

THE DEACON AS SERVANT-LEADER

This workshop will encourage deacons to replace managerial models with a servant-leadership understanding of the diaconate. The workshop begins with an exploration of the biblical background, giving particular attention to the service-oriented occurrences of “deacon” and cognate words terms. The workshop also offers opportunities for contextualization, inviting participants to explore avenues through which they can exercise their servant-leadership ministries.

PURPOSE

This workshop is designed for use in congregations, associational or regional training events, or retreats. It is suitable for prospective deacons, new deacons, and experienced deacons, as well as for groups that are evaluating congregational structure. If you are using the study with individual diaconates, you will probably need to do the small-group work as a single group or in pairs.

TIME FRAME: 2 hours with one 10-minute break

BASIC WORKSHOP OUTLINE

I Introduction (*15 minutes*)

II Review Biblical Background (*30 minutes*)

Break (*10 minutes*)

III Explore Opportunities for Service (*50 minutes*)

IV Introduce the Provisional Deacon Program (*10 minutes*)

V Summary and Response (*5 minutes*)

PREPARATION AND MATERIALS

- Arrange for drinks and snacks for break time.
- Make copies of handouts for each participant.
- newsprint and markers
- pencils and paper
- box for evaluations
- You will need a space large enough for participants to move chairs around for small groups.
- If you wish to use Power Point for this presentation, use the text selection tool in Adobe Acrobat to cut and paste the material you want to present on Power Point.

CONDUCTING THE WORKSHOP

Note: Information for the leader to share or paraphrase appears in italics.

I Introduction (15 minutes)

Welcome the participants and share or summarize the following:

One of the great privileges in our Baptist tradition is the opportunity to serve as a deacon. The deacon is the backbone of the local church and has been throughout our history. The invitation to be a deacon is a signal stamp of approval by the congregation. It is also a call to service in the congregation and in the wider church. Deacons are not governors or rulers of the local congregation, but are its servants. The understanding of leadership as service must be maintained in order to make the office of deacon workable. This workshop is designed to familiarize you with the scope and nature of the deacon's role and to offer some practical insight on the diaconate in the light of the New Testament.

Invite participants to introduce themselves and ask each person to briefly share their reason for participating in this workshop.

Ask participants to spend some time thinking about their understandings of the deacons' role. Allow some time for thinking before asking for responses. You may want to provide paper and pencils for those who "think" best with writing. The following questions may be helpful to your discussion:

- Why did you agree to become a deacon?
- What were your expectations of the role?
- Where did you get those expectations?
- How was the role described to you?
- Do you recall any deacons who had an impact (positive or negative) in your life?
- What disappointments or pleasant surprises have you encountered since becoming a deacon? Or, if you are not a deacon, what disappointments or pleasant surprises have you experienced from members of your deacon board?

Distribute Handout A, "To Deacon or Not to Deacon," and read off each entry, inviting participants to vote "yes" or "no" to indicate whether or not they think each activity is appropriate to the diaconate.

II Review Biblical Background (30 minutes)

Ask participants to form four small groups and distribute copies of Handout B, "The Biblical Background of the Diaconate." Encourage participants from the same church to work in the same group. Review the introduction on the handout, then assign each group one section and explain that their task is to review the identified texts in light of a

“leadership as service” understanding. Provide newsprint and markers. Give the groups 15 minutes to review the texts and prepare to report in whatever way works for them.

Reconvene and invite the groups to report. Encourage discussion and questions and in particular ask participants to contrast the servant-leadership model with models that are found in business and politics. Revisit Handout A, “To Deacon or Not to Deacon,” and ask if anyone has changed his or her opinion about any of the tasks listed in that handout.

Break (10 minutes)

Invite participants to take a ten-minute break. Ask them to return directly to their small groups immediately following the break. Use the break time to set up for the next steps of the workshop. Provide newsprint and markers and distribute copies of Handouts C, D, and E to the small groups.

III Explore Opportunities for Service (50 minutes)

Convene in small groups and remind participants of the following points:

- Unlike some other denominations, the office of deacon in a Baptist church is not a representative governmental function.
- The implications of this distinction mean that it is not the place of the diaconate to oversee the business of the church, to serve a managerial function, or to handle oversight of the church staff.
- The functions of the deacon need to be viewed in terms of service to the congregation and the wider community.

Review together Handout C, “Functions of the Diaconate,” emphasizing the four identified categories of diaconate work: ordinances, worship, spiritual care, and outreach. Spend some time discussing (either as a whole or in the small groups) the following questions:

- What does your deacon board currently do that is in keeping with the servant-leadership model?
- Can you see your deacon board welcoming the service understanding of their role? Why or why not?
- What challenges do you see to helping transform your deacon board into a servant-leader group?
- Are there expectations held by church officers or the membership that might interfere with adopting a servant-leader model for the work of the deacons?
- How might you begin to make changes that will move your deacon board toward this biblical model of the diaconate?
- What kind of training might be valuable for deacons to prepare them to embrace these roles?

Review the instructions for Handouts D, “Deacon Family Care Ministry” and E, “Deacon Outreach Projects,” and allow 20 minutes for groups to complete their work. Reconvene and ask each group to report on how they modified or expanded the ministry descriptions.

IV Introduce the Provisional Deacon Program (*10 minutes*)

Distribute Handout F, “A Provisional Deacon Program,” and explain that the program takes seriously the admonition in 1 Timothy 3:10 that a person should be tested before assuming the office of deacon. It also offers potential deacons the opportunity to discover whether they are gifted for this ministry before making a long-term commitment.

Invite discussion on the feasibility of the Provisional Deacon Program and what it would take to institute such a program in participants’ churches. Ask for suggestions of alternative approaches to strengthening the diaconate.

V Summary and Response (*5 minutes*)

Distribute Handout G, “Selected Bibliography,” and explain that ongoing education is valuable for all church offices and that this bibliography identifies some helpful resources. Encourage participants to make ongoing training for deacons a priority.

Invite final comments from participants and point out the paper, pencils, and box for persons to anonymously submit evaluative comments on the workshop.

Thank participants for their involvement in the workshop and for their commitment to strengthening the diaconate in their churches. Close the session with a prayer or hymn.

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TO DEACON OR NOT TO DEACON

Vote “yes” if you think the task is appropriate to the diaconate and “no” if you think it is not appropriate to the diaconate.

- 1. determining the church budget*
- 2. hiring a church custodian*
- 3. developing a spiritual growth program for the congregation*
- 4. calling on non-attending members*
- 5. previewing motions to be considered at a business meeting*
- 6. evaluating the pastor’s work*
- 7. hospital visitation*
- 8. forming a nominating committee for church officers*
- 9. securing pulpit supply*
- 10. leading the church in community celebrations*
- 11. conducting a family care ministry*
- 12. instituting a stewardship program*
- 13. taking communion to shut-ins*
- 14. planning worship events*
- 15. assisting in baptism or the Lord’s Supper*
- 16. doing community service projects*
- 17. engaging in outreach to the unchurched*

THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND OF THE DIACONATE

There are only five instances in the New Testament where the word *diakonos* (servant) is used to refer to an office. In Philippians 1:1 Paul greets the *episcopois* and the *diakonois*, which are references to the pastors and deacons. In I Timothy 3:8-12 the qualifications of the deacons, both men and women, are enumerated, but nothing is said of their duties or functions. There is no linguistic necessity for translating *guna*, in verse 11, as “wives” as does the KJV, since Paul uses it as a general term for “woman” in Galatians 4:4. There is a greater probability of this being the instruction for women deacons. The only other time a person referred to as a deacon is in the addendum to the book of Romans at 16:1, where the woman Phoebe is called a “deacon in the church at Chenchrea.” Here the use of the masculine substantive to refer to a woman seems to make it clear that this was an official title, not the “servant” used to translate the word in KJV. Some modern translations use the term “deaconess,” but this is also not justified in the light of the wording. She is the only one who bears the title of “deacon” in the New Testament, since the Seven in Acts 6:1-6 are never called deacons, although their choice by the church at Jerusalem may be the precursor of the establishment of the office of deacon. There has been a long discussion as to whether these seven represent deacons at all. Their careers following their selection to serve speaks heavily against calling them “deacons”; however, in Acts 6:2, they are said to *diakoneo*, which means “serve” at tables.

Other occurrences of the Noun *Diakonos* for “the Person who Serves”:

1. “The table servant”—John 2:5 and John 2:9
2. “The servant of the king”—Matthew 22:13
3. “The servants of Christ”—John 12:26 and Mark 9:35
4. “The servants of Satan”—2 Corinthians 11:15
5. Paul as “a servant of Christ”—2 Corinthians 11:23 (cf. Paul as “doulos,” “slave”) and Philippians 1:1
6. Timothy as a “servant of God”—1 Thessalonians 3:1-3
7. Epaphras as a “servant of the Apostles”—Colossians 1:7
8. Tychicus as a “servant in the Lord”—Ephesians 6:21 and Colossians 4:7
9. The one in civil authority as “servant of God”—Romans 13:4

The occurrences of the noun *diakonia*, “the act of service”:

1. “Waiting on tables”—Luke 10:40
2. “Service of love”—1 Corinthians 16:15 and Revelations 2:9
3. “Service in the church”—Ephesians 4:12, 1 Corinthians 12:5, and Acts 6:4 (serving the word)
4. “The service of the Law and the Gospel”—2 Corinthians 3:7-9
5. “Service in an office in the church”—Romans 11:13, 2 Corinthians 4:1, Acts 1:17, & 2 Timothy 4:15
6. “The service of giving”—Romans 15:30 and 2 Corinthians 8:4

The occurrences of the verb *diakoneo*, “to serve”:

1. “To wait on tables”—Luke 17:8 and John 12:2
2. “To supervise the serving of meals”—Acts 6:2, Luke 10:40, and Mark 1:31
3. “To be of service”—Luke 8:3 and Matthew 25:43 (cf. Matthew 27:55)
4. “To serve in the faith community”—1 Peter 4:10-11 and 2 Timothy 1:18
5. “To take up a collection”—2 Corinthians 8:19
6. “To serve in the office of a deacon”—1 Timothy 3:10 and 1 Timothy 3:13

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FUNCTIONS OF THE DIACONATE

The work of the diaconate fits into four basic categories. These are:

Ordinances: helping with baptism and the Lord's Supper

Worship: working with the pastor to oversee the many aspects of the worship life of the church

Spiritual care: nurturing the spiritual development of church members and providing care during times of crisis

Outreach: caring for those in need in the church, in the community, and around the world, and addressing social concerns

Review the functions in the list below. Identity those that make sense for your context and add others at the bottom of the list.

- preparing baptismal candidates
- preparing for baptismal services and assisting at baptism
- preparing and serving the Lord's Supper
- ensuring a welcoming worship space
- working with the pastor to plan and conduct special worship events
- serving in community organizations to plan ecumenical worship events
- making sure the pulpit is filled when the pastor is not available
- serving as liaisons between visitors or new members and the church
- formally welcoming new members into the fellowship
- home and hospital visitation
- serving communion to the home-bound
- visitation to the unchurched
- administration of a benevolence fund
- leadership of prayer groups
- strategizing spiritual nurture within the congregation
- developing ministries to serve special needs, such as after-school programs and food banks
- issuing statements to the community on issues, such as poverty, injustice, and violence

DEACON FAMILY CARE MINISTRY

One common means of implementing the servant functions of the diaconate within the church is by the use of a program of family ministry. Review the following outline and discuss how you might adapt this family care program to meet your congregation's needs.

I. Survey Needs: A complete review is made of the church roll, as well as those families related to the church but whose names do not appear on the roll. Family groups are divided into clusters corresponding to the number of deacons with a balance of active and inactive members in each cluster. Families with special needs are noted, with the area of need explained.

Clusters can be organized alphabetically, geographically, or according to any grouping that makes sense in your context. One cluster is then assigned to each deacon. A simple procedure for preventing deacons from being assigned to immediate families is to arrange the groups alphabetically and then assign the deacons in reverse alphabetical order. Minor changes are then made to keep deacons from being responsible for extended family and to address issues of compatibility.

II. Assign Oversight: One person is placed in a position of accountability for the operation of the deacon's family care ministry. The assigned person keeps a record of the ministry of the individual deacons, receiving reports of visitation. Additionally this person serves as a confidante, discussing concerns and helping each deacon evaluate his or her ministry. This oversight person should, therefore, be an experienced deacon. This person should not be the pastor. In order to avoid overload of responsibility, it may be wise not to assign the oversight deacon his or her own cluster.

III. Identify Family Care Responsibilities: The diaconate decides what responsibilities the deacons will fulfill in family care so that each family receives comparable ministry. These responsibilities may include:

- visiting at the time of a death in the family
- visiting at the time of illness or hospitalization
- making inquiry as to needs in times of crisis, such as a fire, job loss or other financial crisis, legal trouble, or relationship breakup
- providing support during any transition, such as a move or the birth of a child
- alerting the pastor of special needs that may require pastoral care

IV. Keep Records: Each deacon keeps records of visits and shares these with the pastor and oversight deacon. It is crucial that families be made aware that information will be shared. Requests for confidentiality should be respected unless abuse or self-harm is taking place. Record keeping can be as simple as a card file or computer log. It is essential, however, that access to the records be restricted to preserve confidentiality.

V. Evaluate and Train: With help from the pastor or regional minister, the diaconate plans training for visitation, for development of listening skills, and for help in recognizing a situation that needs referral. The church year ends with a meeting to evaluate the ministry and reassign groups as needed.

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DEACON OUTREACH PROJECTS

The following list presents community service and outreach projects that might be part of the diaconal ministry. Review the list and identify those that seem appropriate for your community and/or add other potential projects that reflect your context. Consider identifying several projects for congregational discussion with the goal of selecting one project to begin at the beginning of the new church year. A flexible multiyear plan can help the board develop an effective ministry, while allowing responsiveness to unexpected situations.

1. **Adopt-a-building**—Adopt a senior citizen center, family violence shelter, or an animal rescue organization.
2. **A bookstore to support your benevolence fund**—Consider Judson Press’s Book Table ministry by visiting http://www.judsonpress.com/church_resources_book_table.cfm or calling 1-800-458-3766 to request a Book Table ministry brochure.
3. **Daycare**—Offer programs and support to developmentally disabled adults, people with Alzheimer’s, or preschool children.
4. **A community center**—Offer programs and support for teens, young adults, seniors, recovering addicts, or after-school programs.
5. **Family life ministry**—Offer parenting classes, retreats and respite for caregivers, parents’ night out, affordable recreation (such as movie nights), and low-cost holiday celebrations.
6. **Foster care support**—Provide training and encouragement to increase the number of much-needed foster care homes for children.
7. **Car and home care service**—Many older persons and persons living in poverty need help with car and home repairs. Enlist members and local businesses in providing reduced-cost help.
Consider initiating a barter program where people can offer their services in exchange for help.
8. **Housing improvement**—Initiate a community group to deal with code violations and unjust landlords and to work for affordable housing.
9. **Rent and utility assistance**—Help connect people with the right social service programs.
10. **Prison ministry**—Do visitation at nearby prisons or become a hospitality house for those who have to travel distances to visit incarcerated family members.
11. **Food pantry**—Provide support, donations, and assistance.

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A PROVISIONAL DEACON PROGRAM

This program is designed to put into practice the admonition of 1 Timothy 3:10 that a person should be tested before assuming the office of deacon. It also offers a potential deacon the opportunity to discover whether he or she is gifted for this ministry before making a long-term commitment.

The basic process unfolds as follows:

I. Persons are invited to serve as provisional deacons for a period of one year. Provisional deacons are selected in the same manner as other church officers.

II. During the year, the provisional deacon engages in an organized training program and functions alongside an experienced deacon-mentor. The training should include such things as Baptist history, beliefs, and polity; the role of a deacon; the theology of and basic processes related to conducting the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper; spiritual self-care; visitation opportunities; development of basic listening skills; and pertinent legal matters related to hospital confidentiality and protection of children.

III. The provisional deacon participates in the normal activities of the diaconate, attending meetings, doing visitation (at first) along with the deacon-mentor, helping with the ordinances, and working on community service projects.

IV. At the end of about three-quarters of the term, the provisional deacon, deacon-mentor, and pastor meet to discuss how things are going and whether or not the person feels called to this ministry. Together the committee will pray for discernment and come to consensus on whether the provisional deacon will seek a full term. The recommendations are then forwarded to the nominating committee.

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