

DIAKONIA THE CHURCH AT WORK

by Ralph A. Kee



*“Excuse me, Pastor! The deacons are here,
and they’re ready to get to work!”*

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Preface

Who in America believes in the veracity of naked words anymore? To skeptical Americans, words, including religious words, are too often perceived as propaganda. This little booklet is about diakonia, which you will soon learn is much more than just a religious word. Diakonia moves us from words to action, for it is, in fact, the life of service the church carries out in the world.

Frank Gaebelein says, “From AD 52 to 57 a considerable proportion of Paul’s time and energies was devoted to organizing a collection among his Gentile churches for ‘the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.’” (Rom. 15:26) This work of diakonia was, Gaebelein claims, “the culmination of Paul’s ministry, his final ministry, the high point of his eastern Mediterranean ministry.”¹ Halley’s Bible Handbook calls the same task “a big event in the life of Paul.”²

My contention is that in our day, as in Jesus’ day, as in the Apostle Paul’s day, diakonia carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit is still absolutely critical to the work of a credible church. Diakonia is the word being done. Only the word spoken and the word done, combined, constitute the Word.

Ralph A. Kee
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Boston

SECTION ONE: DIAKONIA WITHIN THE CHURCH

I. Church concepts and church offices

Three key words in the New Testament capture the essence of congregational Christian life. Those words, in the language in which the New Testament was written, Greek, are *kerygma*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia*. Several church offices are identified in the New Testament, each one of which corresponds to one of these three key words. Designated human leadership over each of the three functions of the church is required so that each of the three functions is responsibly carried out in the world in which the church finds itself.

The first key word is *kerygma*. Kerygma has to do with what Christians believe, the essence of that which is preached, “Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again the third day.” The church offices which correspond to kerygma, that which is preached, are apostles, prophets, and evangelists. (Eph. 4:11) Today, we often think of the people who fill these offices as missionaries, rather than apostles, prophets, and evangelists, but the role is the same. In practice, pastors often take on the office of evangelist.

The second word is *koinonia*. Koinonia has to do with who we are as a people. It has to do with our life together in the fellowship of the church. The church offices most responsible for building koinonia, for building the community of faith, are teachers, pastors, and elders. These offices build up the church in a spiritual way, and equip the congregation to fulfill its ministry.

The third word is *diakonia*. This word addresses the church’s vocation. The church office most responsible for the church’s life of service is the office of deacon.

Word	Meaning	Office
kerygma	what we believe, that which is preached	apostles, prophets, evangelists
koinonia	the fellowship that we have, the people that we are	elders, pastors, teachers
diakonia	the life of service in which we are engaged	deacons

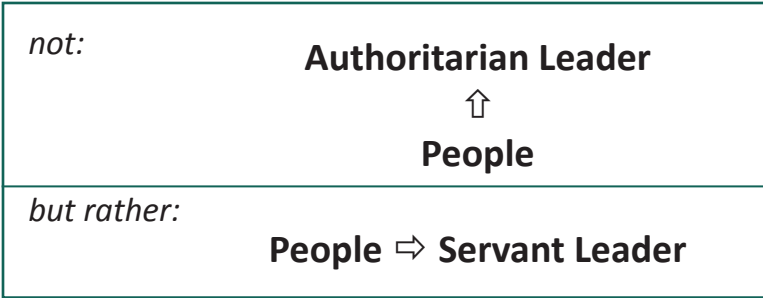
Diakonia refers to service. The word is variously translated “ministry,” “service,” “relief,” and “administration” in the New Testament. Diakonia is basically the life of service the church carries out in the world. As the church serves in the world, she is emulating her Lord, for “even the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister (*diakoneo*) and give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) “As he is, so are we in the world.” (1 John 4:16) Jesus said, “Whoever serves (*diakoneo*) me, must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves (*diakoneo*) me, the Father will honor.” (John 12:26 NRSV)

Jesus, the very Son of God, lived a life of service. We know that “he went about doing good.” (Acts 10:38) Jesus elevated the servant role as the norm for all humankind. Christians are not greater than Christ. If he lived a life of service, the church must as well. Indeed, those very people within the church who are truly servants are the very ones most qualified to lead the church in its total world mission.

“Jesus called them to him, and said, ‘You know that the so called rulers in the heathen world lord it over them, and their great men have absolute power. But it must not be so among you. No, whoever among you wants to be great must become the servant (Luke uses the word “deacon”) of you all, and if he wants to be first among you he must be the slave of all men! For the Son of Man himself has not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life to set many free.’” (Mark 10:42 45 Phillips)

Our servants are not below us, only ahead of us. And being ahead, are in a position to lead. Christian leadership is not a hierarchical leadership, but a horizontal leadership.

Diakonia refers to the church as God's servant people, providing the leadership for the incoming Kingdom of God.



Diakonia is often thought of in terms of individual acts of charity, such as visiting the sick or distributing food to the hungry. And indeed, such acts are proper, lovingly required by God. (James 1:27)

However, diakonia should not be limited to this kind of individualistic or private discipleship. The local church, as a clearly identifiable historical/ spatial community of Christian believers, is also called to engage in public acts of discipleship, in cooperative diakonia.

A neighborhood church, for example, as it joins its community in its struggle for such things as quality education, decent housing, adequate health care, and public transportation, is exercising diakonia in public discipleship. Orlando E. Costas speaks of the “diaconate function of salvation,” and suggests that liberation theologians have made a positive contribution to Christian thought by defining service in terms of liberation and solidarity, rather than as something which one does for someone else. Costas affirms the concept that to be saved includes being freed up to stand in solidarity with one's neighbor and to participate with him in his struggles for liberation.³

In an article entitled “A Theology for Public Discipleship,” Clark H. Pinnock issues a ringing call for public diakonia:

The church has always had to face a pagan and secular world. The tragedy today is that we only have a pagan and secular church with which to face it. A recovery of the doctrine of the church is critical for a theology of public discipleship. Over and above merely individual action we need to stress the importance of the new community which God has called together. The church is a major element in God's social strategy. Not merely a human association, but a supernatural reality—Christ's body, God's people, God's vine. A universal fellowship from every race and culture where all barriers that divide us are broken down. We need to remind ourselves of the purposes of the church. It is the only human society that exists for non members. It has been called to carry on the work of Jesus, to be a servant presence in the earth, to bear joyful witness to the kingdom of God and his righteousness. We have hardly begun to see what can take place when a local expression of God's people take themselves utterly seriously as the servant people of God (emphasis mine). When we do so, there are two things we will want to remember. First, the priesthood of all believers. All believers are called to minister, all are summoned to extend the impact of Christ on the world. Only a full mobilization of the church's human resources will be sufficient to meet the challenge of the hour. Second, only in the power of the Spirit can we minister effectively to needy men and women. We need the full complement of his gifts and graces to carry on the work of Jesus credibly. And we need the guidance of God through His Spirit so that community and individual alike can discover the social strategy that is appropriate for our situation.⁴

Those who provide the leadership for both in house and public diakonia are called *deacons*. Deacon is the English transliteration of *diakonos*, which in the King James Version is translated “deacon” three times, “minister” twenty times, and “servant” seven times.

One further thought about Christian concepts and the church office of deacon. It is obvious that one can have a church office only when one has a church. The office of deacon is possible only within the context of a local, organized body of believers. What is less obvious, but more important, is that diakonia itself is also most possible because of the local church.

This is how Ralph Martin describes the local church:

We feel that the basis of anything happening in Christianity needs to be a full, healthy local church. Without that foundation there is not the possibility of Christ manifesting himself in the world in the way in which he desires. We're just staggered right now by the almost total absence of local incarnations of the body of Christ that are effective and biblical.

We feel that in John 17 a major thing is being said about mission, about the world coming to faith and recognizing Jesus as the rightful Lord of creation. "I pray that they may be one, just as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that you did send me." We feel like the thing that happens in Acts is critical: an integral part of the full biblical Christian experience is an essential link between the gift of the Holy Spirit and Christian community. It is here that we're touching on the nature of God himself. God has a shape and form to his own life: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Within the Trinity is a fantastically deep interpersonal commitment. Jesus is completely giving himself to the Father, the Father is giving himself to Jesus, the Spirit is coming forth from both and glorifying and honoring both. That's the pattern of total community that is being projected into the earth. When Jesus calls people to come to himself and to know the Father, he is inviting them into a profoundly communal life that is expressed in a visible manner here on earth. The unity of Christians is not intended to be a vague, spiritual thing, but it is meant to be a concrete incarnation in a particular neighborhood. This is the way that neighborhoods are going to come to Christ. A communal lifestyle and the breaking out of the power of God is the basis of Christian mission. We feel like we're in a position where that virtually doesn't exist.

What we see is a lot of attention being paid to social agenda by people who aren't yet the church. What we see are Christian social groups caring about society but we don't see the church as the body of Christ, as a committed community sharing the life of the Trinity together, caring about how God wants them to be a servant in the world today, as Jesus was a servant.⁵

II. The concepts and the congregation

Notice that the life of every Christian is engaged in all three of these key concepts: kerygma, koinonia, and diakonia. Every Christian is called to witness to his or her faith, to speak that which he believes (kerygma). Yet every Christian is not an evangelist. All Christians are called to relationship with the community of faith, the local church, and to build one another up as members of the fellowship of those who care (koinonia). All Christians are not elders or pastors, however. Likewise, all Christians are called to be servants within the local church and within the world (diakonia). But not all Christians are deacons.

Diakonia is both an act and an office. It is an act in which all Christians participate, but it is an office to which particular Christians are appointed.

The New Testament establishes a minimal number of church offices to insure that what God desires for every Christian in theory is carried out in actual fact, and to insure that what God desires for every local church is carried out in actual practice. Thus God sets apart some to be elders, with special responsibilities for the koinonia of the church. And he sets apart some to be deacons, with special responsibilities, both administrative and practical, for the diakonia of the church.

III. Church offices are fundamental, yet flexible

In practice, the function of one office often blends into the function of another office. This is to be expected and is not undesirable, as suggested above. Donald F. Thomas describes this blending of offices:

Because the early Christians placed the importance of an office in its functions and saw offices develop out of functions, there was a flexibility in their ministries which we sometimes overlook. Paul filled his apostolic office by special appointment from the risen Christ, but he was also a prophet, administrator, and, for short periods, a settled pastor... Faced with

the urgency of the task awaiting them, the Christians served in ways that ministered daringly and creatively to actual needs. They placed little emphasis on offices per se. Their call from God was not to formal offices but to deeply committed concern, a concern *FOR* the fellowship which focussed upon strengthening of the Christians, their care and edification for the common task. But there was also a concern *OF* the Christian community for the world that endeavored to hold the gospel of Christ in confrontation with the world.⁶

IV. Possible job description for deacons

The Board of Deacons in the local church addresses those needs primarily of a social and material nature which people in general—especially neighborhood people, and Christian neighbors in particular; more particularly believers within the local church and most particularly church members—cannot meet for themselves and which no one seems to be adequately meeting. The deacons seek to see those needs met according to the capacity, resources, and overall mission and goals of the church. This often includes utilizing secular community services and working with the community at large and secular community agencies.

The deacons will also be alert to the physical and social needs of the metropolitan wide, nationwide, and worldwide church of Christ, and lead the way for the church to participate in diakonia with the Church at large.

V. The deacons and controversial issues

By the nature of their work, the deacons will undoubtedly occasionally find themselves involved in issues and methods about which deeply committed Christians of good will may well have sincere differences of opinion. For instance, there might be an occasion when some want to use civil disobedience to press for a justice, and others would stand in opposition to that as a proper tactic. Some in the fellowship may want to work for unilateral nuclear disarmament, and others feel a strong nuclear force is a deterrent to war. Both groups

will see obedience to Christ as the motivating force behind their divergent thinking and action.

The deacons have to work in an atmosphere of trust, charity, and tolerance. The church must constantly pray that they have wisdom. Their work must grow out of constant, thorough, and scholarly Bible study. Where the Bible is clear, the deacons can lead the church as a whole. Where the Bible is unclear or silent, there will have to be freedom for individuals, including individual deacons, to pursue their own convictions if they wish. In these situations, those pursuing a controversial position do not necessarily represent the church as such, though they may be working with church people. In relating to controversial issues or methods, where the possibility of misunderstanding or judgmentalism increases and could even threaten the *koinonia* or unity of the church, the knowledge, wisdom, and support of the elders (who are responsible for the unity and spirit of the church) become a greater factor. There may be times when the elders have to overrule the activities generally administered by the deacons, if in their judgment *koinonia* is unnecessarily jeopardized by *diakonia*.⁷

VI. Qualifications for deacons

The qualifications for deacons are given in 1 Timothy 3. Deacons are appointed by virtue of their Christian character, spiritual gifts, and concern for *diakonia*. Both men and women seem to have served as deacons in the early church. It seems clear, for example, that Phoebe was a deacon.⁸ (Romans 16:1) The early Baptists had both male and female deacons.⁹

VII. Relationships between deacons and elders

What is the relationship between deacons and elders? It seems that within the local church the elders are held chiefly responsible for the life of the church. Their qualifications are, if anything, higher than those for deacons. When new churches were founded in the New Testament, the elders were always appointed first, as far as we know.

Why are the elders, rather than the deacons, chiefly responsible for the local church? This may be because, in the Christian view of things, life always flows from the spiritual to the social and the material, and not the other way around. This is not to suggest that the spiritual world is good and that the material world is less good or evil. No unbiblical dualism which subjugates the material world to a lower echelon of interest or responsibility for the people of God is implied.

Rather, this is simply to suggest that our world system is in a fallen condition in all its spiritual, material, and social components. Except that life flow back into it from the Spirit of God, it remains fallen, which is to say, dead. Since God is Spirit, and not Matter or Society, life always goes from the spiritual to the social and the material. The elders are the ones who principally are responsible for the spiritual life of the church (*koinonia*), out of which *diakonia*, which deals with the social and material, will come.

Therefore, the elders have the greater responsibility. If we were to diagram it, it would look like this:

Kerygma ⇔ **Koinonia** ⇔ **Diakonia**

First the gospel is preached (*kerygma*). Some believe, and these people form a local church (*koinonia*). Then, the local church begins to meet the social and material needs of its own members and to have an impact for good on its surrounding community (*diakonia*). This is the order of responsibility and the order of progress. Thus, in the New Testament the apostles (*kerygma*) appointed the elders (*koinonia*, e.g. Titus 1:5), and the elders, in turn, called for deacons (*diakonia*, e.g. Acts 6:3).

Sometimes this progression has broken down. The work of evangelism and subsequent church planting (the work of apostles and missionaries) has sometimes been resisted by pastors, the pastors seeing this as a threat to their own ministry, rather than as a natural act of healthy growth.¹⁰ In cross cultural missions, missionaries have occasionally been slow to appoint elders within the national churches, hindering pro-

gression from the other direction. In the first case, *koinonia* hinders *kerygma*. In the second case, *kerygma* hinders both *koinonia* and *diakonia*.

Going back to the diagram, elders have generally not called for deacons, at least not in mainstream American churches. The distinction between elders and deacons has become blurred, so blurred that in many churches the deacons are, in fact, not functioning as deacons at all, but as elders. They are elders in everything but name. The true office of deacon has been left vacant. The tragedy is that, as a result, the whole vast area of responsibility, opportunity, and ministry which is *diakonia* is unacknowledged, ignored, and undone. There is a breakdown in the full New Testament flow of progression.

In summary, then, *kerygma* must lead to *koinonia*, and *koinonia* must produce *diakonia*. God sets apart individuals within the body with special responsibility for the development and implementation of these basic concepts. Missionaries call for elders and pastors, and the elders and pastors call for deacons.

VIII. Why standards for deacons must be high

Notice that the qualifications for deacons are high, nearly equivalent to those for elders. This suggests the office of deacon is second only to the office of elder in importance within the local church. Why is the office of deacon so important?

Its importance lies in the deacons' work in relation to the nature of the church. The church is God's new humanity, the first fruits of God's new order. Any local church which is true to the whole Gospel is a visible model of the incoming Kingdom of God, which will one day, when Jesus returns, fill the whole earth. When people look at a church, they should get a healthy glimpse of God's new society.

When Mr. Garvanne looks at Fellowship Church, the neighborhood church that meets around the corner from his house, he should exclaim, "Oh! So that's what God's future will look

like! So that's the difference the return of Jesus will make in our city!"

In looking at a church, the neighbors will often first notice the character of the church's service to that neighborhood (diakonia). If seen in a positive light, it will arouse their curiosity about the church's people, and they will begin to note the quality of the church's life: "behold, how they love one another" (koinonia). They will then ask, "What do you people believe, anyway?" (kerygma).

Diagrammed, the progression of the perception looks like this:

World ⇨ Diakonia ⇨ Koinonia ⇨ Kerygma ⇨ God

God comes to the neighborhood in this order, as the church is planted, and as the truth is slowly revealed:

World ⇨ Diakonia ⇨ Koinonia ⇨ Kerygma ⇨ God

But the neighborhood, the world, often comes to God in the order perceived, through the door held open by the deacons.

We see then that of the church officers, the deacons will often stand the closest to the watching, curious, skeptical world.

The deacons more than other church officers stand on the cutting edge of the church in the world. They are the harbingers of the incoming Kingdom. They, and the people they guide in the carrying out of the diakonia in the neighborhood, are the first visible representatives of God's new society.

This obviously has pronounced implications for evangelism. The adage "What you do speaks so loudly that I can't (or can!) hear what you say" is still true. The closer a church is to a fixed community of people, the truer this becomes. When a church is not a local church, but draws its people from neighborhoods and towns at some distance from the church, then it is difficult to have much by way of local, public diakonia. That opportunity is lost. However, in a neighborhood church, the character and good works of the church wonderfully sup-

port the message the church proclaims (or, if absent, disastrously undercut the message of the church). It has been said, “God’s work, to be real, must be local.”

Over the years, especially, diakonia has profound implications for evangelism within the neighborhood. Let me illustrate.

Mrs. Castelago, still a non believer, is being evicted and needs to find an apartment. She lives in the neighborhood where Fellowship Church meets. Fellowship Church is one of the churches in a network of churches. She knows and cares nothing about Fellowship Church, but learns there is a group of people who help people find apartments. They work out of the office of Fellowship Church.

She goes to the church office (which is open and staffed seven days a week), and she is told the group will help her. She finds the group kind and competent, and, after careful work over two months, they are able to get her settled into her new apartment.

Mrs. Castelago is impressed and grateful and says to the group, “Who are you anyway?”

They reply, “We are part of Fellowship Church.”

She asks, “What do you people believe anyway?”

“We believe Jesus is Lord.”

She asks, “Can I believe in Jesus too?” She does, is baptized and joins the church. Maybe she even then joins the Housing Group and helps someone else find an apartment!

The Housing Group (diakonia) has pointed Mrs. Castelago to the church (“Who are you people anyway?”— *koinonia*). The church has pointed her to Christ (“What do you believe?”— *kerygma*). So, diakonia has led to evangelism. The deacons have been on the visible, cutting edge of the church’s neighborhood ministry.

I think it is easy to see the impact that thirty cooperating

neighborhood churches scattered around Boston—each one having a Housing Group made up of three to five joyful, competent volunteers who are an honest to goodness help to real people with housing needs—would have on evangelism.

Add to the Housing Group of Fellowship Church an Educational Helps Group, an Employment Helps Group, perhaps volunteers for elderly concerns, legal concerns, and problems of single parents, youth, etc. The list is endless. One can visualize a truly credible church, known and appreciated by everyone in the neighborhood, and effective in its outreach and growth.

This kind of a church is bound to be effective because it is biblical, functioning as God wills churches to function: at the three critical points of kerygma, koinonia, and diakonia.

It is also easy to see, I think, that as individual churches develop their own Housing Groups to knowledgeably serve their church people and their neighbors, there would be many benefits if their efforts were not isolated from the similar efforts of the other 29 cooperating churches in the city. By meeting together two or three times a year, these Housing Groups could learn from each other how to accomplish their mission.

They can learn to earnestly pray for each other. They can keep the other groups posted on available apartments in the various neighborhoods. They can help a church family who has to move from the neighborhood of one of the churches into the neighborhood of another church and help them make the transition into their new church family. They can maintain good relations with the owners of apartments and rooming houses, even paying a missed month's rent if need be, to keep that owner happy to offer her vacancies to church people so they can continue to live in the neighborhood.

At the metropolitan level, they can work together on citywide housing concerns, within the political and legislative process. They might, collectively, want to acquire some housing for poor people or the elderly or the physically impaired. They

might work with Habitat for Humanity, in their own city or overseas.

They can help the electricians, plumbers, architects, real estate agents within the 30 churches to understand that their calling as Christian tradespeople or professionals is as sacred a calling as a pastor or missionary. They can mobilize those same people for specific projects, such as helping enlarge church facilities, or building housing for low income (or even middle income) families.

By doing their own ministry in their own neighborhood, and working collectively on metropolitan concerns, the ministry of these Housing Groups becomes very practical and very inspiring.

Diakonia also has important implications for the edification of believers within a church. Since we are called as Christians to do the works of service, if those works are not being done, our faith becomes very theoretical, and the church is headed toward dry, dead orthodoxy. The church people become ‘hearers of the Word but not doers, and are deceiving themselves.’ (James 1 :22) When, however, church people do use their gifts in works of service, they are that much more in harmony with the will of God and thus much more likely to be spiritually alive.

IX. Implementation and diakonia groups

One proven way for a church to implement diakonia is through diakonia groups. These are task oriented small groups of individuals who feel led to minister to a particular area or to a particular social need or problem. The Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., probably pioneered, in our day, the best known model of small groups engaged in ministry.¹¹

Some churches here in Boston have a history with small group life, and have seen how effective small groups can be. Small groups are often koinonia groups, with some engagement in

kerygma. The emphasis is on personal relationships. The base is Bible study and prayer. Diakonia groups would be different from koinonia groups. The emphasis in diakonia groups is on service. The base is still Bible study and prayer. A diakonia group is made up of individuals who have a mutual concern about a particular and specific task. While a koinonia group deals with Christians in relationship, with the spiritual growth of believers as the primary concern,¹² a diakonia group deals with the church as servant, with clear and effective service as the primary concern. Of course, spiritual growth and effective service are not entirely separated one from the other.

A diakonia group could have as few as two people in it, or as many as feel committed to the particular task. A diakonia group could continue for an indefinite period of time, but probably should last at least 13 weeks. In other words, its ministry should be of major significance and proportions. When a person felt led to join a diakonia group, he or she would probably drop out of his or her koinonia group, and generally not try to be in both kinds of groups at the same time. In other words, the diakonia group would provide the small group experience for the individual involved. It would be a healthy church which had each church member engaged in either a koinonia group or a diakonia group at all times.

Diakonia groups come into existence on the basis of spiritual gifts, confirmed need, a common call, and a common task. The gifts, the need, the call, and the task should have the tacit or explicit confirmation of the church, through the congregation or through the elders. (Acts 6:1-7) Diakonia groups cease when the call ceases or the task is accomplished. Diakonia groups are specifically sanctioned and administered by the board of deacons, though the diakonia group does not necessarily need to have a deacon in it.

X. Summary of Section One

Life in Christ has three foci: kerygma, koinonia, diakonia. It is in the context of the local church that these concepts are brought into focus and a community is provided in which the concepts can be translated into practical experience. The church officers of the New Testament provide the human personnel for leadership in each of these three areas. If these leaders are lacking or incompetent, the church is less than it is called to be. A church with a functioning, effective board of deacons is critical to the preaching of the whole gospel of Jesus Christ and the work of the Kingdom.

SECTION TWO: DIAKONIA BETWEEN THE CHURCHES

I. Diakonia coordinator: a difficulty

I confess it is difficult for me to describe, in a brief way, what I envision in a diakonia coordinator. The word diakonia is itself somewhat mysterious, not being English but Greek. I use it because I know of no substitute word. As a biblical term, there is no term in English which captures its essence. To use another word is to assuredly miss part of the meaning of diakonia and thus to emasculate the concept and its implementation. I fear that very thing has happened in many churches.

Secondly, diakonia itself in any comprehensive, organized, and substantial way is largely lacking in churches generally. In a few churches there are good examples of diakonia: alcohol abuse programs, day care centers, hot meal programs. These are fine programs, but nonetheless are rather narrowly defined examples of diakonia usually carried out by a minority number of individuals in a congregation rather than a model of what comprehensive congregation wide diakonia is and can be.

Thirdly, cooperative diakonia by a network of churches is almost non-existent. I know of no models to point to, to illustrate the work of a diakonia coordinator as I would envision it. What is not seen is hard to describe. However, the very lack may be indicative of a great need. In the New Testament and the early church they in effect had diakonia coordinators.

When famine and poverty struck the church of Jerusalem, the Apostle Paul became in effect a diakonia coordinator so that the need in Jerusalem might be met: he networked with the churches of Antioch, Macedonia, and Achaia that the churches together might meet the need of their sister church in Jerusalem.

Way back at the time of his ordination or commissioning, Paul understood diakonia to be part of his—or any Christian's—concern.

“...when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.” (Gal. 2:8 9 NRSV)

So when the prophecy came that there would be a famine and poverty in Jerusalem and Judea, Paul and other leaders were ready to respond immediately. (Acts 11:27 30) They anticipated the crisis even before it struck (v. 28), set in place a determined plan to meet the crisis (v. 29), and followed the project through to its completion (v. 30) —not that it was an easy thing to do.

We read of The Temptation of Christ in Matthew 4 and Luke 4. We read of The Temptation of Paul, the diakonia coordinator, in Acts 21:10 11. Agabus, the same prophet who in Acts 11 had foretold the coming famine, now foretells the fate of Paul, the person seeking to bring famine relief to Jerusalem (vv. 12 14), even though it will mean his own imprisonment.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells of his efforts in Corinth, Macedonia, and Achaia to raise this needed money for the Jerusalem church. The money was raised, the accounts audited (v. 20), additional trustees authorized (v. 22, and Acts 11:30), and prayer solicited from the church in Rome for the full success of the diakonia project. (Rom. 15:25 33) The money raised from the churches was delivered to the church in need. Paul, of course, was arrested as the prophet Agabus had said he would be. He was never released.

Tragic—but not as tragic as it would have been if the Church in those first critical decades of its existence had been unresponsive to those early diakonia needs. Somebody had to lead and coordinate the effort. Paul knew that. That’s why he did it.

II. Why a diakonia coordinator is needed today

The nature of diakonia is such that it is carried out not only by one local church, but by churches. At the beginning of church history, “in function the deacon was connected more closely with the bishop than with the presbyters.”¹³ Lampe is saying that the deacons worked with those who had responsibility for several churches, not just one church. The nature of diakonia being what it is, diakonia of necessity is one with the churches, rather than just with the church. An example clearly illustrating the practicality of this point is made by Geoffrey W. Bromiley: “The most serious weakness of using the parish as the basic unit of poor relief is that in the wealthier parishes, where the need is smaller, there is more money available, whereas in the poorer parishes the reverse is the case.”¹⁴

A metropolitan wide diakonia, which draws on the resources of the several churches to address needs of mutual concern, requires coordination, and that requires a coordinator.

Urban populations worldwide are growing dramatically, but there may be a question as to how much urban churches are growing. Could it be that the good works urban churches are doing are too often done in isolation, unseen by the urban masses? Not seeing God’s work, urbanites are skeptical about the reality of the gospel. On the other hand, where competent and effective public diakonia is being carried out, it stands as a powerful symbol as to the nature, will, and ability of God to impact human life for the better, and convincingly demonstrates to the skeptical world the power of the gospel. In Boston, Starlight Ministries to the Homeless is a parachurch ministry staffed by volunteers from a variety of churches. More than one homeless person has become interested in Jesus Christ when he or she discovered that the group was made up of members from not one, but several churches, and represented several ethnic groups as well.

III. What a diakonia coordinator does

She or he provides leadership for diakonia within a network of churches and beyond. This leadership includes:

- Envisioning
- Researching
- Inspiring
- Planning
- Teaching and training
- Administrating
- Funding
- Evaluating
- Coordinating

He or she works with the deacons of the individual churches, at their invitation, and with the deacons of the churches collectively in those cooperative endeavors of diakonia which are more effective when done together. The coordinator is concerned with diakonia at all levels:

- Diakonia and the life of the individual believer.
- Diakonia and the life of the individual church.
- Diakonia within the network of churches.
- Diakonia within the metropolitan area.
- Diakonia within the nation and the world.

The diakonia coordinator does what is necessary to enhance diakonia at all these levels. An illustration will help.

One of Boston's major industries is the health industry. Thousands are engaged in health concerns in Boston as working professionals or as students. Medical people by and large are not active in evangelical churches. They need to be evangelized. Christian medical people are the best ones to evangelize non believing medical people as members of their own peer group.

Christian nurses often lack fellowship with other Christian nurses, particularly if they are too old to be a part of a young adult group. Too often they face pressures, complex and not

widely understood problems, and difficult choices in isolation from other Christians who understand. A fellowship for health professionals within our cluster of churches, to which other health professionals—Christians and not yet Christians—can be invited, might be used of God.

Concerns of the diakonia coordinator, from the concerns of the individual nurse or doctor as a “called person,” to health concerns worldwide, might include:

- The thinking through of problem areas the individual faces, such as working in a hospital that does abortions.
- What the local church might do by way of ministry in a nearby hospital.
- Answering concerns of parents, say, relative to the distribution of condoms in their child’s school.
- Establishing partners for those suffering with AIDS.
- The whole question of abortion or euthanasia as national concerns.
- Providing scholarship aid, raised by the group, for a Christian medical student from a sister church in a developing country.
- Supporting a national doctor in a poor country overseas.
- Members of the group going, say, on a work detail to a Central American country for two weeks in the summer, or inviting their health professional counterparts in Central America to come to Boston for a work project with us here and establishing long term relationships between the churches involved.

IV. Implementing diakonia through diakonia fellowships

Fellowships along vocational or role lines can be one way of facilitating Christian work in the world. Fellowships for tradespeople, for people in the health professions, for social workers, for teachers, for fathers, for businesswomen and men, where peers pray together and learn together, would be helpful to equip members to fulfill their diaconal function in the world.

V. International or global concerns

The interchange of work crews, study groups, student groups, between our churches and the churches of other nations will render invaluable service and mutual benefits. Supply lines could be set up, providing a means for moving needed information, materials, and personnel within this international network of churches. In today's world there must be a concern for the global body of Christ.

Endnotes

1. Frank E. Gaebelien, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 10*, Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, pp. 311 312.
2. Henry H. Halley, *Bible Handbook*, published by H. Halley, 1951, p. 541.
3. Costas says further: "Obviously, from the point of view of Scripture, there is more to salvation and the church than the idea of service. Yet this is one dimension that missionary theology and praxis have often left untouched. Salvation has often been conceived of as a personal gift and thus a private possession. The church, as the community of the saved ones, has been thought of as the gathering of those who have 'their ticket to heaven'. We tend to forget, as the theologians of liberation rightly point out, that salvation is not so much a prize won as a responsibility given. Without its 'for what?', salvation is meaningless. Even the notion of holiness, which is understood in both the Old and New Testament as a definite fruit of salvation, is conceived of in terms of a 'setting apart' for service." Orlando E. Costas, *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique From the Third World*, Tyndale House: Wheaton, IL, 1974, p. 249.
4. Clark H. Pinnock, "A Theology For Public Discipleship, *Post American magazine* (later changed to *Sojourners*), January 1975, Vol. 4, No.1, pp. 18 19. Emphasis mine.
5. In my opinion, this statement by Martin truly puts it all together. It shows the integral and inseparable relationship between spiritual gifts, church commitment or membership, significant and intelligent diakonia and neighborhood responsibility. An interview with Ralph Martin, *Post American magazine* (now *Sojourners*), February 1975, Vol.4, No. 2, p.12.
6. Donald F. Thomas, *The Deacon in a Changing Church*, Judson Press, 1969, p.36.
7. Cf. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*, appendix, "The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century", Inter Varsity Press: Chicago, 1968.

8. Richard Boldrey, "In the early church both men and women were deacons", *Post American magazine* (now *Sojourners*), December 1974, p. 23.
9. "John Smyth, usually thought of as a founder of the Baptist movement, had followers who wrote in *Propositions and Conclusions Concerning True Christian Religion* (1612 1614): 'that Christ hath set in his outward church two sorts of ministers: vis. some who are called pastors, teachers or elders, who administer in the word and sacraments, and others who are called deacons, men and women: Whose ministry is, to serve the tables and wash the saints' feet.'" In 1611 another early Baptist, Thomas Helwys, wrote of "...Deacons Men and Women who by their office releave (sic) the necessities of the poor and impotent brethren concerning their bodies." D. Thomas, *op cit.*, p. 36. Emphasis mine.
10. Cf. J. Leslie Dunstan, *A Light to the City: 150 Years of the City Missionary Society of Boston 1816-1966*, Beacon Press, 1966, pp. 101, 120, 124. Cf. also Peter Wagner, "American Church Growth Update 194," *Action magazine*, Spring 1974, p. 36.: "... church planting (or) extension growth is not stressed enough as an evangelistic foot in America." 1.
11. See Elizabeth O'Connor, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*, Harper and Row Publishers, 1968.
12. Lawrence C. Richards, *A New Face for the Church*, Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1970, p.177.
13. G.W.H. Lampe, "Diakonia in the Early Church," in *Service in Christ: Essays Presented to Karl Barth on his 80th Birthday*, edited by James L. MacCord and T.H.L. Parker, Wm. Eerdmans, 1966, p. 57.
14. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, same volume, p. 115.



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“At the dawn of the new millenium, one of the greatest needs in our world is for the church to *be* the church! Ralph Kee’s *little* but significant booklet provides a *big* step toward that direction. It is theologically sound and thoroughly practical, and thus a valuable handbook, not only for deacons, but for all Christians who take seriously our call to truly be the Body of Christ in the world.”

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“From a lifetime of serving, Ralph Kee is more than qualified to lead the church of Christ in understanding *diakonia*. This compact presentation helps us to take what we believe and enjoy in fellowship to the streets to serve the needy and disenfranchised. If every church would digest and implement Ralph Kee’s strategy in this booklet, many would be lifted and loved... and even unbelievers would speak well of the good works of serving Christians.”

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Pastor, First Baptist Church, Portland, Maine
Past President/CEO, World Relief