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Organizing for Effective Deacon Ministry

an excerpt from "The Ministry of Baptist Deacons" by Robert Sheffield

Deacon groups serve their churches better when deacon ministry is organized. This fact does not mean that the organizational structure for each deacon group will be the same. Some churches will use a simple structure for organizing deacon work, while other churches will choose a more complex plan. Regardless of which method is used, any method for organizing deacon work has its purpose to help deacons accomplish their ministry.

From time to time, a church should evaluate the method in which its deacon work is organized. The chairperson of deacons, along with the pastor, can guide the church and the deacon body to develop the organization needed.

Guidelines for Effective Organization

The following suggests are basic and can be applied to any size church and any size deacon group.

1. *Keep the organization simple and flexible.* The temptation is to over-organize. Any organizational plan chosen should serve the needs of the deacons and the church. Having many different deacon officers and deacon committees is not always a sign of good organization. The opposite can be true. Having more organization than needed can be as bad as not having enough. The purpose and tasks of deacon ministry should dictate the kind of organization chosen. Deacon groups who decide to use the three deacon ministry plans (care plan, leadership plan, and proclamation plan) will want to adopt an organizational structure that helps the deacon group carry out these three ministry plans. Sometimes, temporary deacon committees are chosen or temporary assignments are made within the deacon group. After these temporary committees do their work, or after the temporary assignments are completed, those committees and assignments no longer are part of the organizational structure. A n effective organizational plan is always a flexible plan. Ministry needs within the church might change. Needs within the deacon body might change. When these kinds of changes occur, the organizational structure used by the deacons might need to change as well.
2. *State deacon duties in writing.* This step offers benefits both to the deacons and to the church.
 - The importance of deacon ministry is highlighted.
 - Expectations of the church are made known.
 - Good relationships among the deacons and other church programs are insured.
3. *Establish working relationships.* Effective deacon ministry often depends on how well individual deacons relate to one another and to other organizations in the church. These relationships are important



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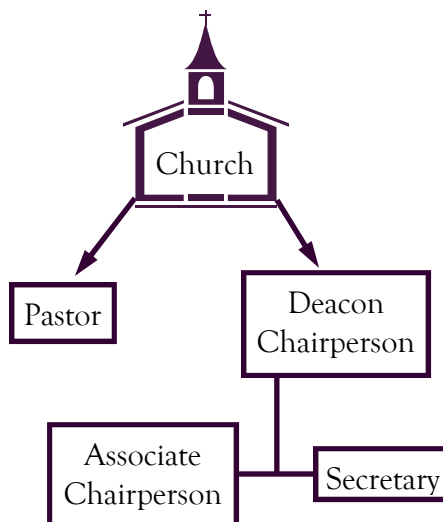
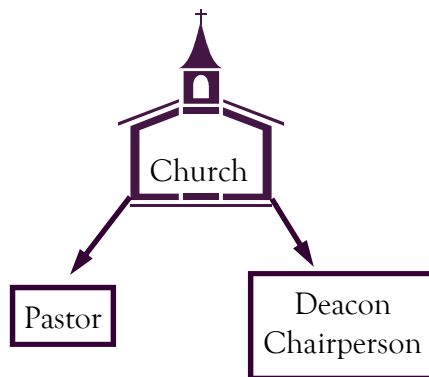
if team spirit in the church is to develop. A winning baseball team develops its winning ways because each player understands the position and role he is to play on the team. Likewise, deacon groups develop winning ways so long as they understand their role and the role of other groups in the church.

4. *Report regularly.* Periods of reporting to the deacon body build accountability into the deacon group. Regular reporting also encourages teamwork. During each deacons meeting, the agenda should show a time for reporting. Examples would be reports of visits made, ministry acts performed, prayer requests, deacon committee actions, and other reports. Report times offer opportunities to celebrate God's blessings and to encourage other deacons.

The deacon secretary should record the report in the minutes of the deacon meetings and should provide each deacon with a typed copy of the minutes.

Suggested Organizational Patterns

The following charts show different ways deacon ministry can be organized. These charts reflect differences in the size of the church as well as the size of the deacon group.





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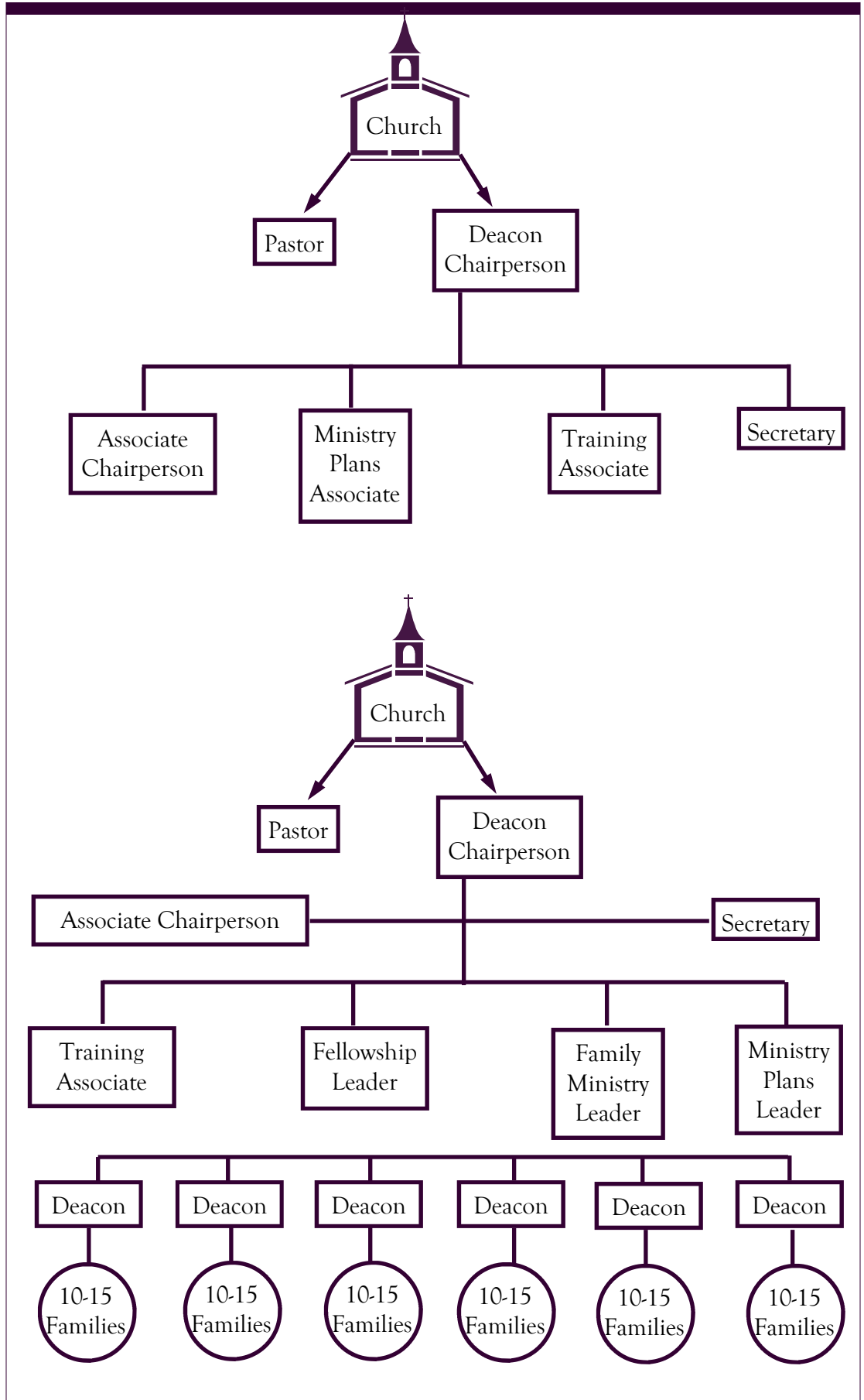
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Suggested Duties of Deacons Officers

You will notice in the preceding patterns that each pattern begins with the chairperson of deacons. This person's work is the key to an effective deacon group.

The Deacon Chairperson

This individual is more than a presiding officer. The chairperson has the privilege of leading the deacons to fulfill their mission as deacons. Charles Treadway, in a book that is out of print, mentioned seven important relationships that need to be cultivated by all deacon chairpersons. ¹

1. *Relationship with the Lord.* This relationship begins with the chairperson's own faith in Christ and includes a commitment to follow the Lord daily. This relationship requires effort, but it is this relationship that determines how well the other relationships are developed.
2. *Relationship with self.* The deacon chairperson does more than just fill a job. Often this individual grows as a person during his time of service. The work of this deacon officer is important enough to demand priority attention.
3. *Relationship with family members.* Love, understanding, trust, and care are the qualities needed at home if the chairperson is to serve well. Much time will be required from the chairperson. He must be careful not to neglect family members while performing his duties as chairperson.
4. *Relationship with the pastor.* The opportunity to minister alongside the pastor might be the greatest reward of serving as chairperson. What follows are some ways the chairperson can encourage the pastor.
 - Join hands with him as a fellow partner on the ministry team.
 - Support the pastor in his daily life and work.
 - Pray with him and for him.
 - Defend him when he is criticized unfairly.
 - Give loyal, redemptive advice when he is mistaken.
 - Guide the church to meet the pastor's needs.
 - Share with him information about the needs of church members and other deacons.
 - Take initiative to include him when you plan deacons meeting agendas.
5. *Relationship with other deacons.* The chairperson gives leadership to the entire deacon body in these ways:
 - Encouraging fellow deacons in their Christian walks.
 - Setting a good example for other deacons.
 - Helping deacons understand their work.
 - Making sure training opportunities are provided.
 - Making sure fellowship times are provided.
 - Praying for fellow deacons.
 - Being a friend to each deacon.
6. *Relationship with the Church Council.* By attending Church Council meetings, the chairperson represents the interests of the deacon body. In this capacity the chairperson interprets, coordinates, and gives



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information about the work of the deacons.

7. *Relationship with the church.* A church went for ten months without a pastor. When a new pastor finally was called, the chairperson said to the new pastor, "I'm glad you're here. Running this church has been a tough job." The chairperson's role never is to "run" the church. Instead, he shows concern for the church and supports the church with his active participation.

The chairperson really is the deacon body's representative to the entire church. He involves the deacons in the church's life by helping the church understand the work of deacon ministry, by helping the church to see the need to improve its deacon selection procedures, and by involving other deacons in the church's ministry.

The Deacon Chairperson as a Leader

When giving leadership to the deacon group, the chairperson should guard against an *autocratic* leadership style. The chairperson's job is not to dictate the decisions, policies, or procedures of the deacon body. Nor should the chairperson use a *manipulative* style of leadership in which he manipulates other deacons to achieve the chairperson's present plans.

The best leadership style will be a *delegating-equipping* style in which the chairperson involves each deacon in planning, doing, and evaluating deacon projects. When this leadership style is used, the other deacons are led to identify and use their ministry skills. In the process of work done, the motivations of the deacon group rises.

The chairperson will need to improve these skills:

- planning skills
- communication skills
- motivation skills
- delegation skills
- evaluations skills

Duties of the Deacon Chairperson

1. Lead the deacons to become an effective ministry team.
2. Lead the deacons in planning, conducting, and evaluating their work.
3. Plan, conduct, and evaluate deacons meetings.
4. Lead in providing deacons with adequate training and resources for doing their work.
5. Guide the deacons in developing deacon ministry plans.
6. Serve as a members of the Church Council. Interpret deacon work to the Council and provide deacons with information from the Council.
7. Report regularly to the church on the work of the deacons.
8. Give guidance to the Pastoral Ministries program in the church in the absence of a pastor.

Duties of the Associate Chairperson

1. Conduct deacons meetings in the absence of the chairperson.
2. Assist the chairperson in fulfilling responsibilities as assigned.



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3. Participate in all deacon work.
4. Coordinate the preparation of Lord's Supper elements. In some churches, a separate Lord's Supper committee will do this. In those church, the associate chairperson could work with the Lord's Supper committee.
5. Coordinate the preparation for the observance of the Lord's Supper, if this responsibility has not been assigned to a committee.
6. Serve as the coordinator of deacon training, unless this work has been assigned to another deacon officer.

Duties of the Secretary

1. Keep accurate minutes of deacons meetings and records of deacon ministry.
2. Maintain deacon membership records, record of deacon rotation, and deacon ministry reports.
3. Order and maintain a supply of deacon ministry materials for deacons to use in their work.
4. Prepare official correspondence for the deacon body.
5. Prepare and revise Deacon Family Ministry Plan resource books, if the church does not have a deacon officer who performs this responsibility.
6. Participate in all deacon work.

Duties of the Training Associate

1. Work with other deacon officers and the Church Training director to provide training conferences in deacon ministry for the deacons and for all church members.
2. Encourage deacons and their spouses to attend associational, state, and national deacon ministry conferences.
3. Keep accurate records of deacon ministry training. Complete request forms for credit for the Church Study Course Awards Program.
4. Guide deacons to complete the requirements for the Deacon Ministry Diploma and the Advanced Deacon Ministry Diploma.
5. Participate in all deacon ministry activities.

Duties of the Fellowship Leader

1. Lead in planning and providing fellowship activities that increase team spirit among deacons and their spouses.
2. Lead deacons to discover ways they can contribute to improving the church's fellowship
3. Order needed resources for fellowship improvement activities.
4. Participate in all deacon ministry activities.

Duties of the Family Ministry Leader

1. Lead in organizing deacon family ministry groups. Coordinate the Deacon Family Ministry Plan.
2. Give monthly or quarterly reports to the church of deacon ministries to church families.



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3. In the absence of a training associate, take the lead in providing training opportunities for deacons, their spouses, and other persons involved in the Deacon Family Ministry Plan.
4. Participate in all deacon work.

Duties of the Ministry Plans Leader

1. Lead in developing plans for the three Pastoral Ministries program tasks of lead, proclaim, and care. Each deacon ministry plan should include at least one project in each of these three areas.
2. Interpret and report regularly to the church concerning the various deacon ministry plans.
3. Work with the training associate in providing training to enable deacons to carry out each ministry plan project.
4. Participate in all deacon work.

Duties of Leaders in Each Plan Area

- If the deacon body is large enough, the deacon organization could include a separate Leadership Plan leader, Proclamation Plan leader, and Care Plan leader. These person would be responsibility for doing the work of the ministry plan leader, but in more specific ways.

Planning Effective Deacon Ministry

When the appropriate organizational structure has been chosen and deacon officers have been elected, the deacon group is ready to begin its work of planning. The scope of the planning task covers the general needs of deacons and the specific projects chosen in each of the three areas of lead, care and proclaim. The book *Deacon Ministry Planning Guide* shows how deacons can do effective planning.

Who Should Do the Planning?

The deacon chairperson assumes the lead, but he does not do the planning alone. Initial planning for deacon work can be done with the various deacon officers. A better approach is to involve the entire deacon group in planning sessions. Be sure to invite the pastor to attend any planning session.

Here are some guidelines for doing effective planning.

1. *Plan from ends to means.* That is, determine deacon ministry priorities and goals first. Then decide which steps are necessary to help the deacon group achieve those priorities and goals. My travels as the national deacon ministry consultant have taught me the wisdom of planning from ends to means. The city I am in determines the kinds of transportation I use when I am in that city. If I am in New York, for example, I can use a bus, taxi, subway, or train. Knowing where and when I need to be determines which of these transportation methods I use.
2. *Involve all deacons in planning.* Involvement by all deacons increases commitment to the plans made. Don't you enjoy looking at pictures of your own children or grandchildren more



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than you enjoy looking at pictures of someone else's kids? in like manner, few of us get excited about achieving someone else's goals or plans.

3. *Be objective in the planning process.* Be open to new ideas and to the suggestions of other deacons. Guard against traditional ideas and preconceived notions about deacon work. The attitude that says "do not disturb me with the facts, my mind is made up" destroys effective planning.
4. *Keep the planning simple.* Try not to schedule unnecessary meetings or develop lengthy processes that complicate the planning.
5. *Allow for flexibility.* Adjust plans made as time passes by. In one church I pastored, three years of planning work went by before our church arrived at a workable deacon election procedure. During those three years, the deacons suggested and the church adopted a yearly deacon reorganization plan. As new information and needs arise, plans can be adjusted to need the changing times.
6. *Coordinate all deacon plans with the Church Council.* This is the reason the chairperson of deacons serves on the Church Council. The calendar of deacon ministry plans will need to be coordinated with the calendar plans of the church's various program directors.
7. *Evaluate plans made at least twice a year.* Times of evaluation allow deacon groups to ask. What is working well? What is not working well? What adjustments should we make?

What Areas of Deacon Work Should be Planned?

Planning will take place for a wide variety of deacon activities. Any ministry need highlighted as a priority need becomes the subject of careful planning. And from year to year, the following areas always will require planning.

1. *Deacons meetings.* Deacon ministry is not accomplished totally during deacons meetings. These meetings, however, are important for fellowship, for encouragement, for reporting, for training, and for coordinating ministry plans and activities.

Deacons meetings need not become personnel committee meetings or finance committee meetings. Hopefully, the church already has elected committees to take care of personnel and financial matters. Any time the deacons meet, they should assemble as a spiritual, ministry-oriented team. the tone and the agenda of the meeting reflect this spirit. The deacon chairperson assumes responsibility for planning deacons meetings agendas. The agenda of any deacons meeting will reflect the priorities and understandings of the deacons about their ministry role.

I have known many deacons who, when the church adopted a ministry (rather than management) concept of deacon ministry, stopped attending deacons meetings. These deacons felt the meeting would not offer them anything worthwhile. But a well-



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planned meeting and a written agenda given in advance of the meeting help deacons like these mentioned to see the value of deacons meetings.

Some suggestions for developing an agenda are:

- Involve the pastor and other deacon officers in the preparation of the agenda.
- Mail a copy of the agenda, along with a copy of the previous meeting's minutes, to each deacon in advance of the meeting.
- Give careful thought to the place and time of the meeting. (See *deacon Ministry Planning Guide* for ideas on time and place for deacons meetings.)

Suggested Deacons Meeting Agenda*

1. Devotion (by a deacon) and prayer time.
2. Reading and approval of minutes from previous meeting.
3. Sharing of ministry reports
 - Celebrating accomplishments
 - Discussing special needs and concerns
 - Praying for these needs and concerns.
4. Training period (see the resource *Deacon Ministry Planning Guide* for training suggestions).
5. Pastor's period in which he shares matters of interest to the deacons.
6. Information period in which are given reports from the church staff, Church Council, and other leaders about various areas of church life
7. Discussion period (items listed on the agenda in priority order)
8. Prayer

*** This agenda generally require two hours of time.**

2. *Deacon ministry plans.* Detailed plans in the three previously mentioned plan areas (Leadership Plan, Proclamation plan, and Care Plan) represent priority needs in deacon planning. Read the chapters in this book that focus on each of the three plan areas. Then develop both long-term and short-term projects for each of the three areas. At times in the church's life, more concentration will be called for in one of the three areas than in the other two. During the course of time, however, strive for balance in all three areas. *Deacon Ministry Planning Guide* contains project suggestions and worksheets for each of the three plan areas.
3. *Deacon training.* If the deacon organization calls for a training



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associate, this person would assume responsibility for planning for training sessions. Plan training opportunities for an entire year. Some of the training will be done through individual study, while other training will be accomplished as a group. Some training will be provided during deacons meetings, while some training might be offered during the Discipleship Training hour. Some training will occur as deacons attend associational, state, and national deacon ministry conferences.

If the church has no training associate, the chairperson assumes responsibility for training deacons. Make sure training events selected are placed on the church's calendar in coordination with the Church Council.

An essential training method for any size church would be the individual study done by deacons as they work toward the Deacon Ministry Diploma and the Advanced Deacon Ministry Diploma through the Church Study Course Awards Program.²

4. *Deacon election and ordination.* When planning these two areas of concern, follow the suggestions found in Chapter 2, "Electing and Ordaining Qualified Deacons." Planning for deacon election and ordination always is done with the pastor and always follows the church's established procedures. While deacons never should become a self-perpetuating group, they can take the initiative to enable the deacon election and ordination time to become a positive, spiritual experience for the church.

A Suggested Planning Guide

The following nine steps become the guide for all deacon planning. More detail on each of these steps can be found in *Deacon Ministry Planning Guide*.

- Step 1: Relate to church objectives.
- Step 2: Develop deacon ministry concerns.
- Step 3: Discover deacon ministry needs.
- Step 4: Establish priority needs.
- Step 5: Set ministry goals.
- Step 6: Plan and schedule actions.
- Step 7: Provide the organization to accomplish actions.
- Step 8: Order needed resources.
- Step 9: Evaluate periodically.

Understanding Deacon Rotation

"Isn't rotation of deacons just a way to get rid of a deacon with whom the pastor disagrees?" I thought deacons were elected for life?" This comment was voiced by a deacon during a recent conference I led. This deacon's question shows the confusion that continues to exist about deacon rotation. The reason I have chosen to discuss deacon rotation in this chapter is because this subject (rotation) affects the deacon organization and must be planned carefully.



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Many churches in the Southern Baptist Convention practice some system of deacon rotation. Most of the churches using a rotation system limit deacons to a three-year term with one year in reserve status. Some churches using the Deacon Family Ministry Plan have begun to use a four-year rotation cycle. Other churches follow what could be called modified system of deacon rotation.

Merits of Deacon Rotation

1. *Provides a broader base of leadership, enabling more qualified persons to serve their church as deacons.* Deacon groups who rotate prevent themselves from becoming stagnant in their vision or cliquish in their attitude. Usually, when I have asked deacon groups without a rotation plan how they involve new people, many have answered, "When we see a need for it." Usually, the "we" refers to the deacons who currently serve. Most churches would benefit greatly from a deacon rotation system.
2. *Provides a way for deacons who no longer want to serve to retire with grace.* Some deacons come to the point in their Christian walk when they want to do other things in the church. Their life-styles require change. Their job or work schedules change. In many churches there is not a way for deacons to "bow out" gracefully. What happens in this case is that the deacons who want to bow out just stop serving and attending deacons meetings while still holding the title of deacon. I have met numerous deacons who welcomed the opportunity that rotation offered to have a natural, quiet way no longer to serve.
3. *Provides a way for deacons to renew themselves spiritually for greater ministry effectiveness.* Ministry, when done right, is exhausting work. Especially is this true when a deacon holds more than one place of responsibility in the church. A year away from deacon work guards against burnout.
4. *Provides for a continually effective Deacon Family Ministry Plan.* Deacon rotation allows deacons the opportunity to change their ministry assignments. Some families require more ministry than others. And some deacons approach their ministry with families with greater zeal than do other deacons. Unless the church changes family assignments about every three years, there is the likelihood that some families will not receive the care they need from deacons. A deacon rotation system becomes a natural way for new family ministry assignments to be made.
5. *Provides the church the opportunity to replace those deacons who, because of age, infirmity, or loss of interest, have become inactive and ineffective.* In this way, a rotation system builds accountability into deacon work. The deacons know that every three years or so the church will review their effectiveness in deacon ministry. Rotation emphasizes that deacon ministry is not just an honorary role.
6. *Provides the church with safeguards against the "board of directors" mentality among deacons.* Usually this approach to deacon work in a church comes about as the same deacons continue to serve year after year after year.



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Guidelines for Deacon Rotation

The decision whether to have a rotation system is a decision to be made by the church, not the deacons. Remember, deacons are accountable to the church. While deacons will be involved in the process of deciding whether there should be a rotation system, they refrain from making decisions for the church.

1. Make this decision carefully and patiently. Strong emotions against a rotation system might be voiced by some deacons and some members of the church. Help all parties involved understand what rotation is and why it is needed. Allow for full discussion about this matter.
2. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages for the church. One obvious disadvantage is the loss of some faithful deacons for a period of one year. The size of the church and the number of qualified people also affect the decision whether to adopt a deacon rotation plan.
3. Determine the number of deacons needed by the church. If a church is beginning from mission status and has not deacons, a guideline of one deacon for every fifty members seems to serve many churches well. As the church grows, the number of deacons could be set on the basis of one deacon for every ten church families.

Deacon Rotation Schedule

The deacon rotation schedule calls for deacons to serve a three-year period and then serve one year in reserve status before being eligible to rejoin the active deacon ministry team. Some churches have adopted a four-year rotation because of the needs of the Deacon Family Ministry Plan.

Some other churches operate on the basis of the three-year schedule, but do not require one year on reserve status. In these churches the deacon would be eligible for immediate reelection subject to the regular election process. This modification allows for some of the advantages of the rotation system and eliminates some disadvantages. No schedule, however, will be free from some difficulties or devoid of some disadvantages.

After the plan begins, the matter of those who rotate in a given year is a simple matter. How do you begin the process?

1. Using the church's regular procedure for electing deacons, conduct the vote.
2. After the group has been elected, let the group draw for years of service. This method is not the only one used but seems to offer the fewest possibilities for problems and confusion.

Record of Deacon Rotation

Accurate records are essential for administering a deacon rotation system. The secretary of the deacons has the responsibility for establishing and



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maintaining the official list. In a church with a church secretary, this person can be enlisted to assist in this task.

The secretary of deacons should provide the deacon nominating committee and the chairperson of deacons a list of those deacons whose time for rotation to reserve status has come. Consider planning a special recognition service for these individuals for the ministry they have rendered to the church.

¹ Charles Treadway, *Deacon Chairman Planning Guide* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1978).

² For information about deacon ministry diplomas write: Pastor-Staff Leadership Department, 127 Ninth Avenue, North, Nashville, TN 37234.