:

“**[Diakonia]** is knowing that the posture from which we do our **service is not as the superior** giver condescending to the level of the recipient; rather, it is knowing that we **stand in solidarity** with the whole human family, that in our ministry we always receive more than we give, that our understanding of the truth is **only part of the total picture** and **that we have much to learn**, that we hear the voice of God teaching us in the voices of those whom we seek to serve, and that **Christ touches us as we reach out** to “one of the least of these.”

Reflection question: think of a time when you served someone else. What was that like for you? Were any of the above statements true for you? If so, how?

# Section III

## Who is the LDA?

The LDA is a Lutheran organization training and forming people for service ministry to those in need across the street and around the world.

- We do this through education in theology, support from an international community, intentional spiritual reflection, and experience in ministry. This process is called **Education and Formation**.

### The LDA:

- Supports deaconesses and deacons in their varied ministries.
- Affirms the whole people of God in their own diaconal service.
- Assists the church in its diaconal mission.

### A Short History

The Lutheran Deaconess Association (LDA) was formed in 1919 in Fort Wayne, IN. At that time, Deaconesses worked as nurses or at other caring institutions. They lived in community, were not married, and earned no salary. They were given a stipend, housing, and lifetime care.

The LDA was multi-Lutheran from its infancy; it was formed out of the Synodical Conference of Bishops, which included several Lutheran denominations. Today we have women and men from seven different Lutheran Church bodies in the United States.

Throughout the 1930s, interest in parish ministry resulted in a shift for Deaconesses from nursing to congregational work. Many could no longer live in community because they moved to be near the parish where they served. The distance increased the longing for community, so the LDA formed the Lutheran Deaconess Conference (LDC) in 1935--the community of consecrated deaconesses which continues today.

The LDC established an annual summer meeting for the Community to support each other, build relationships, and worship together. Both the female community (LDC) and the male community (Community of Lutheran Deacons or CLD) continue to meet each year. In the early years, many deaconesses would travel to annual meeting together with nearby sisters. These relationships fostered a desire for local Community, so area

conferences of the LDC were formed. There is even a Skype area conference for people who are not geographically near to any other LDC or CLD members.

In 1943, the President of Valparaiso University invited the LDA to house their training program at the University. The LDA accepted and a partnership was born. This proved to be a very good move for both parties because more women were seeking college degrees, and opportunities for ministry were expanding. Between 1964 and 1978, the LDA consecrated 200 new deaconesses!

From the very beginning of the LDA, it was common practice for a sister who married was no longer a part of the community. Because deaconesses were placed in calls by the LDA, marriage did not give full freedom for her to go where the LDA might send her. By 1968 however, the LDA re-invited these deaconesses to re-enter the community, as marriage was no longer an issue for diaconal community.

An increased interest of college-educated women sensing a second-career call to diaconal ministry prompted the LDA to re-think student formation. In 1988, the LDA created a distance-based formation program for women over age 35. There were now two formation plans—one for college students and one for second career. In an effort to synchronize them, in 1998 the LDA began re-working the student process, and in 2004 our current education/formation design was in place. This plan is competency-based, and is highly adaptable to each student. Our students come from different college campuses, age groups, careers, skill sets, backgrounds, and Lutheran denominations. Our slogan is “Nothing Typical Here!”

The LDA strives to listen to the needs of it’s’ students, the LDC and CLD, the organization itself, and a changing world. We offer a durable program which carefully and intentionally forms students to respond to a needy world in a Christ-like way.

### **The LDA is multi-Lutheran.**

- Our students come from seven different Lutheran church bodies in the United States.
- The LDA is not officially affiliated with any Lutheran church body, but many LDA Deaconesses and Deacons serve in rostered positions within their respective church body.
- Our students and consecrated Deaconesses/Deacons do not agree on every theological point...and we see this as strength.
- We focus on what we have in common and why we are together—a shared call to serve others, be in community, and be the light of Christ in the world.
- Many of us are not rostered, and work in secular settings.

## **There are other deaconess/deacon training programs. You should check them out.**

- The ELCA has rostered diaconal ministry titles, including Deaconess. Read more about them at <http://www.elca.org/About/Leadership/Rostered>. The roster will be changing shortly, so check it frequently. Many of our requirements for the LDA mirror the requirements for rostering in the ELCA.
- The LCMS has a Deaconess program. Find them online at <http://www.lcms.org/deaconess>.
- The LCMS offers a program called the Lay Deacon Program. It is less training than the LDA but not as broad of a base for ministry. Visit <http://missiontrainingcenter.com>

## **Some Basic Facts about Education and Formation at the LDA:**

- Student formation generally takes between two and four years. It depends on the student.
- Students are formed in four areas: Theology, Work/Ministry, Spirituality, and Community.
- Formation includes fieldwork, internship, chaplain training, and theology coursework.
- Every student has a mentor who supports them throughout the formation process.
- The LDC/CLD Communities are an integral part of student formation.
- Our Education/Formation program is flexible with your life and schedule.
- Scholarships are available to offset the cost of formation.

For reflection: review the LDA history. What rings true with you? In the above section, are there questions you have? Write them down and discuss them with a deaconess/deacon. Consider researching the ELCA and LCMS deaconess/diaconal programs. What do you like about each? Does one speak to you more loudly than another does?



# Section IV:

*How do I discern God's call for me?*

***"As for me, I would seek God,  
and to God I would commit  
my cause."***

***--Job 5:8***

## **A few things to consider:**

- Discernment involves noticing movement **toward** God and **away from** God. According to St Ignatius Loyola, signs of movement **toward** God include excitement, anticipation, gentleness, sense of God's presence, and peacefulness. Signs of movement **away from** God include agitation, anxiety, feeling abandoned, separation and isolation, and self-absorption.
- If you find yourself moving toward AND away, be patient and keep discerning.
- Discernment is different from decision-making. Discernment leads to decision-making, but also involves seeking God's will in your life and work.

## Where/How does Discernment Happen?

Typically, discernment happens in three different contexts:

1. A **worshipping community**
2. **individual** Scripture reading, individual prayer, and reflection
3. Conversation, prayer, and study with **other people**

### 1. Worshipping community:

God speaks through worship. The Word, sacraments, liturgy, prayers and hymns are all ways you might hear God's living word in your life. The people you regularly worship with may know you well enough to recognize your gifts for ministry and may give you feedback about your sense of calling. Sometimes you might ask for it, other times it might just be called out—pay attention to both!

#### Listening for God in worship:

- Be attentive during worship. Look. Listen
- What symbols, pictures, or colors do you notice?
- How might God use visual arts to speak to you?
- How does the music help you hear God's call?
- How do prayers, sermon, or texts speak to you today?

### 2. Individual discernment:

God speaks to us through prayer **Scripture** and **prayer**. Below are some suggestions for both.

#### Listening for God in Scripture:

Sit quietly with the Scripture. Take the words into yourself; let them touch your heart. Try reading one verse or a short phrase at a time. Read Scripture passages that have a special meaning for you, or try one of these. Read it aloud. Reflect. Read it again.

- Psalm 139
- I Samuel 3:1-10
- John 15: 1-5
- Isaiah 6: 1-8
- Luke 4: 16-21
- Matthew 14: 22-32
- Jeremiah 1: 4-8
- John 1: 35-39

For reflection: are there words or phrases that have special attraction for you? Is there an invitation for you in this passage?

### Listening for God in Prayer:

There are many ways to pray. Some people prefer to speak aloud to God with words. Others prefer silent prayer. Some people might repeat a word or phrase, while others might let the thoughts of their heart flow. Some people prefer a quiet space, a walk, or an activity. Prayer is the place where we meet God and can be a place where God speaks to us. Here are suggestions for prayer:

- Find a regular time to pray.
- Read scripture before you pray.
- Try keeping a journal—it can be words, pictures, music, or any other way you can document and keep track of your journey.
- Ask specific questions in your prayer. Focus on your calling to ministry and a decision of being called to this community. What might it mean for those in your life, and what might be required of you to participate in the education/formation process?

#### Try this form of individual silent prayer:

- a) Sit quietly for a time. Calm your body. Pay attention to your breathing.
- b) Recall that you are God's child. Allow yourself to rest in God's presence.
- c) Ask God to open your eyes and heart to see how God's Spirit has been present during the day.
- d) After some time, speak to God about what you noticed. Ask forgiveness for your sins and give thanks to God for this time together.
- e) Write about your experience in a journal to help you see things more clearly.

For reflection: which--if any--of these ideas worked for you? Did you notice anything about yourself or your connection to God?

## Listening for god through reflection:

There are many ways to listen for God's voice in your life, and God's call can become clearer when we retreat and reflect. Here are some ideas to get you started, or continue on your current path.

- Write about moments in your life when you have most keenly felt God's presence.
- Write a history of your faith journey. What, who, and how was your faith influenced?
- Write about the family you grew up in and your family now. Describe major relationships, events, and turning points. How did your family help shape the person you are today?
  - a) Tell about your relationship with each person in your family.
  - b) What experiences in your family helped you to understand pain and suffering?
  - c) What characteristics of your family strengthened you for serving?
  - d) What characteristics detracted you from your ability to serve?
- Write about your experiences with prayer.
- Write about your spiritual life. Were there people and or resources particularly significant for you?
- Think of a Christian act of service you might have done and what you learned. Write about that experience. What did you learn? What service did you offer? How did the person (or people) you served benefit from your service? How did you benefit?

## 3. Discernment with others:

God speaks to us through other people. It might feel intimidating to ask a group of people to pray and reflect with you about your spiritual calling, but it can be a very helpful experience. Others might see gifts or challenges that we have missed. Here are some suggestions of things to try:

- Gather a group of people to pray with you about your discernment. If you do not have a regular prayer group, you might consider using spiritual direction. Please contact the LDA if you need help connecting with a spiritual director.
- Explain to the group that you are asking them to help you discern YOUR calling into diaconal ministry, and whether this is a good fit for you.
- When thinking of who to ask, here are some considerations:
  - a) Gather people whose spiritual insights you value.
  - b) Gather people who know you well, but will also challenge you, pray with you, and speak the truth to you, even if it is hard.
  - c) Consider inviting a church leader—pastor, deaconess, deacon, etc.

- d) It can be helpful to invite people who have some understanding of service ministry.
- e) Decide how many times you would like this group to meet. Once? Regularly? Generally, a few times works well.

**Below is a guide for conversation and prayer with others:**

- Open with prayer. Ask God to be present.
- Share with the group your journey to interest in diaconal ministry.
- Share what you know about the LDA and our Education/Formation process. Find out if anyone else knows anything about the LDA.
- Share your sense of calling. How has God been speaking to you?
- Invite others to share a similar call around vocation or ministry.
- Ask for feedback about yourself. "What gifts do you see in me that might be useful in this ministry?" "What cautions or concerns do you have for me?"
- Close with prayer and invite others to pray for your discernment.
- Thank the group for spending time with you.

# Section V:

## Some Final Thoughts

### **It is not a race.**

Sometimes discernment moves quickly, other times it takes longer. Your journey is yours, so be patient.

### **This guide is just that—a guide.**

Use it a lot or a little. Use parts or use all. The guide is an option to help you listen closely for God.

### **Pay attention to the voices of those around you.**

Sometimes people do not know anything of your call or discernment may call out gifts in you that point towards ministry. This 'external call' is important.

### **Pay attention to your inner feelings.**

Excitement and anxiety can come forward as you consider a new direction in your life.

### **Reach out to the LDA.**

We would be happy to help you discern—through conversation, connecting you with other deaconesses or deacons, or helping you find a spiritual director. Stay in touch with us.

### **I want to Apply! What Now?**

Congratulations on this next step! To find out more about our application, please call or email. Phone and address are listed on the next page.

### **I do not think I am called to this Ministry. What Now?**

Discernment might mean sensing that diaconal ministry is NOT where God is calling you. We pray that you will continue to seek God's call for you in your daily life and ministry, and ask that you let us know you will not be applying.

# Questions?

Call Deaconess Valerie Webdell or Deaconess Deb Lennox at (219) 464-6925. You may email us at [Valerie.webdell@valpo.edu](mailto:Valerie.webdell@valpo.edu) or [Debra.Lennox@valpo.edu](mailto:Debra.Lennox@valpo.edu). Our application materials can also be found online at [www.theLDA.org](http://www.theLDA.org).

*"The place God Calls you to is where  
your deep gladness and the world's  
deep hunger meet."  
--Frederick Buechner*