

These UMC deacons are more like doulas than circuit riders

How Sacred Stones Ministries is bringing new ministry models to birth

by [Eric Smith](#) in the [July 17, 2019](#) issue



United Methodist deacons Kerry Greenhill, Nani Arning, and Denise Bender. Courtesy of Sacred Stones Ministries.

Three female deacons in the United Methodist Church in Colorado recently found themselves without any paid position in a congregation. Two of them had been laid off by their congregations for financial reasons, and the other resigned after concluding it would be difficult to work with the church's newly hired senior pastor.

Nani Arning, Kerry Greenhill, and Denise Bender faced a reality that many deacons face: congregations don't know how to incorporate deacons in ministry, and if they do know how, they have difficulty paying a deacon a salary. Being a deacon in the United Methodist Church usually means finding your own work, and "that isn't easy," Bender said.

The three women, who were already friends, put their heads together to come up with a creative response. Recalling the circuit-riding history of Methodist pastors, they wondered if deacons could be circuit riders of a new kind, offering their skills to churches that lack the resources to hire a full-time pastor or any staff beyond a solo pastor.

“I have a heart for smaller churches,” Arning said, “and I believed that what I could do for them would enrich their ministries.”

Arning, Greenhill, and Bender’s discussions led them to launch Sacred Stones Ministries, which connects deacons and congregations to work on specific ministries.

“What we are doing is clearly sacred,” said Greenhill, explaining the organization’s name, “and stones have a quality of being solid and enduring. But they are also something that can be picked up and carried.” The nonprofit corporation adopted this mission: “Helping people connect more deeply with God, with each other, and with the world.”

When the position of deacon was created in the United Methodist Church in 1996, it was designed for people who felt called to ministries of service, justice, and compassion but not to the work of presiding over or administering a congregation. The expectation was that deacons would serve alongside elders—the UMC term for those ordained to the ministry of word, sacrament, order, and service.

As far as the deacons of Sacred Stones are concerned, this division of ministry roles frees people like them to do the ministry that they really want to do. Although people sometimes assume that those who choose the diaconate in the UMC do so to avoid the Methodist itinerant system, in which a bishop assigns elders to serve in particular congregations, Greenhill and her colleagues said that that’s not the case. They simply feel called to the ministries of the diaconate.

“It’s not a function of not wanting a bishop to be in charge,” said Bender. “I’m called to compassion and justice and word—and making the word something that people can use in their everyday lives.” Greenhill agreed. “I felt like if I pursued ordination as an elder, I would spend more time managing my weaknesses than leading from my strengths.”

With none of the protections of a guaranteed appointment afforded to elders, deacons sometimes feel like an afterthought on a church staff—the last ones to be

hired in good times, the first ones to be let go in lean times. Worse than that, people don't always recognize the work of deacons or the vocational call they have answered—a call to serve God and the church in unique ways. Many people equate clergy with being a solo or a senior pastor. Greenhill said she often hears the comment: “Surely someday you want your own church.”

As part of Sacred Stones, each deacon serves multiple communities in a part-time or contract capacity, offering workshops, worship materials, or mission opportunities. The contract may be for five or ten hours a week, or for a weekend retreat or training session. Sometimes the contract is for a season—a few weeks or a few months to get a program off the ground, or to write liturgies for particular worship services or seasons of the church year. None of the congregations they work with can support a full-time deacon, but they can find money for limited projects.

Arning, Greenhill, and Bender work with some congregations close to where they live, but they also work with distant communities via video. And they do some traveling.

“If someone called us from England, we would find a way to help that community,” said Bender. “We would go anywhere. And technology has helped to bridge that gap.”

The three deacons see Sacred Stones as part of a paradigm shift in ministry. A lot of churches need to change their structure of ministry or close their doors. “We help them thrive,” said Bender. Small churches have many of the same needs as large churches—needs that deacons are ordained to serve. Sunday school classes need curriculum; youth groups need opportunities for mission and reflection; worship services require liturgies; lay leaders need training and encouragement. But few small congregations can afford to pay an ordained person to do that work, and certainly not to do it full time.

Dennis Shaw is a believer in the Sacred Stones model of ministry. As the elder serving Hilltop United Methodist Church in Sandy, Utah, Shaw has worked with Sacred Stones on creating prayers and liturgies on special themes.

In the midst of congregational change, deacons point to a new paradigm in ministerial leadership.

“It’s very rich,” he says of the liturgical material Sacred Stones Ministries has provided. “They have a way of making everything connected in a better way than I could do it by myself. They have a way of taking what we would normally do and making it even sharper.”

With over 200 in worship each week, Hilltop United Methodist isn’t exactly a small church, but it doesn’t have the budget to hire a liturgical specialist. Sacred Stones is “giving us something that wouldn’t happen otherwise,” said Shaw. “It’s bringing something to the table that I would have to do myself . . . and they’re doing it better than I could do it.”

Sacred Stones is reaching beyond United Methodism to assist the Church of the Beloved, an independent ecumenical Catholic community in Northglenn, Colorado. The church can’t afford staff for religious education, even on a part-time basis, and it finds that the mass-market educational resources available don’t fit the congregation’s own theological and ecclesial identity.

“I find Sacred Stones Ministries to meet a niche market—the small, less affluent churches who struggle to retain and pay staff,” said Pastor Kae Madden of Church of the Beloved.

Sacred Stones has created a curriculum with the “essentially Catholic content” that Madden wants for her community. The congregation has people ready to implement a curriculum, she said, but they don’t have the time or expertise to create one.

Another Sacred Stones client, David Amrie, elder at Calvary United Methodist Church in Colorado Springs, appreciates the ministry that deacons provide at a time of widespread budget shortfalls. He said leaders in his congregation were at first worried about what a contract with Sacred Stones would entail for management and oversight. But the church’s positive experience with Sacred Stones has made it open to using the group if staff positions were to open up.

“We are a hybrid model,” Greenhill said. “We do a little bit of the staffing piece, we do some consulting, we walk alongside congregations as an outside voice so that the congregation hears things in a new way.”

Many pastors thrive on the jack-of-all-trades mentality that often goes with congregational ministry. A minister can be mowing the church’s grass while mentally rehearsing a sermon before heading to a stewardship meeting. But churches can

benefit, said Bender, by calling on a specialist for a particular project.

“We can come into a church and help them assess what their needs might be,” Bender said. “We work with the pastors and the churches to help them vision in a way they haven’t thought of before.”

Most pastors and churches have stories of struggling to adapt to shifting cultural, economic, and spiritual contexts. Youth programs compete with sports programs, while budgets sag, and more and more pews sit empty. In the United Methodist Church, the decision by the special General Conference in February 2019 to reassert bans on gay clergy and same-sex marriage have created new tensions and challenges for congregations. Bender thinks it’s a moment when deacons can be especially useful. “The recent decision provides us with a continued opportunity to be in ministry with all people,” she says. “There are no restrictions for us. We serve with all.”

Deacons are like doulas, Greenhill said. They are now assisting “in birthing the new church that is going to be—the one that nobody knows what it looks like yet.” As the shape of the church shifts, there’s little doubt that the work of ministry will continue to be an adventure. The deacons of Sacred Stones plan to be there to help communities along the way.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “The new circuit riders.”