

# Serving as Deacon

*Deacons are people persons.*

## Introduction

For those who love people and want to follow in the ministry of Jesus Christ, there is no better leadership role to assume than that of deacon in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). As the *Book of Order* notes, “The ministry of deacon as set forth in Scripture is one of compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Christ Jesus for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress. Persons of spiritual character, honest repute, exemplary lives, brotherly and sisterly love, sincere compassion, and judgment should be chosen for this ministry” (G-2.0201).

Traditionally, deacons are people persons. Their hearts go out to those in distress, to members who have suffered loss, to neighbors in the hospital, to prisoners, to friends who have lost their jobs, to new parents who are confused by a wonderful, sudden, and challenging change in the responsibilities of life, to new members who need a word of welcome, and to members who are shut in and lonely and cannot leave their homes. They long to help people in the community who have lost their way and can no longer find God, those who are economically oppressed and do not have adequate places to live or enough to eat, and any person who needs to experience the love of Christ in concrete ways.

Clearly deacons are not the only Presbyterians who provide these ministries of compassion and service. All Christians are charged to love their neighbors and care for one another. But the deacons provide an *organized* way of bringing the love of Jesus Christ to the church and the community. Deacons, by assisting the pastor(s) in pastoral care, by working closely with the session to bring justice to the village, town, or city where they are located, by taking seriously the admonition to love one another from the heart (1 Pet. 1:22) and to fulfill the command of Jesus to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12), providing ways for the whole world to experience and see the love of God.



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## Biblical Background

After the positions of apostle and elder, the position of deacon was one of the first ones established by the New Testament church. According to Acts 6, the early Christians faced an enviable problem of church growth. Disciples were increasing in number, and the Hellenists (Greek-speaking Christians, in contrast to those who came from an Aramaic or Hebrew background) complained that their people were being short-changed in a ministry that had been established to distribute food. The twelve disciples of Jesus (by this time Judas Iscariot had been replaced by Matthias; see Acts 1:23–26) called a meeting of the church leaders and it was decided that a new group of seven should be chosen to “wait on tables” (*diakonein trapezais*) so that the others could continue in the work of preaching and praying. It is not a coincidence that all of the first deacons (*diakonoi*) had Greek names. Obviously it was true already in the first century: if you complain you get the job! The fact that the leader of the initial group of deacons (Stephen) was stoned to death for teaching and preaching demonstrates that from the start the church had more in mind for them than menial tasks.

It is an interesting phenomenon that the early church decided to give one of its most important groups of church leaders a mundane, commonplace name. In the modern world we would no doubt want people to feel important in their new position and provide a dignified title, something like social service provider, caring minister, or enabling

coach. But the church chose the title *diakonos*, which, in its most literal sense, means a person who serves food to other people in a home or a restaurant, perhaps even “slave.” Since their duties required them to meet the needs of others, even washing travelers’ feet, it was not the most enviable of jobs.

Why did the early church choose such a humble title for new leaders? Obviously they took it from the ministry and example of Jesus Christ, who taught his disciples that whoever wants to be first in the kingdom of God must be the servant of all (Mark 9:35; see Isa. 53 and the concept of the Suffering Servant).

The Gospels tell us repeatedly that Jesus called attention to the exalted status that comes from service.

- “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.” (Mark 10:43)
- “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)
- “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.” (John 12:26)
- “Servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.” (John 13:16; see Matt. 10:24; Luke 6:40)

The earliest written reference in the New Testament to the role of deacons (*diakonoi*) is found in Philippians 1:1, where Paul greets them along with the bishops (*episkopoi*). A later writer (1 Tim. 3:8–13) provides the first list of personal qualifications that were required of deacons. (See the discussion of this passage in “Qualifications” below.)

Throughout the New Testament service to God (*diakonia*) is considered to be a central characteristic of those dedicated to being Jesus’ disciples. Paul indicates that beyond the fact that Stephen was one of the first deacons, his whole family “devoted themselves to the service of the saints” (1 Cor. 16:15). For the early Christians several spiritual traits were all bound together: service, love, faith, and patient endurance (Rev. 2:19). As Paul puts it in a well-known passage in 1 Corinthians 12:1–31, “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” The different gifts (*charismata*), services (*diakonein*), and action items (*energēmata*) all provide energy, enthusiasm, and power for the church “for the common good.”

Deacons and other leaders are called not to suit themselves or to make themselves look good but only to serve the Lord and the unity of the one church, for the purpose

of interpreting the faith, healing the sick, prophecy, or providing spiritual discernment. God appoints different people to perform various tasks within the church (see a list in 1 Cor. 12:27–31), but the things they have in common are orders from the same God and the same desire to serve the body of Christ. Service is a characteristic not just of the deacon but of the apostle (Rom. 11:13; 2 Cor. 4:1; 6:3–4; Acts 1:17, 25), the evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5), those who are missionaries (2 Tim. 4:5), and even angels (Heb. 1:14, “Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?”). It is a requirement of anyone who follows Jesus.

## Responsibilities

The board of deacons might be described as “the caring arm of the church.” Most Americans are incredibly busy, and even church members may forget to regard one another with genuine concern and love. It is a regrettable fact that in churches of all sizes, members and friends can be absent from worship without being missed or can go through an illness, a family tragedy, or a financial crisis without getting the comfort and attention they need. At such times, it is often necessary for the deacons to step forward in an organized way to marshal the love and concern of the whole congregation to help members endure pain and tragedy.

In addition to ministering to members who need special pastoral care and welcoming new members, deacons may also (see G-2.0202)

- lead the congregation in worship and assist with the Lord’ Supper;
- serve as the stewardship committee, or as is the case in many congregations in the former PCUS church, take on some trustee functions;
- handle educational tasks;
- or assume special duties delegated by the session.

If congregations decide not to have a board of deacons, all the functions of the ordered ministry will be the responsibility of the ruling elders and the session.

In many congregations, the deacons facilitate congregational ministry by dividing the church membership into zones (often along geographical lines), with one deacon responsible for each zone. In such cases, a deacon is asked to maintain contact with the individuals and families within an assigned area to make sure that they are attending church regularly, find out if they have an understanding of the ongoing mission, goals, and objectives of the congregation, and determine whether or not there



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Deacons, of course, often take on many other ministries of compassion and service. In some congregations the deacons serve as ushers to greet all members when they attend worship. They work with the elders and pastors to serve the Lord's Supper on a regular basis. They may act as lay readers or liturgical assistants during the services of worship.

Deacons may be the ones who organize prayer chains through which members pray for one another in times of crisis or opportunity, or work with the Christian education committee or the adult education program to provide classes introducing members to service possibilities in the church and community.

The board of deacons may also be in charge of sending annual care packages to college students away from home for the first time. Individual members of the board may be responsible for keeping in touch with all college and seminary students and with members in the military on a regular basis.

In many congregations, direct assistance to senior citizens is part of the deacon portfolio. Deacons provide monthly visits to shut-ins or members who cannot regularly attend services of worship. Some churches also put on monthly or quarterly dinners or luncheons for older members so that they may enjoy fellowship together and benefit from Bible study and programs of interest. Frequently, transportation is offered to all church events for those who cannot drive, and rides are organized for members requiring visits to doctors and dentists or hospital treatment on a regular basis. Dinners are often brought to families who have loved ones who are ill or have passed away.

In some congregations the deacons arrange for free home-repair service staffed by volunteers from the church. For people who are elderly or on a limited budget, it is very comforting to know that someone they can trust is on call to help with plumbing and electrical repairs, or that members are willing to help with small painting and decorating jobs.

## Qualifications

Deacons are ordained leaders in the church, and it is important that members with sufficient personal spiritual maturity and experience in the local congregation are elected to such an important position. The board of deacons is not a training ground for new members or an introduction to the Christian faith for new Christians. The author of 1 Timothy 3:8–13 makes it clear that those chosen must have impeccable qualifications and be of the highest moral character. The requirements are daunting.

are any outstanding needs that the church can or should address. In some cases it means nothing more than a frequent phone call to keep in touch and listening to concerns or complaints about the church. On occasion it requires a personal visit or lunch together to share and discuss matters that are of deep personal concern to the member. Often people are reluctant to reveal their problems to relatives, neighbors, and friends, and it may be that the deacons or the pastors are the only ones they dare trust. Occasionally, in really tough situations, deacons will be asked to provide critical advice (working with the pastor or other professionals if necessary), recommending a physician, a financial advisor, an attorney, an accountant, a pastoral counselor, a psychotherapist, or a psychiatrist. Because this last responsibility is difficult and somewhat frightening for some church leaders, the board of deacons often includes regular training sessions in its meetings that are lead by medical, mental health, or legal experts so that deacons can be prepared for any eventuality when they meet with members of the congregation.

In some churches the deacons also work independently or with the evangelism or new member committees to help welcome new people into the church. One of the most common complaints visitors have about any congregation is, "I went to church last Sunday and not one person greeted me." The deacons can help church members find organized ways to meet and greet visitors and make them feel welcome in the church family. Whether visitors come because they have just moved into the area, are looking for a new church home, are seeking to renew their faith in Jesus Christ, or are looking for God and for Christian fellowship for the first time, a friendly greeting, a genuine desire to know a new person, and a careful follow-up can make visitors know that they are in a place where caring and love really are the top priorities. Deacons may also function as the stewardship committee in some churches or may work with the session committee assigned the duty of challenging the congregation to share and pledge their time, talents, and income at the time of the annual stewardship drive.

Deacons . . . must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them first be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons. Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things. (vv. 8-11)

These qualifications are discussed in detail in chapter 3 of my book *The Presbyterian Deacon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

## Possibilities for Ministry in the Future

As we enter the beginning of the twenty-first century, and society and the world change at explosive and exponential speeds, it is possible that the role of deacons may have to change in some radical ways. When churches decrease in size or face overwhelming financial problems, for example, deacons may be called to take on some of the duties of pastors if meaningful ministry is to continue. Or the board may work with the worship committee to help the church become wired as new technology is used in worship and parish communication. In other congregations, deacons may see the need to advocate for those who are in crisis or suffering injustice (when no one else will stand up for them), work actively for peacemaking when violence is often the most common response

to conflict, become primary promoters of environmental justice in a world that faces radical threats to our health and our planet, or become involved in the organization of frontline response teams to deal with increasingly common natural and human-caused disasters, to mention a few possibilities. If deacons really are people persons and represent the heart of the church, then there is almost no limit to what they might do together in the name of the compassion and justice of Jesus Christ. As those called by him to care for others, they are only limited by their own imaginations and the direction given them by the Holy Spirit.

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### About the Writer

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### Publisher's Note

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