

Abstract

The diaconate is often viewed as the lesser office within the three-fold order of ministry to which the Church of Ireland subscribes. Transitional in practice, it is now viewed as a step on the way to ordination for prospective candidates for the priesthood. Little thought, therefore, is given to the ministry as an independent entity.

When one considers its scriptural provenance, and the onerous characteristics and qualifications required of potential candidates in the writings of St. Luke in Acts of the Apostles and in the Pastoral Epistles, it is apparent that as the first established ministry, the diaconate occupied an important place in the outreach and mission of the early Church. How then do we reconcile the diaconate in its current form in the Church of Ireland with the foundational role envisaged by early Christians?

This dissertation will examine how the diaconate is characterised as a ministry within the Church of Ireland, through an examination of its scriptural roots and intentions, its historical development and subsequent decline as an independent ministry in Western Europe, and how the Ordination Rite seeks to shape it today. Through reviewing its different contemporary manifestations in Western Christianity, we will conclude with an assessment of its missional value and its outworking in today's Church of Ireland.