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SPEAKERS

Marie, Christy, Jonathan, Jim

Hi Friends – this is Bishop Graves and I am excited to greet everyone as we hear this new Table Talk podcast. The conversation today is about the decision of the General Conference to grant sacramental authority to our ordained deacons.

I was presiding at General Conference when this legislation was passed. It was an historical moment. I hope you enjoy hearing some of our deacons talk about what this decision means for them in their ministry setting.

Although this legislation was set to become effective in January 2025, in the TWK, Bishop McAlilly gave immediate effect at your annual conference in June. I did the same thing in the KY Annual Conference effective in October. I hope you enjoy this episode!

Jim 00:03

Welcome to Table Talk, a podcast where United Methodists across Tennessee and Western Kentucky can connect with one another in deeper conversation around issues of life and faith. My name is Jim Hughes. I'm a semi retired elder from the legacy Tennessee conference, and I will be your host for today's episode in the United Methodist Church, deacons are ordained by a bishop to serve a lifetime of ministry. Their role is to lead the church in relating Christians to their ministries in the world through their worship, preaching, teaching, nurturing spiritual vitality and leading ministries of service, love and justice. Sometimes deacons work primarily in congregations. Other times, they work in settings like hospitals, social service agencies, schools and counseling centers. At our most recent General Conference, legislation was passed granting authority to deacons to preside at the sacraments, both baptism and communion in their ministry settings. Today, we're in conversation with three clergy members in our conference, Christy Brown, Marie C King and Jonathan Lewis. We're going to learn more about the role of deacons, learn about how the church is connecting to the world today, and talk about the impact of this recent General Conference legislation. So welcome to all three of you. And before we dive in, let me start with just a question that we ask all of our table talk guests, and that is, tell us a little bit about yourselves. And Marie, I'll let you begin.

Marie 01:31

Thank you, Jim. I am a preacher's kid, a PK, and I was born in forest, Mississippi. That's where my parents met and married, and then we transferred to the Louisiana conference. I've been in the ministry

for a little bit over 24 years, and I was ordained a deacon in 2003 I am also a registered nurse. I became a registered nurse in 1982 and I have served in healthcare for a number of years. And even though I am part of the I am ordained, I also maintain my nursing license to serve as a parish nurse. Excellent.

Jim 02:18

And where are you serving now.

Marie 02:20

I am currently serving as lead pastor with Mount Pisgah United Methodist Church, because I am in the process of transitioning from the order of Deacon to the order of elder. Great.

Jim 02:33

Thank you for that. Let's go, Jonathan. Jonathan, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Jonathan 02:38

Yeah. Really glad to be here. I am. Jonathan Lewis, I'm coming to you from Memphis, Tennessee, this morning, which is really my home. I was born in Alabama, lived a short time in South Carolina, and my family moved to the Memphis area when I was in about second grade, and so that's really where I have grown up. My entire ministry has been here. I started working for Methodist Le Bonheur healthcare in Memphis in 2008 and I'm still there. So I've been at Methodist healthcare for 16 years. My training was as a chaplain, and I spent many years as a clinical bedside Chaplain on the units with patients and families these days. My current role at Methodist healthcare is Director of Community Partnerships, so I'm not really at the bedside anymore. I'm doing mostly sort of public facing programs, partnerships with schools and churches and things like that. So I also have a background in healthcare, and that has been my ministry for many years.

Jim 03:42

Thanks. Jonathan Christy, how about you?

Christy 03:44

Well, Jim, I have to tell you, when I was newly in the process of becoming clergy, an elder in the connection, came up to me and said, Where did you come from? And I my only answer was the world. It's not a short answer for me, I've lived in many places, and while I'm no stranger to the church universal, I've only been a United Methodist for 12 years. So found my place, fell in love, and started the process. So I now serve as a endorsed healthcare chaplain and a board certified chaplain at St Jude Children's Research Hospital as a as a bedside chaplain in our bone marrow transplant and cell therapy unit.

Jim 04:32

Great thanks. And while we're with you, let's let's go to the first question with you too. The role of Deacon has a long history, and it's gone through a number of iterations. For instance, I was a deacon on my way to becoming an elder. They used to call that the transitional Deacon. They've, that's been done away with now, but we've, we've had these changes, and now, most recently, in the last general

conference. So would you mind explaining. Explaining Christy to all of us, what exactly is a deacon?
Now,

Christy 05:04

you know, a deacon is a clergy person ordained to word, service, compassion and justice, and I think why I truly fell in love with the order of Deacons in the United Methodist Church is because of this expansive bridge work that deacons do, bridging, you know, God's love to society and society's hurts, back to the church in a beautiful circle of care.

Jim 05:37

Okay, thanks, Jonathan. You want to chime in on any of that?

Jonathan 05:40

Yeah, I would say the thing that I probably most often have to emphasize with people, if they have questions about what a deacon is, is the thing that Christy said first, which is, a deacon is a clergy person in the United Methodist Church. It is a fully ordained member of the annual conference, and that's probably one of the things I would say is one of the most common misconceptions. And you know, there's a lot of reasons for that, not the least of which is that Deacon means the word Deacon means a lot of things in different faith traditions and in some others, especially others that are in the south that's reserved for a leadership position, but a lay leadership position. And so I think we run into some of that sometimes. But the the thing that I feel often needs to be emphasized for people is that deacons are ordained, and as Christy said, we are ordained to word service, compassion and justice, which we'll talk about, you know, some of the really beautiful ways that can be expressed.

Jim 06:53

Okay, good. That helps, Marie, you may be in the best position to answer this question, and that is now that we have this legislation this past, what exactly are the differences between an ordained Deacon and an ordained elder?

Marie 07:06

Well, I just want to go back to what a deacon is. A Deacon is called to word service, compassion and justice. An elder is called to Word and service, sacrament and order. That would be, what the differences would be. But we are called also to work together, to work together in ministry. The Deacon is called to bridge the church and the world. The elder orders the life of the church, and has sacramental authority at the time of their ordination, at the General Conference, we were granted sacramental authority. Deacons are also called to serve within our area of vocation. So if I am called to be in the area of music, and I feel called also to be a deacon, I may be appointed to serve as a minister of music. In my calling in healthcare, I was ordained as a deacon, but serving in that ministry as a parish nurse, and then also a nurse within the healthcare system.

Jim 09:24

And so how do elders and deacons work together in a given ministry setting? And I'm assuming that would probably mostly be in a church setting, but maybe I'm wrong about that. So Christy, you want to take a stab at that?

Christy 09:39

Sure, I'd be having to I mean, I'm in a setting where I'm not appointed primarily in a church, right? I'm at a hospital. And so I can certainly say the changes at General Conference are really important to my work in the world. Not only is that not appropriate for me. Call an elder into this space to provide the sacraments. It is an extension. It is an essential part of our United Methodist doctrine. Right? We have an open table, especially when I think about communion. We welcome all to the table without a litmus test and being able to extend the table of the church here to people who are facing catastrophic childhood illnesses and are separated from their home communities, their home, faith groups. Sometimes people have been, you know, estranged for the church for decades and and now that they're facing the death of a child, they want nothing more than the sacraments of their youth to be able to provide that it so lives into what it means to be a United Methodist, right? So having this sacramental, I like to think of it as sacramental privilege. Um, you know, it comes from God. I'm administrating it, right? It's not my authority, it's God's authority that that makes it a sacrament, but when it comes to working with elders, right? Because I do have connection with a local church, I'm bringing all of this experience that I'm having. I spend all day, every day, having sacred congregations with people of all faiths and have no faith, and I'm able to bring this back to the context to say, here's what I'm hearing, here's where, as a church universal, we might be falling short, and here's the needs of the people. And they're able to integrate into their preaching. I'm able to integrate that into my preaching. And hopefully they're having conversation with me and saying, you know, what are you seeing out there? They're inviting me to serve with them at the table. One of the beautiful things that I sometimes get to do is take the communion and then deliver it to like the children's ministry on a Sunday or the people who are serving and volunteer things. This feels very diagonal to me. Let me carry the communion out of the sanctuary and hand that off. Every time the elders that I work with utilize me in that way, they're affirming their own understanding of how deacons extend the love of God to the world.

Jim 12:17

Okay, that's that's very helpful. Uh, Jonathan, occurs to me that in my memory, at least until fairly recently, deacons primarily were found in larger membership churches, serving in staff roles in various ways. I know that's changed some now, and I'm looking at the two of you who work in hospital settings, and for those folks who may not really be connected to the role of Deacon, can you talk a little bit about how many different roles you're aware of that deacons have served in the world?

Jonathan 12:55

Holy Moly, it's a lot, and that's one of the things I really love about deacons, about working with deacons, about hearing the stories of deacons, because they are so diverse and lovely for friends who might have been at the recent annual conference meeting of Tennessee, Western Kentucky conference, we had a moment where we heard just a small sample of the different things that deacons do just around our conference. And I think that maybe, you know, gives people a picture of that you're you're right in some sense, Jim, that oftentimes when a deacon is in a local church, it may be in a larger setting, mostly because a larger church probably has more staff positions and so that just kind of makes the flexibility of sort of hiring and supporting a deacon a little bit easier. That's certainly not the case across the board. There definitely are deacons that serve at midsize and and even small congregations, when you get outside of the parish roles, deacons are found as chaplains in schools or

hospitals, working in social servants agencies, working in the military. We have Deacons in our conference that have literally started their own nonprofits out of thin air, just from a vision of their own calling and what God has asked them to do. Didn't go and apply for a job anywhere. Literally founded, you know, their own thing. And so in that sense, you know, Deacon can literally be almost anything. One thing about that I want to say is that, as it relates to the General Conference decision, and I want to say this because that's just something we're getting a lot of questions about. Because since the General Conference decision, you know, I think people are exploring a lot, you know, sort of what the implications of that is. Is the sacramental privilege that deacons now have is often going to be expressed in the deacons appointment or ministry setting. But it is not limited to the deacons appointment or ministry setting. I could go into the nuts and bolts of I think, where the confusion of that comes from, but I won't go down that road unless we want to. But really, the thing that happened at General Conference, the thing that changed in the Book of Discipline, in paragraph 328 if anybody wants to look it up, is that formerly, deacons had to have special permission from the bishop in order to preside at the sacraments. Now that's no longer necessary. There is no special permission that is needed for an ordained or commissioned Deacon to preside at the sacraments. Now they have that privilege. And whether or not it is contextually appropriate, as the language says in the discipline, is up to the deacon to discern. And

Jim 16:01

let me Can I follow up with just one question? And this is out of ignorance, so please forgive Was it my understanding that part of the ruling is that if there is an elder present, that the deacon and elder serve together at the table, or is that a misunderstanding of mine? Well,

Jonathan 16:20

I would say that wasn't part of the ruling. That's part of the discipline, and that that is already in paragraph 328, and has not changed. Okay, okay, that helps. But part of the language in paragraph 328, that's that's describing what deacons are called to do in ordination is assisting the elders in administering the sacraments. So that that is in paragraph 328 has been a paragraph 328 and was not removed. So okay, that helps, in addition to the fact that we used to have to get permission, and now we don't, we still have this language in the discipline that describes part of our role is to assist elders in their calling, in their work, in order and in sacrament. And so I think that was a long answer, Jim, I think the short answer is yes to your question, if, if there is an elder present, that elder and Deacon should be working together to make sure that that all are served,

Jim 17:22

okay? That helps and and in the the conversation about roles, more and more, like Marie, we have more deacons that are now being appointed to serve churches as the lead pastor, and that's sort of a new a new reality for us too.

Jim 19:51

Okay, so Marie, can you? Can you tell us a little bit about the pathway for a person who receives a call to to become ordained?

Marie 20:01

Right, yes, when someone realizes or feels that they have received a call to become a deacon or an elder, even a licensed local pastor, part of that discernment is going to God in prayer and praying for the leading of the Holy Spirit to understand where your calling is in that time of discernment. Also going to your pastor, having a conversation with your pastor about your calling, where that calling, where you feel that calling might be, and at that time, your pastor may share with you the book *The Christian as minister* to help you with that discernment process. There are other steps there as well, but the first would be your time of prayer, speaking to your pastor and reading the book. *Christian as minister*. Not all are called to ordain ministry, and so part of that discernment is to decide or discern. If you are called to ordination, you are called to be a licensed local pastor, if you're called to be a certified lay minister, if you're called to be a Christian minister, working with your congregation and your pastor, after that discernment process, and you determine that, then you are connected to your district superintendent. You're connected to the DCOM, the district committee on ministry. And the process begins there of getting you into the process for either ordination or licensing. And then you go from that step to being presented to the Board of ordained ministry. During that time frame, you're also discerning where you want to attend seminary, your seminary training, your educational level, depending on if you want to be a deacon or if you want to be ordained or licensed if you're going to be a certified lay minister, so you continue your education process. There are the basic theological graduate study courses that if you're going to be ordained have to be completed by deacons and elders. The educational process is the same in the seminaries. Once you graduate, you then are eligible at that time to submit for being considered as a provisional deacon or a provisional elder, and that process, then is a minimum of three years where you are provisional.

Jim 23:13

That's good. And you said this in a beautiful way, that there are lots of ways to be called in the ministry. Yes, and it doesn't have to be one path or another, and that's part of the discernment. I think that happens. And one thing that that, I think, I don't know that you said this, but I think it's an important step, and that is from the prayer to a conversation to the pastor, but that a local church must recommend anyone seeking that sort of connection. I think that's a really important step, because the local church knows you, and they know whether you have the, what they used to call the gifts and graces, yeah, to do the work. So thank you. That's that's really helpful. I want to ask all three of you a question about the the 24 general conference, and this is on an emotional level, okay, what exactly does this decision mean to you? Personally, I find myself wanting to ask, before this happened, did you have any sense of feeling less than and I know that there's been conversation, sometimes conflict, maybe sometimes tension between elders and deacons in certain ways. So I find myself wanting to ask you exactly on in a personal way, what did this decision mean to you? So, Christy, you want to start?

Christy 24:30

Yeah, I do and and I how I'm gonna just be really candid to say I was fortunate throughout my commissioning, I've had the bishop has been generous with me because of my context, so I've had permission for from the bishop for sacramental privilege the entire time, and I'm very grateful for that, and it made a big difference in my ministry. But I. Your question really does hit a tender spot, because through my whole process, there have been conversations where I've not felt less than and a big part of my advocacy for deacons is to say we are equal to over and over and over again, I was really discouraged from becoming a deacon. From many elders, sometimes from other deacons, like, it's a

hard path, and there was a real sense of inequality. And in early in my discernment, I heard a lot like, don't you want to be a full elder? And I had to spend a lot of time in personal discernment about knowing the authenticity of my call to being a deacon and knowing and accepting that advocacy for the order was going to be a part of that. So for me, what happened? I mean, the room erupted in applause and weeping, I think, because when the bishop, well, not only the General Conference 2024 but at our annual conference, when the bishop gave us that authority Effective immediately, because it was incredibly validating. It was a validating of the call, validating of the gifts, validating of I remember I said to Bishop that night, I want you to know that you can trust me with this. And he said that was never the question, but it felt like the question, can I be trustworthy with these sacraments when I've studied and discerned and worked so hard? So for me, that was really monumental. I

Jim 26:35

appreciate that. I really do. Jonathan, what about you?

Jonathan 26:40

I really wanted to talk about this by underlining the exact same moment that Christy just brought up, which was our moment at Tennessee, Western Kentucky annual conference, when the bishop made what was definitely a surprising announcement at the end of the ordination service. Because to answer your question, Jim I I certainly would want to acknowledge that I know for sure that there are some deacons that felt maybe less than or limited or misunderstood or not trusted just because of of the way that the the sacramental rights were were set up, but what really sort of underscores how miraculous and beautiful it felt to be included in that ministry was, I think, exactly the emotion that Christy described at annual conference. It occurs to me that that sanctuary that night, full of a lot of people that were ministers and laypersons, and probably even family members of people who may not even necessarily be United Methodist, there are probably a lot of people that sort of witnessed that that night and weren't even really sure what they were seeing. If they're not sort of Book of Discipline nerds like we are, and maybe didn't follow every single legislation piece that came to the floor of General Conference. People might have seen sort of the emotion that Christy just described, and might have wondered, What in the world was that, and why was there such an outpouring over it? I think the reason, one of the reasons, is because that is an expression of ministry that deacons have really longed for, and the decision at General Conference, and then the bishop's announcement at our annual conference, just really spoke life into that calling that so many of our deacons have, and I think you saw that play out in that moment.

Jim 28:56

And Marie, before I get to you about this, you just reminded me about something in my own history. I'm in my 50th year of ministry, and there was a there was a season that I served as an associate director for the conference Council on ministries, which is now The Connectional Table. And I vividly remember people coming in saying to me, you've left the ministry, and it's like, what, what in the world are you talking about? But that's the kind of attitude that was there. So I can't, I can't completely understand where your hearts are, but I do remember that time and how confusing it was to have my colleagues, you know, say things like, When are you coming back to the ministry, and that sort of thing. So it was very strange. So maybe, on behalf of all elders everywhere, I should apologize for how sometimes insensitive we can be. Jonathan, you'd like you want to say something, yeah, I'll

Jonathan 29:52

say just a very short thing that I think supports what you're saying, Jim, and has nothing to do with being United Methodist as a hospital chaplain. Uh, when I would visit people in the hospital who didn't know I was United Methodist at all, or the or what a deacon or elder was in the Methodist Church, sometimes just introducing myself, you know, as a chaplain, and people will get curious about me, I would get the question a lot, oh, well, you know, what church do you preach at? And I would say, Oh, well, I don't. Actually, this is my full time ministry. And then the question would be, oh, well, don't you want a church? And be like, right? Really, I this, this is my calling, and that, you know, I think it speaks to the same thing that that you were describing, kind of,

Jim 30:33

I think that's, that's exactly right, Marie, what about your heart? What happened on that day?

Marie 30:38

So I was blessed to be a delegate, clergy delegate to General Conference, and the atmosphere in the room when it was voted on the affirmative was such joy. And at the very end of that session, there was crying and hugging with deacons, with laity, with elders, with anyone who was part of working with the United Methodist Church, and knowing that we have been asking for this opportunity for such a long time, it was just heartwarming. It was Words cannot express when I as I sat there and the tears flowed from my eyes that this has actually happened now for us. When our Bishop extended sacramental authority, sacramental rights, privileges to for all deacons at the end of the ordination service, there was this overwhelming joy that filled the sanctuary at Murfreesboro. First, as deacons, we have felt a level of frustration when we could not have the rights to serve communion or baptize without having to ask first. There was a lack of being able to immediately extend God's grace with the sacraments and having to wait. I always wondered how I had to stop and think, as a chaplain, what my answer would be if someone asked for baptism at that time, although the hospital had a different protocol, I still knew I had to follow what our Book of Discipline said. So for me and for other deacons, there has been a level of frustration we feel. I feel now that we feel free to be able to make those decisions when we are immediately in the presence of someone asking for baptism or asking to be served communion.

Jim 33:13

You know what strikes me about all of your answers here is that for the last, oh, I don't know, four, eight years whatever, the word joy was rarely used in annual conference settings. I mean, there was so much tension, and, you know, those were settings that you almost didn't even want to be in. And now suddenly, this moment feels kind of healing in its own way, and I'm glad about that. I've got two more questions that I want to ask, and these are kind of, let's call them lightning round. So Jonathan, let's start with you. What excites you most about ministry right now?

Jonathan 33:48

The new possibilities for our denomination, for the many ministries that United Methodists are part of all over the world, the new possibilities after General Conference are things that just really excite me right now, and certainly apropos to this conversation we're having. And in my role as a conference chair of the order of deacons, there's a lot of new possibilities for deacons because of what we're talking about. But that's not the only things. Of course, this was a truly historic General Conference for a lot of

reasons, and to me, it just opens up a lot of new possibilities that are very exciting for for United Methodists,

Jim 34:26

that's great. Thanks for that, Marie. What about you?

Marie 34:30

What excites me the most is the opportunities that we have as deacons to extend the table. What excites me are the new opportunities that can be innovative in our ministry work as we bridge the world and the church. And what excites me is that the church is willing to listen and grow in the changes that are happening in our world, so that the deacons can be more available as we bridge the church in the world. What

Jim 35:49

about you? What excites you the most about ministry right now? I

Christy 35:52

think what excites me the most about ministry right now is sort of broadly the future if, if you have been in a disaffiliation church and have heard some of that rhetoric you know, you've been fed the lies that you know God has done with United Methodist Church. And the United Methodist Church is over, and I'm in a my secondary appointment is in a post disaffiliation church where I see so much new life, and it's not that we don't miss the beloved community that is gone and have moved on. Of course, wish them well. But as new people come and as this forward focused identity goes, both on a very local, personal level, and broadly in the denomination, I see so much new life and so much hope for what God is doing in the United Methodist Church for the future.

Jim 36:46

That's great. I appreciate that. And Christy, let's start with you with the last question, what are you learning now? And where are you learning it?

Christy 36:57

Boy, I'll tell you what I learn every day. Here in my context, how near God is. I mean, it is impossible to do this work. It is impossible to work with dying children without understanding God's presence here in the places of suffering. I know that's kind of a downer for other people, but that's what I'm learning every day.

Jim 37:18

No, not at all. It's, it's very experiential, and that's, that's where a lot of our learning comes from. Jonathan, what

Jonathan 37:26

about you? I am learning really new and lovely ways of experiencing and understanding God in the world, and I'm learning those from young people. One of my favorite things that I get to do is teach a class at Rhodes College here in Memphis, undergraduate students in religious studies. And I've been

teaching that class since 2021 I teach it every fall and every spring, and every single time that I do, I learn something from those students. And there is just something about teaching and something about young people that keeps you seeing new things about God and about where the Spirit is moving.

Jim 38:31

That's good. Thanks. Jonathan Marie, what are you learning and where are you getting

Marie 38:37

it? I am learning the different ways in which our clergy, coming out of seminary, are thinking about serving, as Jonathan had mentioned earlier, some are starting their own ministries and just Learning how they're really enthusiastic about different opportunities and ways to serve. I am learning so much about how we as a community are resilient, especially as we have experienced some disaffiliation concerns. But we are resilient community. We continue to support each other and keep pressing on to the mark of the high calling. Yeah, yes, yeah.

Jim 39:28

Thank you. Well, listen. It's been great to spend time with you guys, and I really do hope that we get a lot of folks who can listen to this podcast, because I think you've put out a lot of really good information for people to know, and I'm grateful to you for that. So Christy, Marie and Jonathan, we thank you for being with us. If you'd like to learn any more about what we've discussed today, you can visit our table talk website at TWK, umc.org/table_talk. And if you'd like to add to our conversation, we'd love to hear. Hear from you, so email us at table.talk@twkumc.org. Thanks for being with us. You.