

Dear Bishop:

The members of Grace Episcopal Church in Madison, South Dakota, would like to present the following reactions, dilemmas, and possible solutions stemming from your recent decision that the administration of the Sacrament by a deacon, except in "emergencies," is theologically unsound:

First of all, the situation at Grace Episcopal Church is this: We are a self-supporting mission church which, while able to tithe to the Diocese and pay a stipend to visiting priests, does not have the funds to pay a full-time minister. We have been dependent for many years upon part-time ministry by priests for the administration of the sacrament. In the last year, we have had itinerant priests, with an attendance rating -- if we were lucky -- of once a month. In the last two months, i.e., eight Sundays, we have had a priest for one of them. Deacon Bridgid of Brookings ministers to us twice a month. If the administration of the Eucharist is taken from her we shall, frankly, be starving to death.

We do not say "starving" lightly. In the Episcopal church, the Eucharist is the center of the Sunday services, and so it should be. It is the Bread of Heaven, the Body of Christ. We recognize that South Dakota does not have enough priests to serve the flock as the flock should be served: but this means that the Diocese must do its best to make this hardship fall as lightly as possible upon the sheep. We respectfully urge you to remember that, for many churches in South Dakota, a deacon is the only ordained minister available, due to simple lack of funds. To deny the Body of Christ to the faithful because they cannot afford a full-time minister sits ill, and bodes ill, for and upon the Episcopal Church in South Dakota. Frankly, we feel that our Lord would prefer His flock to be fed than for His flock to starve while the "rules" were observed with pharisaical rigor.

It is our understanding that the chief reason this decision was handed down was because some deacons were abusing their authority by using the full Eucharistic form of worship in the prayer book, as opposed to the Morning Prayer service with the passage for Deacons. We respectfully, but desperately, urge that you consider disciplining the offending deacons instead of punishing those of us who are dependent upon the services of a deacon to receive the sacraments.

Secondly, should you determine that this decision must stand, then we demand to know the definition of an "emergency." How long must we go without the Body of Christ before we are allowed to turn to the services of a deacon?

Thirdly, while we recognize that you as the Bishop of this Diocese have the right to make what theological determinations you see fit, we also respectfully, but firmly, remind you that

you are responsible for the spiritual health of your flock, i.e., ALL of the members of the Episcopal church in South Dakota, whether rich or poor, in a cathedral or mission church. We need your help. Not only do we need it, but we demand, as our right, that our bishop provide us with the sacraments, not deny them to us, nor put further hindrances in the way of our receiving them than our poverty already places.

Believe it or not, priests are not lining up to serve us, or other churches like us. We are fortunate to receive our one priest every six to eight weeks, and we recognize that. It has made us even more appreciative of those deacons who have been our steady bulwark in a time when more fully ordained shepherds seem to be nonexistent. But it is wearying, wearing, and a perplexity to our spirit to have to fight our own church to receive the sacraments on a regular basis. As it says in the prayer book, "Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten; Nor the hope of the poor be taken away."

Sincerely,