



A Manual
for
Deacons and Deaconesses
of
Congregational Christian
Churches

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DEFINITION AND ELIGIBILITY

What are deacons?

Deacons are men who are elected to assist the pastor in helping the church to envision and achieve its spiritual possibilities. The specific functions and methods by which these objectives may be realized are more fully developed in subsequent sections of this outline.

What are deaconesses?

Deaconesses are women who are elected by a church to render spiritual and social service to the homes of the parish members in co-operation with the deacons. Their specific opportunities and responsibilities are also elaborated later.

Who may act?

Men or women who are church members in good standing and whose character and abilities are in harmony with the dignity and importance of these offices. Paul lists their qualifications as “Self-control, temperate, blameless, hospitable, conciliatory, managers and not lovers of money.”

In many churches, attention is being given to the inclusion of younger men on the Board of Deacons and to limitation of terms and rotation of service. This serves to keep the Board alert and progressive.

Some consideration might be given to the tactful solving of the problem of the elderly deacon whose infirmities make him an uncertain factor in the functioning of the Board but whose honor commands recognition and respect. Should an age be set when a deacon becomes inactive or is honored by emeritus status?

In some churches, young people of adolescent age are elected to serve as a Junior Board or Diaconate to further the spiritual interests of youth and for training in churchmanship and for later service as deacons and deaconesses.

In some churches, deacons and deaconesses are combined in one Board to co-operate in united service through various subcommittees.

II. THE TRADITION OF THE DEACON

The tradition of the deacon goes back to the New Testament Church when “men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom” were selected to assist the Apostles in the spiritual oversight of new converts and in the care of the needy. St. Paul refers to these as deacons, elders, overseers, and emphasizes high standards required of them.

Some denominations have emphasized the functions of oversight and management, and call these leaders “elders.” Congregational and other Christian churches have emphasized the fraternal and service activities. “Elders govern, deacons serve.”

In our early denominational life, to be elected a deacon was the highest honor that could be conferred upon a lay member of the church. In some churches it is still so considered, but in the majority the functions of the deacons have been so neglected and under-developed that the trustees, whose duties are more strictly material, have been accorded more recognition and honor.

In many churches, the deacon is the “forgotten man” and so inactive that one pastor wrote of his deacons: “When I’m dead and gone, let my deacons shed no tears, for I’ll be no deader than they have been for years.”

While in a democratic church all are servants without rank, there is great need for a resumption of the dignity and worth of the deacon’s office.

III. SIZE OF BOARD, LENGTH OF TERMS, AND NUMBER OF MEETINGS

It would seem that even a small church should have at least four deacons and a corresponding number of deaconesses. For churches larger than two hundred members, it may be well to add two of each for every extra two hundred members, with a limit of nine members each.

Terms are ordinarily three years, and so staggered as to leave two-thirds of the Board continuing each year. Many churches now limit continuous service to two terms, with a year’s interval before one can be eligible for re-election.

After giving honorable and meritorious service, a deacon may be elected a Deacon Emeritus and upon such election is entitled for life to all the privileges of a member of the Board of Deacons.

Meeting should be held regularly every month at a definite time and place, with such added meetings as may from time to time be necessary. (See suggested Agenda in Section X.)

IV. TRADITIONAL DUTIES OF DEACONS

1. Preparation and serving of the elements in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. In the preparation of the table, the deacons are usually assisted by their wives or by the deaconesses.

In most churches, the elements are served with such dignity and orderliness that careful training of the deacons is revealed. In others, it is so unplanned and erratic that the service is robbed of much of its impressiveness. Each Board of Deacons should be so well trained and disciplined that each member will know specifically what is expected of him at every point in the service and his activities so co-ordinated that the service proceeds with each, order and dignity.

2. In former days, the deacons joined the pastor to confer with candidates for membership and to determine whether the candidates would be recommended to the church for election to membership. In our informal trend this formality has been gradually neglected and in many churches is not observed. In the interest of recognition of the significance, worth, and dignity of church membership, and of impressing the candidates with the responsibilities involved in membership as well as

in their preparation for meeting those responsibilities, would it not be well for us to restore and emphasize this function of the deacons?

3. Most pastors have used their deacons as advisers on matters related to the spiritual progress of individual members and of the church as a whole. Too often, this service has been intermittent and limited largely to critical situations. It is the aim of this study to reveal and define the larger possibilities of this function.
4. It has been the responsibility of the deacons to attend to the supply of the pulpit during the absence of the pastor and during interims between pastorates. Where a special pastoral committee is not provided, the deacons have the responsibility of locating and recommending to the church a candidate for the pastorate.
5. It has been the custom of the deacons or deaconesses to receive and administer the funds collected at the communion Service or on other occasions for charitable uses. This function might well be elaborated and expanded. The private and confidential nature of the use of these funds should be kept in mind constantly.
6. In some churches, the deacons stand with the minister when members are received or the rite of Baptism is administered. Deacons often meet with the pastor for prayer just before morning worship.

Traditional duties of deaconesses

These have been largely limited to the discovery and meeting of the practical needs of parish families and to the distribution of the deacons' or deaconesses' funds in dispensing needed charities. Possibilities for the elaboration of personal and family parish service will be elaborated later in the discussion.

V. THE PERSONAL INFLUENCE OF THE DEACONS OR DEACONESSES

Election to either office is chiefly on the basis of Christian character. To maintain that ideal and tradition is a sacred obligation. However, this does not betoken frigidity nor dignified aloofness. A true deacon is a radiant, friendly soul, the impressive exponent of the abundant life. Children are attracted to him. Youth admire him and seek his understanding counsel. Adults seek to emulate his example. His Christianity is warmly contagious. His humility, sincerity, and kindness kindle the spark in other hearts.

The deaconess should possess the same qualities.

A. The deacon feeds his own soul

1. He maintains the discipline of daily devotional life. His Bible gathers no dust, but each day yields treasures new and old. He is familiar with the best devotional literature and has samples available to pass on to others.
2. He makes some adventures into the field of theology, gradually, of course, and under the tutelage of his pastor. He knows that the chief study of a competent churchman is God. If he is to help others know God, he will acquire the

vocabulary and the concepts that will help make God real to them. He will not let his pastor have any monopoly on theology.

3. In addition to his regular church attendance, he will be found in the district, state, and national meeting of his denomination and will take other laymen with him. He will not overlook interdenominational meetings.

The deaconess will do likewise.

B. *The deacon is a personal worker*

1. He has something to share. "The constraint of the Love of Christ" is upon him. He has a "concern."
2. He prepares himself. He seeks to master and perfect the most tactful and effective techniques of personal approach. The kindness of his contact will make it natural and not mechanical.
3. He will help his pastor enlist and train other men suited to personal work. Together they will meet for prayer, counsel, and encouragement.
4. Once the commitment is secured and church membership established, the deacon will see that his friend is made to feel at home and acquainted with the aids that will help him to become a competent churchman.
5. He will also take a personal interest in every member of the parish; in their successes and reverses, in their sorrows. He will be a *personal* worker.

VI. AS CHAMPIONS OF THE AUTHORITY AND DIGNITY OF THE CHURCH

"As Protestantism is now organized, the parish church depends largely for its dignity and influence and prosperity upon the personality, the character, and the ability of its ministry. In general it is true that what the minister is, that a given church is also There can be no question that Protestantism in our modern world would be made far more stable and secure by regaining the conception of the church as a divine organism, having a divine authority in its truth, its worship and its sacraments, and thus less dependent upon the personality and capacity of its ministers." ¹

We are greatly in need of some group which will recognize the divine origin and nature of the church. We need the lift of the conviction that the church is truly the body of Christ. This will take us beyond the human frailties of members and the limitations of leader to that which is in accord with the nature and purpose of Christ.

A. *Developing a more adequate concept of the church*

1. Enlist the aid of the pastor in classes, sermons and lectures on the church as a divine organism.

B. *Adopt practices which will transform the church into the body of Christ*

1. In training new members distinguish between the church in its frailties and the church of Christ's hope and vision.

2. Stress salvation as coming from God and vows as made unto him.
 3. Point up the privileges and responsibilities of church membership as from and to God, instead of man.
 4. Exalt worship as an appointment with God, not with the preacher, the choir, or our friends.
 5. Lift giving and service to the high plane of stewardship.
 6. Work on the principle that a God-centered church grows increasingly into a divine organism.
- C. *Present the sublime significance of the church to your youth so persuasively that they will volunteer for the ministry and other forms of Christian service with enthusiasm*
1. By enlisting the more likely candidates in a class to explore the challenge of the ministry in its various forms of leadership and relationships;
 2. By personal planting of timely suggestion;
 3. By occasional sermons on Christian leadership;
 4. By use of leaflets setting forth the appeal of the ministry;
 5. By arranging interviews and conferences with ministers;
 6. By working always to impress your church with its responsibility for recruiting Christian leaders. (How long since your church has produced a minister or missionary?)

VII. MORE AND BETTER CHURCH MEMBERS

Most church rolls are loaded with too many indifferent, inactive, and inefficient members. These greatly limit the power and effectiveness of the church. The pastor needs the help of his deacons and deaconesses at this point. Please discuss and evaluate the following suggestions:

A. *Improving the quality of church members*

1. *By lifting the quality of Christian commitment:*
 - a. In its relation to God, Christ, the kingdom, the Church;
 - b. By making it more intelligent and deeply felt;
 - c. By lifting its motivation and clarifying its purpose;
 - d. By exploring the implications of the principle and practice of stewardship.
2. *By making the possibilities of church membership attractive and appealing by presentation of:*
 - a. Its contribution to the basic human problem of reconciliation with God;
 - b. Its revelation of the possibilities of personal development;

- c. Assurance of the support to high purpose to be found in its worship and fellowship;
 - d. Convincing proof of the world influence of the church;
 - e. Thrilling interpretation of its possibilities for service.
3. *By defining the basic requirement of church membership:*
- a. Through emphasis of the church covenant.
(Congregational Christian churches have not stressed creedal tests by covenants of shared purpose have been our bases of fellowship. In what degree is your church covenant emphasized? Is it submitted to the member before he joins?)
 - b. In what degree should attendance, financial support, and acceptance of responsibility by emphasized as membership requirements? What vows are taken in your church?
 - c. Restore the former practice of meeting with candidates for membership to consider their commitment and to discuss with them the requirements of church membership.
(Should it be easy or difficult to join a church? Formerly, it was more difficult. Lately, the tendency has been to make it easy. Dr. Carl Patton said it should be easy to get into a church, but very difficult to stay in. Can the latter point be stressed unless stiffer requirements are made a condition of membership? Is the church a collection of saints or of candidates for the Christian way of life? It might awaken your church if you gave serious consideration to what the requirements for membership should be at this time.)
4. *By training for efficient participation in church life:*
- a. Through a minimum of two hours weekly of catechetical training for nine months, for youth, followed by confirmation. Instruction should include a history of the church, its doctrines, principles, policy, program, and organization.
 - b. Through similar training, possibly briefer, for adult candidates for church membership.
 - c. An annual School of the Church (three sessions or more) for instructing the congregation in the work of the Conference, General Council, Board of Home Missions, American Board, Council for Social Action, and the agencies of interdenominational co-operation, should be established.
 - d. Provide intensive training for all new officers, acquainting them with their duties and the latest methods of procedure.
 - e. Install officers impressively and give appreciative recognition of outstanding service.

- f. Provide for rotation of officers, limiting service to two terms with an interim of one year before re-election.
 - g. Make full use of churchmanship values in your state paper and *Advance*.
 - h. In co-operation with the pastor, make large use of the publications of the Commission on Evangelism and Devotional Life. There are great possibilities in the wealth of material available.
5. *By provision of "refresher" occasions:*
- a. Take full advantage of the growing emphasis on a well-planned Lenten program. (Work for one hundred percent use of the devotional booklet, *The Fellowship of Prayer*.)
 - b. Explore the larger use of the "Church Year."
(See "Modern Churchmanship." Make full use of the Church Activities Calendar, published by the Missions Council of the Congregational Christian Churches.)
 - c. Give your people the inspiration of denominational gatherings.
6. *By prompt attention to disaffection or indifference:*
- a. Through periodical check-up of membership.
 - b. Through prompt and kindly attention to specific cases, using the person most likely to be helpful, all of this being under the guidance of the pastor.

B. Increasing the number of church members

Every Board of Deacons and Deaconesses should feel a definite and urgent responsibility for recruiting new members. They should be constantly bringing to the attention of the pastor persons who have made commitments and are candidates for church membership. This Board might well be held responsible for a five percent increase in membership through their efforts, and for asking the pastor to be responsible for a five percent increase through his efforts. If this responsibility were more generally recognized we would soon remove the stigma of having so many churches which do not receive a single new member on confession during the year.

1. *By subtraction.* Many churches would be relatively stronger if they revised their roll to include only active and interested members. Deacons should feel responsible for the vitality of the church roll. Some members, though non-resident, may want to continue their membership for very good reasons. Members removed by such revision should be placed on an inactive roll subject to reinstatement if active status or a letter of transfer is desired. The majority of our churches would profit by a wise and considerate study of their membership rolls.
2. *By addition, using the following methods:*
 - a. The Preaching Mission, the modern mass evangelistic technique. While in our churches mass evangelism is under a cloud, experience shows that intensive presentation of the gospel values for two weeks does produce new commitments and deepens the spiritual life of the church.

- b. By use of lay evangelism in which, after training and organization, the laity seek commitments to the Christian life and church membership materials are available. Results are impressive.
- c. Closely related to the above method and widely used in our denomination is a period of parish visitation, one of whose objectives is securing commitments for the Christian life and church membership.
- d. Through development of a “prospect” list of candidates for Christian decision and church membership with assignments of personal approach to suitable persons. There should be a frequent check-up of this list and addition of new names.
- e. Some suggestions under Section “A” above apply here also.
- f. Since our churches so easily tend toward “class” appeal, we should broaden our base and work to reach more types of people.

**VIII. CALLING ALL DEACONS AND DEACONESSES TO
MAKE THEIR CHURCH FAMOUS AS
“THE FRIENDLY CHURCH”**

The church is essentially a fellowship.
Fellowship thrives on friendliness.
Friendliness attracts – Formality repels.

A. Methods to promote “The Friendly Church”

- 1. Talk up your church as a friendly church. In some communities our churches are charges (usually falsely) with being exclusive and snobbish. Let us show that we are democratic in practice as well as in principle. Every church should be concerned to see that its membership is a real cross-section of the community. Oftentimes churches talk democracy more than they practice it.
- 2. *Plan for friendliness in church service.*
 - a. Develop a strong “Friendly Church” program.
 - b. Have a welcome or greeting committee on duty before and after each service.
 - c. Maintain a perpetual “alert” for strangers.
 - d. Hold each member responsible for greeting strangers near him.
- 3. *Have two or more parish visitations by laity each year.*
 - a. Organize carefully and make definite assignments.
 - b. Cover the entire constituency.
 - c. Coach visitors on how to make calls church-centered.

4. *Have special thought for shut-ins, sick, sorrowing, troubled, and over-looked persons.* Make it a regular order of each Board meeting to keep a careful check on those and make definite assignments to visit them, all of this in close co-operation with the pastor.
 5. *Keep close check on indifferent and disaffected members.*
 - a. The Board should share the pastor's concern for these.
 - b. Secure the help of those most able to influence them.
 - c. Keep spiritual moods and motives dominant.
 6. *Multiply methods for expressing friendliness.*
 - a. Remember birthday, wedding, and other anniversaries. (A grand job for one or two persons.)
 - b. Remember the absentees. A cheery letter will warm their hearts.
 - c. Maintain a general supervision (to avoid duplications) to insure that flowers, letters, booklets, and other courtesies are sent to the sick and sorrowing.
 - d. Recognize honors, advancement, etc.
 - e. In rural churches, after March 1st, hold a reception for newcomers.
- B. *Special agencies to further friendliness*
- a. Gear in with and foster the friendly church programs of the denomination.
 - b. Recognize the friendship values in the women's organizations.
 - c. Encourage formation of "Mr. and Mrs." clubs.
 - d. Utilize "interest" groups as a means of fellowship.
 - e. Remember the "forgotten men" in most churches.
 - f. Show sympathetic interest in the Pilgrim Fellowship.
 - g. If the parish is large, use the "colony" plan to further neighborhood fellowship.

IX. ORGANIZATIONS OF DEACONS AND DEACONESSES

Organization will naturally be suited to the number deacons and deaconesses and the extent of their program.

In the interest of a more effective service, it is hoped that more of our churches will provide deaconesses and that both the deacons and deaconesses may work jointly as a Board of Deacons and Deaconesses.

B. Officers

Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Secretary, whose duties shall be those usually pertaining to this office. Other officers can be added as needed.

C. *Committees*

Boards of larger numbers and with more extended programs may well appoint committees to specialize on and be responsible for certain phases of the program. Obviously, committees should only be appointed to further distinct and important divisions of the work. Overlapping should be avoided. Committees that have been found useful include:

1. Committee on the Services of the Church
2. Committee on the Sacraments
3. Committee on Ushers, Reception, and Friendliness
4. Committee on Pastoral Visitation and Comfort
5. Committee on Funerals
6. Committee on Recruiting and Membership
7. Committee on Church Attendance
8. Committee on Stewardship
9. Committee on Interchurch Activities

X. SUGGESTED AGENDA FOR MONTHLY DEACONS' AND DEACONESS' MEETINGS:

1. Prayer
2. Roll call and minutes of last meeting
3. Report and recommendations of pastor
4. Report of committees
5. Reports on special assignments
6. Attention to new needs and assignments on same
7. Check-up to obviate oversights
8. Discussion on special topic for the evening
9. Service of prayer
10. Adjournment

Suggested special topics for monthly meetings:

1. The spiritual tone of our church
2. Our worship service; its strong and weak points
3. The value of symbols in worship
4. Help that people need and want from sermons

5. Our Communion service; how to make it more impressive and helpful
6. Standards and requirements for church membership
7. How to make our Covenant come alive
8. Parish evangelism: Why? What? When? How?
9. Preparing candidates for church membership
10. How can we make our church more friendly
11. How can we interest and help the underprivileged
12. How to improve our ministry to the sick and troubled
13. How to comfort the sorrowing wisely and graciously
14. Methods for increasing church attendance
15. The church year in relation to our program

FOOTNOTES

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