Deacons As Leaders

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Contents

4 Preface

5 Chapter 1
Deacons Modeling Biblical Leadership
Charles W. Deweese

20 Chapter 2
Deacons Leading in Church Ministry
Charles Warnock III

34 Chapter 3
Deacons Leading in Community Ministry
Gary Hardin

48 Chapter 4
Deacons Leading as Change Agents
Robert Sheffield

65 Chapter 5
Deacons Leading in Times of Transition
Charles Belt

81 Chapter 6
Deacons Leading with Pastor and Staff
Jerry Songer
Deacons serve in vital leadership positions in the church. This is true from a biblical as well as practical standpoint. Unfortunately, deacons, pastors, and church members have not always understood or appreciated the role of deacon leadership. The nature of deacon leadership and the scope of deacon ministry have often been misunderstood in the life of the church.

*Deacons as Leaders* seeks to clarify the nature of deacon leadership. Space does not permit us to cover every area where deacons express leadership. The subjects covered represent critical areas of concern for you, your fellow deacons, and your entire church.

The writers of *Deacons as Leaders* bring knowledge, experience, and insight into their chapters. Their comments will broaden your understanding concerning deacon leadership.

To gain full benefit from this book, consider the following study process. First, read the book through carefully and prayerfully. Underline significant sentences and words. Then read it a second time. Carefully reflect upon the underlined points. Let them impact your mind and heart. Finally, discuss the book with other deacons.

*Deacons as Leaders* was written for you. It is my prayer that this book will enable you to become a more effective deacon for the glory of our Lord and the growth of His church.
Deacons Modeling Biblical Leadership

Charles W. Deweese

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Not every lemon is sour. Joel B. Lemon, Baptist deacon, proved that through his effective leadership.¹ For 33 years (1861–94), he served as deacon in the Mill Creek Baptist Church in Botetourt County, Virginia. Spanning the Civil War and Reconstruction, his life as deacon reflected important leadership traits and achievements.

As an active participant in Mill Creek’s Sunday School, Lemon studied the Bible faithfully, learning principles of biblical leadership along the way. He then modeled what he learned by serving from time to time as church treasurer, moderator, trustee, pulpit committee member, discipline committee member, and messenger to the Valley Baptist Association. He also arranged hospitality for church guests, visited absent members, urged members to contribute toward the church’s financial needs, supported mission causes outside the church, and served on a committee charged to send food and other provisions to Richmond College.

Lemon was also a loving husband, a caring father, and a community-minded citizen. He and his wife reared a large family of sons and daughters, of whom all received a basic education and several graduated from college.
Two sons became Baptist ministers, and one became a physician. In 1870 Lemon helped form one of the first public schools in Virginia. He strongly supported the building and maintaining of roads in Botetourt County.

Times have changed. Deacons today do not tend to serve lengthy terms; instead, they usually serve short terms on a rotating basis. And deacons today do not necessarily serve as church treasurers, moderators, or trustees, or in other aspects of church administration; instead, they function more fully as servants in the pastoral ministries of the church. However, at least one key Baptist conviction links Joel Lemon and deacons today: leadership in personal, family, church, work, and community life is vital to deacon effectiveness. And such leadership must evolve from and relate to biblical models and principles of leadership.

Deacon Leadership is Essential

In ordination a church recognizes the leadership a deacon has already expressed as a Christian disciple, affirms its confidence in the deacon’s potential for increased leadership, and states its expectation that the deacon will accept and mirror biblical patterns of leadership. Therefore, ordination implies that a deacon can serve Christ and the church best as a leader.

Effective deacon leadership is essential to creative patterns of lay ministry, to the quality of a church’s worship, to covenantal relationships that tie a church together, to the moral and spiritual tone that a church sets, and to the successful completion of a church’s overall tasks.

The Baptist stress on the priesthood of all believers affirms that ministry belongs to the whole church. Baptists elect deacons hoping that they will minister by leading all church members to engage in practical discipleship.

Baptists continue to assign specific leadership roles to their deacons as they have done for centuries. Why? One important reason is the biblical mandate that “everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Cor. 14:40, NIV). Second, the congregational form of church government requires strong leadership. Third, a church's need to carry out its calling and mission compels it to place deacons in the forefront of service-oriented leadership.
In 1987–88, I served as chairman of deacons at Judson Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. That experience convinced me that the Lord, the Bible, and the church have a right to expect that deacons lead by expressing vision, taking courageous ethical stands, seeking to meet the spiritual standards of the Bible, preserving vital Christian traditions, making creative and flexible adjustments to change, using crisis as a time for learning, and cultivating the varying gifts of church members.

That experience also taught me that every person who agrees to be ordained as a deacon should be prepared to be viewed as a leader. Church members automatically assume that their deacons will be good leaders, even if the deacons do not absorb leadership into their self-identity. The potential danger of confused identity is that deacons may lose the respect of the church. The advantage of a healthy self-understanding regarding leadership is that deacons can help guide the church into meaningful patterns of ministry.

Deacon Leadership is Biblical

Three ideals—freedom, cooperation, and accountability—best describe the biblical style of leadership for deacons. The Bible invites deacons to maximize their individual gifts of leadership, urges them to cooperate in achieving the mission of the church, and stresses their accountability to God and the congregation.

Strong deacon leadership grows out of biblical requirements. Robert Sheffield’s book *The Ministry of Baptist Deacons* contains a valuable chapter on “Deacons Ministering as Christian Leaders.” This chapter highlights character qualities which the Bible expects of anyone desiring to lead. These qualities include servanthood, commitment, faith, vision, perseverance, and enthusiasm.3

Why is it so important that deacons turn to the Bible as the main source for their leadership style? Quite simply, Baptists view the Bible as the sole written authority for their faith and practices. First Timothy 3 presents excellent qualifications for deacon leaders. But we can search the entire Bible for valid principles and models of leadership for deacons. Eight such principles follow.
1. *Effective deacons lead by living daily under the lordship of Christ.*—
Peter stated in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost: “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36, NIV). Philippians 2:11, part of an early Christian hymn, urges that “every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (NIV). The confession that “Jesus is Lord” quickly became one of the favorite claims of early Christians.

The lordship of Christ means that all people owe Christ absolute obedience. The integrity of deacon leadership rises to or falls on the basis of its commitment to Christ as Lord. Deacons devoted to the lordship of Christ possess changed priorities, values, and dreams. Put simply, they behave and believe differently than before. They read the Sermon on the Mount with new understanding. They imitate the life of Christ with increased intensity. They accept their ministry roles as Christian servants with fresh zeal. They worship with higher motivation.

A deacon who leads under the lordship of Christ gains a clearer perspective of the importance of the things of this world. This kind of deacon has been “born again” by the Holy Spirit (John 3:3,7, NIV), has received “baptism into death” (Rom. 6:4, NIV), has become “a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17, NIV), and “overcomes the world” (1 John 5:4, NIV). Equipped with these New Testament credentials, any deacon magnifies the possibility of making a major impact as a church and community leader.

Devotion to the lordship of Christ guarantees freedom. Acceptance of the obligation to subject oneself to Christ in all things frees a deacon to abandon self-reliance, to lead with imagination, to point the church toward its high calling from God, and to serve with joy. Paul’s warning and encouragement to the Galatians goes to the heart of deacon leadership: “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love” (5:13, NIV).

Hymns of our faith express the lordship of Christ in powerful ways. Such hymns include “All Hail the Power,” “Come, Thou Almighty King,” “Crown Him with Many Crowns,” “Fairest Lord Jesus,” “Have Thine Own Way, Lord,” and “Jesus Is Lord of All.” Through singing these hymns,
deacons affirm their dependency upon Christ, worship with the people whom they are called to lead, and then lead with the awareness that service, not control, is the central motif of their ministry.

2. Effective deacons lead by committing themselves to the historic purposes of the church.—Acts 6:5 identifies seven men chosen by the early church to assist in the daily distribution of food to Grecian widows. Although Acts does not designate these men as deacons, their assignment “to wait on tables” (6:2, NIV) comes from the same root as the Greek word *diakonos* which can be translated into English as deacon or servant. Philip was one of the seven.

When persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, Philip “went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there” (8:5, NIV). Adversity seemed to deepen his dedication to the church. Acts 8 depicts Philip in the multiple roles of preacher, healer, evangelist, and teacher. Because of his preaching, “spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed” (8:7, NIV). With excitement, when many “believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women” (8:12, NIV). Later, on a desert road to Gaza, Philip assumed the roles of evangelist and teacher in relating to an Ethiopian eunuch, resulting in the eunuch’s conversion and baptism (8:26-38).

The model set by Philip in Acts 6 and 8 urges today’s deacons to accept appropriate responsibility for leading the church to stay close to the purposes for which Christ created it. Since the church exists to share the good news of Christ, deacons need to bear a meaningful verbal and life-style witness and to undergird mission work. Since the church exists to glorify God and enjoy fellowship with Him, deacons need to worship weekly with fellow Christians. Since the church exists to teach the content and disciplines of the faith, deacons need to participate faithfully in Sunday School, Discipleship Training, and other educational opportunities of church life. Since the church exists to meet human need, deacons need to invest themselves in family ministry programs and other pastoral ministries of the church.
Helping the church understand and attain its New Testament calling penetrates the heart of deacon leadership. Respected by a congregation, deacons occupy a unique position of service from which to lead church members to upgrade and protect the regenerate nature of church life. They can do this by leading them to meet biblical requirements for doctrinal soundness, moral purity, spiritual growth, covenant relationship, and active ministry.

3. **Effective deacons lead by engaging daily in personal devotions and family worship.**—Personal Bible study and prayer provide a strong foundation for deacon leadership. Viewing the Bible as the primary source of Christian faith and practice and of spiritual inspiration, deacons who read the Bible daily can eventually say with the psalmist both that “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (119:11, NIV), and that “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (119:105, NIV). Thus prepared, deacons can lead with confidence, courage, and humility.

Bold praying also characterizes the private lives of deacons who lead out of a sense of biblical calling. Daniel 6 presents a remarkable example of personal prayers in a difficult time. King Darius approved a law to throw into a den of lions anyone who prayed within 30 days to any god or man, except to Darius himself. Knowing that he might wind up in a den of lions, Daniel refused to let a government ruler dictate the nature of his prayer life. Following the routine pattern of his life, he responded courageously: “Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before” (v. 10, NIV). Regular prayer enables deacons to commune with God, worship God, and commit themselves to God. These actions and attitudes add depth, maturity, and substance to deacon leadership.

Deacons who model biblical leadership also engage in daily family worship. The 1837 Circular Letter of the Old Colony Baptist Association in Massachusetts focused on the importance of family worship. Citing
biblical support for the practice, the letter viewed family worship as important because it strengthened parental influence over children, offered a valuable setting for Christian instruction, and prepared family members for Christian service. Deacons who lead by ministering to other people’s families need first to be ministers to their own. Baptists have long recognized that biblical ideal. They have rightly stressed that “a deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well” (1 Tim. 3:12, NIV).

4. Effective deacons lead by responding enthusiastically to God’s will for their lives.—John the Baptist typified this principle in a wonderful way. When “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert,” immediately “he went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:2-3, NIV). Isaiah 40:3-5 had anticipated that John would respond excitedly to his call from God, and the angel Gabriel had expressed this anticipation to Zechariah (Luke 1:11-17).

Jesus expects all His disciples to follow Him. Simon and Andrew, the first two disciples whom He called, modeled the proper Christian response to their invitation to leadership roles: “At once they left their nets and followed him” (Mark 1:18, NIV). Captivated by their new relationship with Christ and the possibilities of ministry tied to it, they set the pace for all future Christian leaders, including deacons, by quickly accepting Christ’s calling. And they responded this way without knowing either the full demands of Christ for their lives or what the future would hold.

Baptist deacons occupy pivotal leadership roles in church life. Zeal, fervor, and optimism about their calling need to complement their ordination. Positive attitudes about leadership opportunities affect church members’ perceptions of deacons. When the congregation senses that deacons have accepted their leadership enthusiastically and are using it responsibly, the members then view deacons as dynamic contributors to the church. Respect and support for deacon leadership soon follow.

William Carey, father of the modern mission movement, launched his career in the early 1790s as English Baptists’ first foreign missionary after
inviting those Baptists to “expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.”

That spirit of anticipation saturated Carey’s leadership style throughout his magnificent missionary work in India. In reacting to God’s call, he listened attentively, prayed expectantly, and responded committedly. Carey’s vibrant devotion to God’s will provides a major message for today’s deacons.

5. **Effective deacons lead by encouraging, motivating, equipping, and serving others**.—These patterns of service and leadership permeated Jesus’ self-understanding. Soon after overcoming three temptations presented to Him by the devil, Jesus set the stage for and established the meaning of His ministry by entering the synagogue in Nazareth and reading from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah: “ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor’ ” (Luke 4:18–19, NIV).

Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) vividly illustrates how He changed a life through a ministry of support. He encouraged Zacchaeus by inviting him to come down from a sycamore-fig tree so that He could go to his house and spend some time with him. He motivated Zacchaeus by leading him to evaluate the moral and spiritual aspects of his life. He equipped him with a new sense of purpose by leading him to accept the salvation which only He could offer. He served this wealthy tax collector by guiding him to confess that he would give half of his possessions to the poor and that he would repay four times any amount that he had cheated from anyone.

Jesus is the ultimate model for deacons. His first-century commitment to meeting the needs of others speaks volumes to the responsibilities of deacons today. He calls deacons to imitate Him. He pleads for deacons to care for people where they hurt. He urges deacons to view love for neighbor as an essential quality of leadership in church and community life. Jesus’ call for each of His disciples to “take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24, NIV) includes deacons. And that call requires a self-denying approach to Christian service.

Deacon leadership implies a willingness to invest oneself in the needs of
others. To illustrate, during a recession in the mid-1970s, many residents of Candler, North Carolina, experienced industrial work layoffs or had their hours cut back. Deacons in the Hominy Baptist Church in Candler responded by forming a Deacon Economic Assistance Committee (DEAC) to assist church members facing severe economic problems. Deacons who serve in that kind of way discover the true meaning of Christian leadership.

6. Effective deacons lead by assessing ministries needing to be done, setting goals for achieving them, developing strategies, mobilizing resources, working cooperatively, and expressing thanksgiving to God for positive results.—Nehemiah demonstrated mastery of all these leadership skills and attitudes as he coordinated the rebuilding of the walls around Jerusalem in the fifth century B.C.

After obtaining permission from King Artaxerxes to travel from Persian exile to Judah, Nehemiah arrived safely in Jerusalem. Soon he conducted a personal inspection of the walls which had been destroyed during the Babylonian invasion of the sixth century B.C. A man of vision and initiative, he then committed himself to motivating the Jewish people to rebuild the walls.

Nehemiah quickly moved the people from motivation to action. He made specific work assignments, organized elaborate plans to frustrated the opponents of the building project, and led the people to complete the task in the amazingly short time of 52 days.

In a spirit of worship Nehemiah led the people to express their gratitude to God. The dedication of the completed walls included “songs of thanksgiving,” “the music of cymbals, harps, and lyres,” the use of “two large choirs to give thanks,” “great sacrifices,” and much “rejoicing” (Neh. 12:27,31,43, NIV).

An additional clue to the power of Nehemiah’s leadership model for deacons lies in his reaction to the ways former governors and their assistants had “placed a heavy burden on the people” and “lorded it over the people” (Neh. 5:15, NIV). In sharp contrast, Nehemiah wrote that “out of reverence for God I did not act like that. Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall” (Neh. 5:15-16, NIV).
What makes a deacon an effective leader? Led by God, such a deacon chooses a participatory style of leadership. Nehemiah did more than coordinate the rebuilding of the walls; he helped build them. Deacons cannot simply sit back, plan projects, and call the shots; they must work alongside those who follow their guidance. Deacons may find it helpful to adopt what I call “a theology of chipping in.”

7. Effective deacons lead by staying with a task until they complete it, despite all obstacles.—Succeeding Moses as the leader of the Israelites, Joshua received both an encouragement and a leadership assignment from God: “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them” (Josh. 1:5-6, NIV).

Joshua’s leadership in the conquest of Canaan required patience and perseverance. Obstacles thrived. For example, after the Israelites destroyed Jericho, Achan acted unfaithfully in stealing some of the holy things of the city, causing God to respond angrily against Israel (7:1). As a result, when Joshua sent about 3,000 men to capture Ai, they were defeated. When the Israelites disciplined Achan, God’s favor returned to them (7:26).

Joshua then led the Israelites in battle after battle, defeating king after king. He helped the Israelites overcome the harshness of day-to-day military life by leading them to stay close to God. They built an altar to God, offered burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, listened to the reading of the book of the Law, and engaged in covenantal renewal (8:30-31,35).

A new menace emerged, however: worship of pagan gods. Joshua refused to yield. In his farewell address to the Israelites, he continued to take a stand: “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (24:15, NIV). The people then vowed that they, too, would serve the Lord. Joshua concluded his remarkable life of leadership by making a covenant for the people at Shechem (24:25).

Joshua’s life demonstrates for deacons how to stay with a task until they complete it. He committed himself to God’s mission, communicated with
God regularly, responded constructively to God’s discipline when the people abandoned their assignment, refused to cave in to difficulties, led the people to worship in thanksgiving for victories, and engaged the people in covenantal relationship with God.

Imitation of Joshua’s model can motivate deacons who stay close to their calling to claim with Paul: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7, NIV). What better legacy could any deacon leave to God and the church?

8. Effective deacons lead by modeling a sacrificial spirit.—The article on stewardship in The Baptist Faith and Message statement of Southern Baptists describes God as “the source of all blessings” and asserts that Christians live “under obligation to serve Him with their time, talents, and material possessions.” To apply this obligation faithfully, deacons need to be willing to deny themselves and take up their crosses in following Christ as Lord. This approach to leadership makes an indelible mark on those ministered to by deacons.

The apostle Paul possessed an incredible willingness to sacrifice himself in order to lead out in the mission work of the early church. Persistent hostility greeted him in city after city. Consider the following illustrations from Acts:

• Victimized soon after his conversion by a plot of the Jews in Damascus to kill him, Paul escaped to Jerusalem (9:23-26).
• In Pisidia, Antioch Jews incited persecution against Paul and Barnabas, forcing their expulsion from the area (13:50).
• Jews came to Lystra from Antioch and Iconium and influenced the crowd to stone Paul and drag him outside the city, believing he was dead (14:19).
• In Philippi, in a series of dramatic developments, “The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison” (16:22-23, NIV).
• In Jerusalem a mob seized Paul, dragged him from the temple, and tried to kill him (21:30-31).
• Imprisoned on a ship sailing to Rome, Paul experienced a violent storm and a shipwreck off the coast of Malta (27:18,41).
• And Paul even commented on “a thorn in my flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7), but he moved quickly to say, “I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (vv. 9-10, NIV). Contemporary deacons willing to capture and live by that spirit can inject new meaning into their leadership role in church life.

Deacon Leadership is Practical
History can inform and inspire deacon leadership. Evidence follows. John Gurnsey, Baptist deacon in the town of Amenia, Dutchess County, New York, from the 1790s to the early 1840s, modeled biblical principles of leadership in key ways.7

Gurnsey modeled humility. Consistent in conduct and faithful to Christ, he was still willing to confess his sins. He claimed no superiority over others. And he was willing to perform any task, regardless of how lowly, in ministering to fellow church members and neighbors.

He also modeled a kind heart. Without neglecting his business, he made time to visit the sick, the poor, and the afflicted, whether they were church members or not. The following account shows how his inner compulsion to serve expressed itself in a concrete ministry of compassion:

Once, when the winter was very severe and the snow deep, blocking up all the roads, he thought of a poor sister in the church, who lived about a mile from his residence, and could not rest without going to see her; he was afraid she was in want. Though then an old man, he went with his staff in one hand, and a basket of provision in the other, and with much difficulty reached the house. The poor woman saw him coming, and her heart was deeply affected in witnessing his exertions to wade through the snow. He was a welcome visitor: she and her children were really in want; their fuel and provisions were all gone, or nearly so. He returned home wearied and exhausted, and
immediately dispatched his team to take her some wood.8

Little did this faithful deacon know that his sacrificial effort would be recorded and would serve as a teaching device to help you understand what it means to develop a caring style of leadership.

Gurnsey modeled a generous approach to stewardship. His annual subscription for the pastor’s support always exceeded anyone else’s. He contributed liberally to missions. Even when he died, he left $1,000 to his church and $700-$800 each for home and foreign missions.

He modeled a faithful Christian witness. Besides leading his family in daily worship, he shared the gospel with people wherever he went. For 30 years he “sustained” a weekly prayer meeting in a schoolhouse in his neighborhood.

He modeled commitment to his church. He attended public worship regularly. He had a large covered wagon built so that he could take his family and friends to church. When the church erected a new house of worship and a parsonage, “the great burden of the care and labor fell upon him.” He served as long as possible. The last time he distributed the elements of the Lord’s Supper, he had to use crutches.

He modeled a cooperative spirit. He diligently promoted the welfare of other churches. He and his family attended revival meetings at churches miles from their home. Neighboring churches facing trouble often enlisted his prayers and help.

Gurnsey was not perfect. But his defects seemed minor compared to his spiritual strengths. Two comments of his biographer summarize the thrust of his life. First, “No hurry or press of business was allowed to direct him from his high and holy purpose to serve God.” Second, “It was not because he had better gifts than others, that he was so much more useful, but because he was willing to use what he had.”9

So goes the story of deacon John Gurnsey.

How does your story read? Perhaps the following self-testing instrument can help you decide. Simply answer yes, no, or sometimes to each statement. Then evaluate your responses on the basis of the biblical principles of leadership described in this chapter.
1. I try to live daily under the lordship of Christ.
2. I am committed to the historic purposes of the church.
3. I engage daily in personal devotions and family worship.
4. I respond enthusiastically to God’s will for my life.
5. I seek to encourage, motivate, equip, and serve others.
6. I regularly assist other deacons in assessing ministries needing to be done, setting goals for achieving them, developing strategies, mobilizing resources, working cooperatively, and expressing thanksgiving to God for positive results.
7. I usually stay with a task until it is completed, despite all obstacles.
8. I possess a sacrificial spirit.

Robert Sheffield writes that deacons provide leadership in three ways: serving as an example to the church, participating in church life, and serving as catalyst leaders who help the church initiate activities to achieve its mission. He then suggests that each deacon group develop a Deacon Ministry Leadership Plan made up of projects to be done during the year. Suggested projects include fellowship enrichment, stewardship support, church organization support and involvement, the church understanding and practicing Baptist polity, interpreting the work of the church and the denomination, and involving church members in Pastoral Ministries program work.¹⁰

Consider ordering *Handbook for Planning Deacon Ministry*. Urge your deacons to sponsor some of the projects identified in it. As your deacons model biblical principles of leadership, your church may begin to pulsate with a new sense of spiritual excitement. May the likes of Joel B. Lemon and John Gurnsey live on!


8. Ibid., 300.

9. Ibid., 301, 302.