

DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

The Wife of a Deacon  
In the  
Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle  
—  
*Our Story*



# Introduction

**T**his booklet contains a collection of personal accounts from women married to deacons in the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. We are reflecting on our own experiences as our husbands made the journey from laymen to ordained deacon. Whilst the accounts are all unique, all acknowledge that the wives of deacons in training go through their own transition process; a transition that at times evokes practical, emotional and spiritual challenges affecting all family members.

Some accounts highlight periods of spiritual richness and greater understanding as a couple, others describe times of grief and loss as wives adjust to a different future, others still enumerate the changes that have to be made to family rituals and routines.

We hope the accounts show that there is not one way to become the wife of a deacon, nor is there one way to feel or think, there is only your way.

As well as what is available for wives as part of the diaconate training programme there are other opportunities for wives to meet. At present there is an annual Day of Reflection for wives which, alongside spiritual input, also offers a safe space for sharing and mutual support. There are quarterly social evenings for deacons and partners and some groups of deacons and wives have developed social networks in their own localities.

Many of us have found the understanding and support of other women whilst going through the training period and after ordination to be invaluable at different stages of the journey.

## The Wife of the Deacon

Vocation is a pre VAT 11 word which I find difficulty in using. Pre Vat 11 Vocations were to the Priesthood and Religious Life- loosely to Teaching and Medicine- roles of care and support. Since VAT 11 the Permanent Diaconate was restored - and in addition we the Laity were also told, that we too have a calling and the Word most used for this is Ministry; based on our personal call from God and individual gifting. Today we see people leaving their "Vocation" - however, Ministry never changes as it is based on who we are- Our Mission which arises from this , may change as life and call progresses, but it is still based on the same person and the same gifting-God given for the purpose.

Hans Van Balthasar (Christian States of Life) says this is a unique grace of personal mission associated with our baptisms. At Confirmation we give our assent to this... God's dream is distinct for each person." - Called Gifted and Sent- it never changes- but that's another area to be looked at , at another time.

Is being the wife of a Deacon a woman's Ministry? If I am married part of my marriage commitment is to support my spouse, I may at times disagree, but my call is to support. Before a man enters the preparatory year to investigate this call, his wife is interviewed alongside him. Before entering into Training per se- if accepted, then his wife needs to sign a letter of agreement to this, addressed to the Bishop and again before his ordination. It is however his calling , his Ministry, not hers; although there may be many times she supports him in what he does. It is also a fact that other potential wives look to those whose husbands are already ordained, for support and example. This is why days together for wives are important. They are not necessarily about me- but about us- also journeying together. When one falls - another picks them up. (ecl. 4;10) This is equally applicable to Deacons and their wives. This is an on- going journey and equally time together for Deacons and their wives with others around the Diocese, is equally important for that mutual support; forming a caring community- mirroring the Diaconate

Diaconate is not a hobby, it is leading to Ordination, and therefore although documents tell us that "Family comes First" this is a discernment and on- going decision making, that needs to be continuously and amicably made along the journey; while remembering this is to be a life of iconic witness and service, to the Church and to the Laity, this being central to the Deacon's role,

For both, this is a journey of discovery and discernment, in total 4 years. At the end of each year a discussion takes place and a mutual decision taken as to whether the next year will follow; This is a time of Transition for all and therefore a time when this important discussion needs to be also taken between husband, wife and family.

A wife has her own personal calling and gifting, and life experience, as does her husband and each is called by Baptism to begin their life's journey to discover what it is God has Called and Gifted them to be , in the midst of their marriage, and where and by what means this is to be exercised.

Yves Congar in his work for Vat 11 and the role of the Laity says that in every age the Holy Spirit brings new life to the Church. Post Vat 11 the call was for laity and clergy to work more closely together in collaboration, mirroring the New Evangelisation, learning and teaching each other on the journey. Perhaps the Deacon and his wife also bring this complementary witness, also witnessing to their "mutual growth and Mission" in service of each other and the Church.

The Deacon's wife has a Mission of her own, through her femininity, gifting, relationship with God, her family, Friends and the Church. The grace of Baptism and Confirmation and Marriage is to signify what the Sacrament signs. God graces us all to this task. Our role is to listen for the promptings, to recognise our uniqueness and dignity as children of God and to respond each in our own unique way, in a manner of gracious service and thanksgiving.

Pat Kennedy MPS, Co-Ordinator of Studies Permanent Diaconate Training. Hexham and Newcastle Diocese.

## A Journey towards Diaconate as a Wife

My journey began one Wednesday evening after Mass. Shaun came home and announced 'Father Jeff had asked him if he would consider going forward for the Diaconate'. After my initial reaction of 'Are you mad?', we sat down and he explained what a Deacon was and I went away to pray about this new thing that the Lord had dropped into my lap.

The decision was made for Shaun to proceed and my role was seen to be helping him to do this by keeping the family home running and giving him the space to follow this new path.

Through monthly fellowship with the Deacons in training, their wives and the clergy who lead them new friendships were formed and great spiritual strength was gained from the liturgy we all shared together.

I took a whole year to come to the realisation that, although together as a married couple, we were on separate journeys. Shaun towards ordination and the great joy and privilege of serving God's people. Me towards acceptance of the changes in our lives together and the deeper love and companionship we shared as a couple.

I look back now and think would I react any differently if Shaun came to me with the same question today and I can honestly say that my reply would be 'Go for it.'

## The First Step

I think that the day Martin articulated his desire to explore the options in relation to ordination to the Permanent Diaconate was the first step of our journey. I had known for a long time that he felt there was a calling out there for him, but he hadn't managed to find it. Sometimes I wonder if he had found a job with a 'vocational' element, we wouldn't be here now – he'd have been able to marry his faith and work in a way which would have satisfied the need he felt to serve. But he never did find that job, unlike me, and so there was a constant search for ways to express his faith in a practical, meaningful, prayerful way of service.

We'd talked about the Diaconate earlier in our marriage, when we were younger, with babies. He was told then that he was too young to train, and he would not be accepted, in RCDHN at least, for the training programme. This was a source of hurt to him, and consequently to me as well. The rejection hit hard, and for a time he faced a serious crisis of faith, spending time and energy exploring the Anglican community as an alternative to the Catholic church; we spent time roaming over the Diocese of Durham, meeting Anglican vicars and their wives, and talking and praying about whether this might – after all – be the calling from God.

Fortunately for the Catholic diocese, in my opinion at least, he never found this option to be right and so we continued as a family at Mass weekly, growing in our faith as a couple and as parents. In this time I became Catholic myself, having been a Methodist when we met and married; and we had another child on the way! But the searching, for Martin, went on.

We hadn't discussed the Diaconate again, since that initial rejection. Martin had withdrawn from this idea, seeking to combine his faith and work life elsewhere. It was our parish priest, while we were celebrating the ordination of one of our parish to the Permanent Diaconate, who leaned closely in and asked 'when will I be seeing your form?' Martin looked over to me, and I nodded, knowing that this serendipitous opportunity might not arise again. And so the real journey began...

The forms alone were enough to put me off. Reams of paper geared towards ensuring that my husband was spiritual enough, sane enough, *safe* enough to embark on this journey. The psychological assessment was like a book of question after question; about his faith practices, his engagement with the church, our marriage, his personal beliefs, our sex life, and so much more. Having been a victim of numerous personality questionnaires in our careers, we laughed over some of the questions, puzzled over others, and were indignant at the level of detail they wanted about the most intimate aspects of our life together.

Then came the interviews – Martin alone, us as a couple, me alone, us as a couple; the days away for psychological assessment, and the days waiting for the letters confirming whether he would be accepted for training, never mind ordination.

We travelled this part of the journey together, discussing and praying over each stage completed, slowly coming together as we progressed through the hoops. We discussed the process with our children, who were aged 9, 7 and 4 at this point. We talked openly about how this might change our family, although even then we didn't have a clear idea how this might take form. Luckily our parish has a deacon and so the children were able to reconcile the talk with a reality – daddy would do what Deacon David does. They could see, even then, that this was something important and so they gave Martin their blessing, just as I had done. I think this was helped along by the one fact which they all picked up and held on to: if daddy is a Deacon, then he and mummy can't ever get divorced. At a time when one of our children had several friends whose parents were separating, and not always amicably, this was something they needed to cling to in order to help them understand that there was something significant about this Deacon thing. And, if I am honest, if it helped them, it helped me. They have always supported Martin in the training, and four years down the line are as excited for his ordination as they would be for a family wedding.

My feelings, on the other hand, are not all excitement and anticipation. At least, not all positive. I have walked alongside Martin for 4 years of his training, supporting him with time and love and prayers all the way; I always knew the final few months would be difficult, and would put pressure on our relationship in a way we have never experienced before, but even then I think I underestimated how I would feel, deep down. I am scared, if I am honest, and no amount of praying, or being positive about the future, has diluted my fear of losing my husband, my life partner, my soul mate to this clerical thing. The Diaconate has assumed a looming presence in my thoughts and feelings, which I am struggling to manage.

To be fair, this is not a great year for us – I am mid-PGCE in an attempt to change career in my early '40's, our eldest is in a school delivering Key Stage 4 over three years and so has started his GCSE preparation, and our middle child has year 6 SAT tests a month before Martin's ordination. I have no job, yet, for September teaching English and at present this is a stress I could honestly do without! The worry about getting vestments ordered (and paid for!), letters to the Bishop giving 'permission' for his ordaining my husband, guest lists and sorting out who reads, odes the offertory and so on for the actual Mass, are all things we could do without as a family, as a couple. But there they are, looming. A constant in our life. Weekend academic days, which we have endured for four years, are coming to an end. Essays which have increased the size of our study library exponentially will soon be a thing of the past. The constant question of what *exactly* does a Deacon's wife do? What does a Deacon's *family* do? These seem to be overshadowing most of this year so far, and I am awaiting the ordination like it will answer this in one fell swoop – as if the Holy Spirit will descend to me, like Mary, and make everything okay.

And then we had Easter...

And my emotions have changed somewhat. As a parent, I find Easter harder and harder to endure. The thought of Mary, standing at the foot of the cross, watching her son – her baby – die in such a way haunts me. It always had, but as the years go by I find this the aspect of the Passion I focus on more and more. Mary, and her role at the end of her son's life as well as at the beginning. Mary, who had the courage to say 'let it be done to me as you will', sentiments echoed by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: 'let this cup pass me by, but if not, then your will be done and not mine.'

I have always tried to accept whatever comes into my life as a gift, and to be thankful to God for these gifts. Serendipity has led me so far, and I have a wonderful life, complete with family, faith and love in immeasurable amounts. As a convert, I regularly consider how lucky I have been to find my faith life fulfilled in the church I have chosen, eyes wide open to the graces and the faults it has. Like Mary, I have tried to say 'yes' to as much as I can in my life. And as I get older, the 'yes' actually becomes easier; perhaps because I can reflect on the gifts it has brought me thus far? So, like Mary, I need to face up to the wonder and joy of *this* moment, but understand that it is tempered with sorrow and loss.

I am sorrowful: my husband, at his ordination, will present himself to the Bishop and the people of the Diocese as a servant in a way he has never presented to me. He argues that this is because we are a team, a partnership of equals and we serve one another in so many myriad ways every day that it was unnecessary to state it explicitly in our marriage vows. His relationship with the Bishop, and the people of the Diocese, is not one of equals, demanding service and obedience regardless. I am still sorrowful. The thought of his obeying another, outside the realm of our intimate relationship, fills me with fear for our future, our children's future and what he may be asked to do in order to submit to his superior. I know, in my heart, that he will always consider us first when he is asked to take on any role; but equally I know that if he were to refuse something because I ask him to, then our relationship will change again, and not for the better. My sorrow remains, although I know God will not expect me to endure more than he has planned, and so I pray for the strength to move through this sorrow, and support Martin in any way I can.

I fear loss more than ever: I have always had nightmares that I am widowed, and left alone to cope with this world without an anchor. These dreams have plagued my married life, almost from the beginning, because I have been lucky to find my soul mate early in my life, and even luckier that we recognised one another. Through 18 years of

marriage, miscarriages, deaths, redundancies, ill health, and job stresses and strains, we have stuck together as a pair – two united as one against the world. But I fear this ordination will lead me to loss, as my husband is called to serve away from me and our home, and to serve others who need him more than we perhaps do at times. Again, I turn to Mary, considering her loss that first Good Friday. She knows, as a wife and mother, the fears women have; she understands how we feel about our husbands and our children. She said ‘yes’ in spite of everything in her life which should have directed her to say ‘no’ and so I find comfort. There is comfort in knowing that she sees me, and all my worries, and she understands. She provides strength when I weaken, and inspiration when I fall. My prayers are for her help, guidance and love as we move into this new phase of our life together; and her example keeps me moving forward at times when I could easily give up.

And so we are less than three months from ordination: O-Day looms on the horizon, getting closer and closer. I worry about what to wear, yet I am annoyed when this is the first question people ask me! I know there will be photos, and we will be on display as a family, even though the focus of the event should be Martin, Peter and Terry. The cathedral will be packed with people we know, and people we don’t, judging the men as they step up to the Bishop, and judging their families as well. My fears of loss are subsumed by fear of letting Martin down; looking sad when I should be happy, saying the wrong thing to the wrong person, dropping something! I want our children to remember this as a happy event, the beginning of something, while at the same time I can’t help viewing it as the end of something; the death of something. And perhaps this is what it needs to be; an end to my selfish need to keep Martin to myself. The death of self-interest, and insularity. An awakening to the possibilities this vocation offers us all, not just Martin. And that’s the nub of it, right there. Because this is *his* vocation all right, but it will affect *us* undeniably. I just have to work out how I can be like Mary, accepting what I cannot change, and making the most out of every opportunity God sends....and this is where the *real* journey to the Permanent Diaconate begins.

### **I suppose it was going to be inevitable .....**

I suppose it was going to be inevitable that Rob would become more involved with the church.

When we met, I was sixteen and a half and Rob twenty-one. From the beginning of our relationship I realised his loving parents were in my view very religious, spending every evening praying and saying the rosary. The house was very quiet and on the mantelpiece stood marvellous statues of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of Mary. As a youngster Rob was an altar server at the Convent of Marie Reparatrice in Jesmond and along with his parents went to Mass there and to his local Parish of the Holy Name, Jesmond.

My childhood was very different. I was christened in the small Church of England church of Saint Cuthbert's Brunswick Village and attended Sunday school most Sundays but I do not remember being under any pressure to attend. I somehow managed to gain awards of a prayer book and bible for good attendance. My mother and father prayed in their own way and I later found out that my father said his prayers every night before going to sleep even though he only attended church on special occasions. My mother believed and enjoyed the music in church when she had the opportunity to come with us. Although non-Catholic she supported our church by knitting endless numbers of toys and donating many gifts over the years at the annual garden fetes.

I grew up in a loving caring environment where I learnt humility, respect and commitment. I have always prayed and talked to God whenever and wherever I am. I love to pray quietly in my own space.

Rob encouraged me to go with him to church and take part in the Mass even though I could not follow it and found there was a lot of up and down standing, sitting and kneeling! I particularly enjoyed Easter and Christmas midnight Masses. I suppose as a teenager I thought there was a 'lot of church' probably because of the chanting of prayers and the ritual of the service. I continued to accompany Rob to church and before we were married took lessons and agreed to have any children baptized as catholic. On our marriage day I promised to love honour and obey until death us do part although obey has become more of a compromise between us. We have been married forty - five years and during this time my involvement in the church grew from helping in the garden fetes to running the children's liturgy, becoming an extraordinary minister and catechist for FHC. It has been with Rob's encouragement and his devotion to the church that has inspired me to develop my own faith. Everything changed in 1985 when following a visit from missionary priests I decide to become a Catholic. From that moment I could fully partake in the liturgy and I could receive the precious body and blood of Christ and I could take my daughter for a blessing; something that did not happen before. I was finally, wholly accepted as part of the community. Our daughter and son are baptised Catholic, attended Catholic school and received their First Holy Communion and Confirmation. I can thank Rob for being instrumental not only in my faith development but also of our children.

I have always worked as a nurse, spending my life until retirement studying and working long shifts. Rob has always been supportive, helping me with my study while being a house- husband, juggling his own career while looking after the children in my absence. We make a good team balancing our lives while remaining independent. Rob was never keen on studying especially for accountancy exams but he did enjoy training for his hobby of sub aqua diving where he worked hard to become a diving instructor. If he puts his mind to start anything he will always give it total commitment.

In 2007, Rob decided to commence the CCRS course. There was a change and a thirst for knowledge. I feel a bit guilty saying that I was too caught up in my own career to notice all the effort he put into the course and probably shocked when near the end of the course he told me he wanted to become a Deacon. There are times when we are swept up in the tide of everyday living that we never notice what is happening

around us and under our feet. Our family was growing fast, changes were happening at work and our parents were becoming older and frailer. Life was very busy. Rob applied for the Diaconate even though he was at the upper age limit. Looking back I should have asked more questions, tried to understand more about the process, listened and thought less about myself.

The time came and the invitation arrived for us to attend an interview at the Holy Name Church in Jesmond. The very thought of interview unnerved me but I still thought I was going along to support my husband not to take part myself! I later realised that the wife is the gate - keeper in the admission and screening process and the church requires the wife to give informed consent. How important that makes us feel and reinforces the view that the family comes first. Without the support of his wife the Deacon would not be able to fulfil his duties. On the interview day, we sat in a room in the priest's house with two couples who were much younger and both had young families. We shared their experiences and wished them well but we wondered how they would cope with the programme considering their busy lives. The interviews were long and arduous taking a long time for each person to be questioned separately. It was the first time I felt like I was taking part in the Mr and Mrs Quiz show and I was concerned that my answers would be very different to my husbands. The interview panel consisted of priests, a psychologist and a Deacon. It is hard to remember exactly who was there because nerves kicked in. We were made to feel comfortable and there was a sense of humour to allow us to relax a little which helped me to be myself. On reflection, would I have been any different if I was better prepared or was it better to be natural?

Rob's application was accepted which meant he then had to go away for a weekend to undergo personality and aptitude tests to ascertain if he was the right person to become a Deacon. No one understands how long the process takes and how many checks need to be made to ensure the person would be able to fulfil the role of Deacon. Nothing is definite until after the training and following confirmation from the Bishop. This is a time of real soul searching for the Deacon and his wife – how will it affect our marriage and our relationship? Especially in our relationship where we have shared a co-existence. It was a period of adjustment, discovery and discernment, almost a new beginning.

I remember Rob surrounded by books in the lounge trying to work in between all his other duties. I do not think it was easy but he thrived on the new knowledge and enjoyed the theology and study. I supported him whenever I could, trying to read and understand some of his assignments and giving him some space to work. We were lucky that the children were old enough not to need too much attention. Life around us continued but sadly during the programme Rob's mother died and suddenly and unexpectedly my brother Pete.

From the Diaconate came a new beginning meeting fellow Deacons and their wives. This was and still is a great support system. It is like having a family who nurture and because they have experienced or are experiencing the same as you can offer help and useful advice. Deacons who are ahead of Rob have been supportive by helping him on the practical side of being a Deacon and how the Diaconate has changed their lives. Not all Deacons have had positive experiences and this helped Rob to see some of the problems he might face.

Someone said God does not give us anything that we cannot handle. There were, and still are, moments when it is a struggle, times when I grumble with a reluctance to fit into my husband's planner because even though family comes first quite often God has other plans. As a Deacon's wife it is important for time set aside for each other and family and a time for prayer and service to the church. As a couple, we are still learning how to balance.

A parishioner once asked if being a Deacon's wife was like 'being a mistress,' initially annoyed by the comment I later realised what she meant. We do share our husbands but we do not own our husbands. They have a free will and my husband has his devotion to the church and to the service of others but above all, he has an overwhelming love for us as a family.

During the programme I was privileged to go on weekend retreats to Wetherall and Blackwell Grange in Darlington where I met with other Deacons' wives. This gave us time to unwind and listen....Time to pray....Time to reflect....

I could see Rob changing and for the first time see him emotional about something separate from his family. I remember receiving the Holy Spirit when I became Catholic, an overwhelming feeling of love, peace and love for Christ. I could see the Holy Spirit moving not only in Rob and me but also in the others within the group. Being together for the weekend gave the Deacons and their wives the space and the safety to be open and honest with each other and their faith. The journey together has been incredible and by attending the wives' reflective days, I have been able to enjoy some of the moments again.

I have been at Rob's every step through his propaedeutic year, his candidacy, lector, acolyte and his ordination. We have shared those special times together.

St Mary's Cathedral is my favourite place where I like to light a candle, pray and be close to God. How magical it was at Rob's ordination on 22 June 2013. Sadly, none of our parents could be there, only in spirit, but our daughter and son, friends and people from both parishes were there to celebrate. Priests and fellow Deacons and wives came to celebrate. The atmosphere, the music the celebration was uplifting and I was very proud of Rob taking his vows before the Bishop. As he lay prostrate, I was humbled by all his hard work and effort. When the time came for me to dress Rob in his Dalmatic, I was nervous but felt honoured to be able to do it. Rob was the only Deacon to be ordained so we were lucky to be in the front of the congregation. As I placed the Dalmatic over his head I realised I was agreeing to my husband becoming a Deacon and from that moment, I was letting part of him go. We were emotional and gave each other a kiss but also happy. I watched my husband go to the Bishop's side and knew that from then on life would be slightly different.

The vows we made when we married still ring true but now I can love, honour and respect him. I am blessed, proud and privileged to be a Deacons wife.

Rob has been a Deacon now for three years. How time flies! We have both retired from paid work but life is busier than before. Soon after Rob's ordination, our Parish Priest became ill and Rob has carried on assisting at Mass, conducting baptisms, funerals and weddings in the absence of the priest. He fulfils his role of Deacon and his obligation to pray morning and evening the Liturgy of the hours. He always ensures he visits families before any occasion such as a baptism, wedding or funeral and has great compassion and humility when talking with grieving relatives, which surprised me by his ability to do this. Another part of his role is in the facilitating of the catechesis of the church using his patience to help others to understand and develop their faith.

In 2015, my mother passed away and it seemed only fitting that her son in law whom she loved very much would conduct her funeral. Rob although emotional gave her the service and celebration of her life she deserved. It is strange as a wife to watch your husband as the focus taking on this difficult role but doing it with pride and love for our mother. I could imagine she would be looking down on him with the greatest of love and admiration.

When I listen to Rob's homilies, written from the heart I am warmed by the comments of affirmation from others in the congregation. Deacons are spreading the word of God: a special gift.

We holiday in Gozo Malta and have made good friends over the years who have accepted us into their community and culture. I am so in awe of Rob when he is asked to assist the priest and Bishop at the local church in Marsalforn. He has also assisted at processions and in the Mass. I am proud and sometimes speechless when he asks the congregation in Maltese to offer each other the sign of peace (aghtu l' paci lil xulxin) and we respond 'pace mieghek'.

We juggle family life looking after an active two-year-old grandson but we still manage a holiday and time to ourselves. Retirement has turned out different than we planned but our journey continues into another chapter hopefully a long and healthy one with the strength and faith in God.

It has taken time to adjust to sitting in the church alone while Rob is on the sanctuary but I can look with pride knowing that he is doing something special that he loves and for the love of Christ. I know like fellow Deacons he has been called to serve and I have been blessed to be his wife and support him.

### **Three Months After Ordination**

It is now three months since my husband Paul was ordained into the Permanent Diaconate and perhaps now is the time for me to reflect on the journey that not only Paul has travelled these last four years but also the journey the family has travelled.

When a husband is accepted onto the Diaconate Programme there are changes to family life. This might be the practical organisation of children when arranging to attend retreats, etc; to getting used to sitting in mass on your own. Our journey and I say "our" on purpose started almost five years ago when Paul first discussed the idea of the Diaconate. We discussed what we thought might be the impact on family and work life. I realised that it was Paul's vocation and at that point I wasn't sure what my role would be as 'the wife' and how that would affect my own vocation. I knew that I would be the practical support at home taking on some more of the ferrying of children.

One thing that was made very clear at the beginning was that the wife is there to support the husband and I remember being asked at the interview how I would feel if we had plans and Paul was called away and how would I feel about giving that support. That interview was the Saturday; my school was subject to an Ofsted on the Monday. I went from interview, home, changed and then into school. I was able to demonstrate that I could give the support even though it meant a long weekend for me in school.

I have to say that on the whole the Diaconate Programme acknowledges that most of those in formation have families and a full time job - but 2/3 days in a week for training some weeks sometimes saw Paul and I passing as ships in the night. It can be a long trek from the most southern tip of the Diocese to Newcastle. Time is set aside for those in formation and their wives to meet and a time for reflection through meeting, retreats, mass etc. As a wife attending evenings or weekends takes planning – organising children, work etc. We are fortunate as our children are now older and that by the time Paul was in the second year of formation we were able to leave them overnight. The elder one who was then 18 in charge!

It wasn't until the last year of formation that the impact on my life was really felt.

In the early stages of his formation I pulled back on some of the work I did within the parish. We were both conscious that this was Paul's ministry. Paul has been assigned to two parishes, not the parish where we live. I go to one of the masses but as our children have grown, have their own lives, it has come to a point now where I go to mass on my own and sit on my own. This was very strange at first. I am slowly becoming involved in these new Parishes- taking over Paul's place on the reading rota, involved again in Marriage Preparation, so my mission and ministry in the Church is changing.

We are all affected by life's experiences, the people we meet and we use them in our own lives. This has certainly been true for me. The opportunity to go on retreat with those in formation has aided my own spiritual growth; proof reading assignments extended my knowledge and understanding so much so I am now completing the CCRS, something I started many years ago. As a teacher, there is always an experience, prayer or thought that can be borrowed and adapted for use in school.

Our family life has now entered a new phase, the elder has completed university, the younger two now grown up – one taking a gap year and working, the other off to university coincidentally the same university where Paul and I met. Paul has changed jobs, still a solicitor, but in an office that allows him the flexibility to also act as a prison chaplain. Our life is at times different to what it was five years ago, but richer for our experiences.

Debra Hargreaves wife of Deacon Paul Hargreaves, Stockton on Tees

### **Reflections on being the wife of a Deacon**

My husband's decision to apply to train as a deacon and his subsequent ordination had a different impact on me from any of his previous decisions relating to work or personal development. Perhaps this was because he already had his professional identity when I met him or that any changes he made were of direct benefit to the family, either financially or as a result of an improved work - life balance. This felt different; because diaconate ordination was for the rest of his life - our lives. It seemed to be adding a third element into our marriage which had previously been intangible. We were becoming a ménage a trois but his relationship with the third person was different to mine. He was answering a call I had not heard.

What did this mean for me? Initially I was elated at this new path that could lead to an interesting, enriching and potentially fulfilling way of life for both of us. Indeed the experience of sharing the monthly ministry afternoons and the two residential weekends each year was invigorating and opened new horizons for thought, mutual sharing and spiritual development.

Like any course of study my husband's attendance at training days and his time spent in reading and essay writing meant changes to our home life and impacted on our time together as a couple. Counter balancing this was the stimulus of the weekends away and our ongoing conversations stemming from our evolving understanding of spirituality, religion and ministry.

One challenge I had not anticipated was that our growing spirituality - a huge part of our individual and joint identities - would take us in divergent directions. My reading and reflections leading me to understand spirituality and church differently to my husband. I was greatly troubled by this and massively helped by the guidance given and reading suggested by one of our retreat givers which enabled me to acknowledge that I too was growing as a result of the diaconate formation journey and though I was not called to be a deacon, my own journey into maturity as a fully human being was as inherently valuable.

During the four year programme the possibility of ordination lay safely in the future. Once the final year arrived this possibility turned into reality and for me this reality was terrifying. One weekend these terrors could no longer be contained. Voicing them to my husband felt potentially destructive for him but necessary for me. I was like a small child about to be left behind saying, " what about me, what about our marriage , what about our hopes and dreams..." I feared that on top of his work commitments which were already draining for him he would start saying "yes, yes, yes" to all that was asked of him as a deacon and that I and us ( marriage) and the family would get the crumbs - and this was for life. To his credit, though stunned, he listened and what followed was a valuable and cathartic conversation. Work commitments, diaconate commitments, couple and family time were looked at realistically with an acknowledgement that workloads would have to be altered and that couple time had to be protected. We, together, were the power house for each other and for the family, our strengths complimented each other and we had always been stronger as a team. Anything that divided us weakened us. This discussion removed my fears and I experienced a sense of serenity when contemplating the coming ordination and what lay beyond.

Now, nearly one year on from ordination I still feel serene and am completely accepting of his "deaconhood". He is reducing his paid work to offer more time to his calling as a deacon and this too feels right.

I know the future may not be easy. Given the absence of a robust structure of mentoring and supervision for ministers in the church it likely to be my role to police the deaconate/ family interface in order to maintain a healthy boundary and provide the balance that will allow my husband to operate as a fully rounded minister whilst still being an individual, husband and father but I feel confident that we will face any future challenges together as the couple we have always been.

### Three Years after Ordination

My husband has been an ordained Deacon for three years, and I have tried to use writing a reflection on being the wife of a Deacon as an opportunity to consider the journey for us so far.

The question “have you thought of becoming a Deacon?” was put to my husband twenty five years ago by his uncle who was being ordained a Deacon in Swindon, long before Hexham & Newcastle Diocese had ever decided to introduce the Permanent Diaconate. Having very young children at that time, the question/calling was put to one side.

Throughout the years the question would arise, but my husband felt he would not go looking for this challenge and we both agreed if this was meant to be it would happen, and we passed it back into the Lord’s hands.

When eventually the question was asked again, this time by our Parish Priest, an answer was needed and that answer was yes. The feelings I had at this time were feelings of uncertainty, anxious for my husband and the task he was about to undertake, had he/we made the right decision. However, the following evening there was a Parish meeting and someone asked about having a Deacon in the Parish. Without giving anything away the Priest said, “The matter is in hand.” Suddenly everyone seemed to be discussing Deacons and we sat looking at each other not daring to give anything away. Some people started saying to my husband, “you should put your name forward, you would be good at it.” When we got home I said “well if you needed confirmation that you have given the right answer that was it.”

The first thing to start this journey was my husband went to Manchester for an initial interview and psychological assessment. It was at this point that I wondered what my role as a Deacon’s wife would be, the children were older and like me were unsure where this would all lead. As a wife I have always supported his decisions in work and as a couple we have made decisions for family life, but this was going to be a totally different journey for both of us.

Having completed the Psychological assessment the next step was a joint interview. My husband was interviewed first on his own, I was left in a room on my own, and to be fair someone did keep popping in to make sure I was OK (or hadn’t gone home!) and after an hour or more I was led into the room for a joint interview. The first question I was asked was, “What do you think being a Deacons wife will be like?” Straight to the point I thought, but I was unable to answer the question as I didn’t know. The questions after that made me realise that perhaps these people themselves didn’t really know the answer to the first question they had asked me.

What is being a Deacons wife like?

It wasn’t until we went to the first ordination of a Deacon that I was able to start answering this question. As we came outside, the wife of another Deacon in training said, “this is quite a big thing”. All of us were relieved that someone had said what we were all thinking. We all agreed “this is huge!”.

I find great support from the wives of other Deacons and enjoy the reflection day we have each year, even if we do sometimes take this opportunity to have a moan.

From the beginning we have always said “one step at a time! This journey is not a race” and like any journey it starts with a single step: steps like coping through the time spent on the essays, the first time you see your husband in clerical dress, the first time you sit on your own in church, the first time your husband gives a homily (I have stopped feeling sick with nerves at this, and can now listen to him!).

So three years on I’m still answering that first question that was posed to me. I try to encourage, keep calm and stand back but try to be there, all the things a wife will try to do. There are times when I find it difficult and I remind myself that this is not just a calling for my husband, it is a calling for me. It is something I have to grow into and like my husband I will do this with prayer and one step at a time.