

Deacons

SERVANT MODELS
in the CHURCH

Third Edition

HENRY WEBB and CRAIG WEBB

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To my two sons,
Craig and Chuck;
and to my grandchildren,
Bethany, Aaron, Carl, Myrissa, Laralyn, and Gracie;
whom I love and who faithfully serve
their Lord, families, and churches.

Acknowledgments

MANY PERSONS DESERVE PRAISE FOR helping this book become reality:

I am grateful to B&H Publishing for continuing to give this book life for future generations of deacons.

The members of the churches who have trusted me to be their pastor or transitional pastor through the years have given me support, freedom, and help to grow as a person and as a pastor.

My ordination as a deacon was a meaningful act of Christian encouragement. My fellow deacons have demonstrated the principles of this book.

Deacons in conferences that I have led have excited me with their quality of commitment to Christ and their desire to be effective servants in their churches.

I have been fortunate to be surrounded by people who have loved me and believed in me—wife and sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren, parents and sisters, teachers and coworkers, church members and friends, pastors and deacons.

My greatest thanks must go to my wife, Patti, for her constant moral support and her patience with me as I continue to grow as a Christian and husband.

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Foreword

NEARLY FIVE DECADES AGO, WHEN my dad first wrote *Deacons: Servant Models in the Church*, he could hardly have imagined the profound and lasting impact this book would have on generations of Baptist deacons, pastors, and lay persons. What began as a clear, biblical response to the confusion surrounding deacon ministry has become the foundational text that has shaped how countless Baptist churches understand and practice deacon ministry across America and beyond.

The book's enduring popularity—being the most widely purchased book for deacons during its decades in print—testifies to its practical relevance and spiritual authenticity. It has survived not because it offers easy answers or quick fixes, but because it calls deacons to the demanding but rewarding path of Christlike servanthood.

For pastors, this book provides invaluable guidance in developing healthy partnerships with their deacons. For prospective deacons, it offers a clear picture of the high calling they are considering. For experienced deacons, it serves as a constant reminder of their true mission and methods. For church members, it helps them understand what to look for in deacon candidates and how to support their deacons' ministry.

My dad grounds deacon ministry in two fundamental concepts that emerge directly from Scripture: Deacons are called to be servant models in character and servant leaders in function. This twin emphasis on who deacons are (chapters 2–5) and what

deacons do (chapters 6–9) has provided a clear framework that has stood the test of time.

The book’s exploration of the biblical qualities expected of deacons—demonstrating growth toward mature faith, Christian family life, personal and public morality, and a life accepted by God and the church—has challenged countless candidates to examine their hearts and lives before accepting the sacred responsibility of deacon ministry.

I believe the book’s enduring popularity stems from pastors giving it as a gift to new deacons at their ordination. Wise pastors saw how it helped restore the biblical balance between pastoral authority and deacon ministry. Rather than creating competition between pastors and deacons, it fostered partnership. The servant leadership model my dad champions eliminates the “us versus them” mentality that has plagued some churches, replacing it with a “we together” approach to ministry that honors both the pastor’s role as shepherd and the deacon’s calling as servant minister.

As you read these pages, you will encounter not merely administrative advice but a biblical vision of servant leadership that reflects the heart of Jesus Christ himself. You will be challenged to see deacon ministry not as a position to attain but as a calling to live out daily in humble service to God and his people.

My prayer is that this third edition will continue the transformational work of previous editions, shaping another generation of deacons who understand that true greatness comes through serving others and that the highest leadership is found in the lowest service. May God use these words to raise up servant models and servant leaders who will strengthen churches and advance the gospel for decades to come.

Dr. Craig Webb
Executive Director-Treasurer
Hawaii Pacific Baptist Convention
Content Editor, *Deacon Magazine*

Preface

I AM CONVINCED THAT THE ministry role of deacons as expressed in the New Testament is appropriate today. As a young pastor, I was grateful for Howard Foshee's guidance in *The Ministry of the Deacon* in clarifying the tasks of deacons. Through the years, I have been challenged and honored to be involved in continuing to express these New Testament principles and the practical application for deacon ministry as editor of *The Deacon*, as a leader in deacon conferences, as a deacon, and through the pages of this book.

The purpose of this book, first released in 1980 and updated in 2001, was to help deacons demonstrate in their lives and to apply in their churches the biblical concepts of their role as servant leaders. That purpose is unchanged in this latest edition. I am grateful to B&H Publishing for giving this book life for future generations of deacons.

Chapter 1 guides the congregation to determine its procedures for selecting and ordaining deacons. A careful process can assure the electing and setting apart of those who will truly be servant models for the church.

Chapters 2 through 5 explore the biblical qualities for deacons. Deacons are expected to model growth toward mature faith, Christian family life, personal and public morality, and a life accepted by God and the church.

The opportunity for deacons to model ministry as partners with the pastor is the focus of chapter 6. This includes the

emerging role of deacons through the centuries and the organizing of deacons to minister to persons more effectively.

The last three chapters suggest more specific ways deacons can carry out their responsibility to minister. As they respond to the needs of persons and the church, they can model care for families, the proclamation of the gospel, and Christian leadership.

I pray that God will use this book to encourage and help you fulfill the challenging task of being a servant model in your church. I am confident that these words of Paul will continue to be true of deacons in every generation. “Those who have served well as deacons acquire a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 3:13). May all that deacons do be done to honor and glorify God and to accomplish his purpose.

Chapter 1

The Church Needs Servant Models

ONE OF THE GREATEST COMPLIMENTS people can pay Christians is to view them as examples for other Christians to follow. Paul paid that compliment to the Christians in Thessalonica. “You became a model to all the believers. . . . Your faith in God has become known everywhere” (1 Thess. 1:7–8 NIV). Their pattern of Christian living was a model worthy of imitation by other Christians. They were living examples of the Christlike life.

The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26). Those who are called by Christ’s name should be honored to model his life in their lives.

Paul encouraged Timothy to “set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity” (1 Tim. 4:12). He also challenged Titus to “make yourself an example of good works with integrity and dignity in your teaching” (Titus 2:7).

The primary model for all Christians is Jesus Christ himself. He left “you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21). Jesus came to serve. He said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Jesus dramatically illustrated his servant lifestyle for his disciples. He washed their feet at their last meal together before his arrest and crucifixion. He wanted them to learn, unmistakably, a basic lesson of servanthood. “Do you know what I have done

for you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are speaking rightly, since that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done for you” (John 13:12–15).

All followers of Jesus are to serve by providing ministry in his name. The title *diakonos* (“servant,” see the word studies in the appendix) applies to every Christian. But the apostle Paul also used *diakonos* in a special sense for specific church leaders in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8–13 when he paired the word with the pastor/elder/overseer role. Translators chose not to translate literally in those situations but to make a new English word, *deacon*, from the Greek word for servant. Therefore, deacons carry both the name of Christ and the name of servant.

The high qualifications for the pastors (elders/overseers) and deacons found in 1 Timothy 3 clearly indicate that the New Testament churches looked to these church leaders for examples in Christian living. This remains true in today’s churches.

The congregation looks to its pastor and deacons to serve as models both in their quality of life and in their active ministry. This chapter guides the congregation to determine its procedures for selecting and ordaining deacons who truly will be servant models for the church. This chapter also suggests the importance of training both new deacons and those continuing to serve.

Selecting Deacons for Ministry

The selection of deacons is one of the most important events in the life of a church. The process of choosing these spiritual leaders can be a meaningful experience for the congregation, for those chosen, and for their families. Careful planning and appropriate procedures can make that possible.

Churches use a variety of methods. Certainly, there is no one right way to nominate and elect deacons. Some of the factors

that influence the church's procedure are tradition, the size of the church, and the duties of the deacons. Churches need to select deacon nomination and election procedures that fit their needs. A church should use a method that will assure the election of deacons who are both biblically qualified and deeply committed to deacon ministry.

The most common denominator in churches is that the congregation votes to elect the deacons. However, the variables include such areas as (1) church-required qualifications (in addition to biblical qualities), (2) term of service, (3) nomination and screening of candidates, and (4) preparation of the congregation for the selection process. The number of deacons needed is based on a balance between the number needed to carry out the deacon ministry and the number of those in the congregation who are qualified to serve.

Church-Required Qualifications

Most churches have some minimum age requirement for deacons. The intent is that deacons should have broad enough adult experience to be able to minister maturely to a cross section of members. Of course, such maturity does not come to all persons at the same age.

Many churches also require prospective deacons to be church members for a specified period. This gives church members a more adequate opportunity to become familiar with their qualifications for deacon service. This time also gives prospective deacons an opportunity to become familiar with the nature and style of the church and how deacons minister in it. A one-year requirement is most common, but some churches require as little as six months and others as long as two years.

Churches often require some external signs of commitment to the church. Most frequently cited is regular participation in church activities such as Sunday school/Bible study/life groups and Sunday worship services. Deacons often also are expected to

be tithers, giving 10 percent or more of their income through the church budget. A church may also require regular deacons' meeting attendance and participation in specific training for deacon ministry.

Other requirements usually derive from the biblical qualities for deacons found in 1 Timothy 3:8–13 and for church leaders found in Acts 6:3. Chapters 2 through 5 explore these qualities in detail.

Term of Service

Some churches continue to have deacons serve indefinitely on the active deacon body. These churches have deacon elections only when there are vacancies or when the deacon body is enlarged. But many churches elect deacons for a limited period of time. Almost all the latter churches use a three-year term. However, some have chosen a four-year or other longer, specified term.

The phrase “rotation of deacons” means that the term of only a portion of the deacons expires each year. In most cases after serving the specified term, the deacon is ineligible for reelection for one year. Those elected to fill a vacancy for one year or less usually are eligible for reelection for a full term. Churches usually choose a rotation approach for two reasons: (1) This approach provides continuity with only a portion of the deacons rotating off the active body each year, and (2) this approach makes it possible for more members to serve as deacons. Reserve deacons who have rotated off the active body can continue to minister as servants through other church responsibilities. They may also help with some of the ministries assigned to deacons. They will be ready to assume the deacon role again if reelected by the church. Some churches use a limited term, but do not require the year off before reelection to another term.

Some churches confer the title of “deacon emeritus” in recognition and honor for long-standing deacon service. The term *emeritus* means that the deacon has retired from an active position,

usually when no longer physically able to carry out the duties of an active deacon.

Nomination of Candidates

A widely used nominating procedure is nomination by the entire congregation. Churches generally use one of two approaches. Some distribute a ballot to every church member listing all eligible members. The members mark the names they want to nominate up to the number of vacancies to be filled. Other churches have a blank ballot for persons to list the names of those they feel are qualified for the role. Some churches use Sunday school classes or life groups as a source for nominations.

Another method is nomination by committee. This committee is either a special committee that nominates only deacons or a church nominating committee that nominates other leaders as well. Either committee would need to study carefully the qualities and duties of deacons.

In some churches, the existing deacons nominate other deacons because they believe the deacons understand the work of deacons best. The strong disadvantage of this approach is that the deacons can become a self-perpetuating group.

Screening of Candidates

One of the most important steps in selecting deacons is interviewing prospective nominees. The purpose of the interview is to determine if a person is qualified according to biblical and church requirements, understands and is committed to the ministry of the deacon, and is willing to serve if elected.

If the congregation nominates, the pastor and deacon chairman often do the interviewing. Sometimes, other church staff members and deacon officers assist in this process. If a committee or the deacons nominate, that group or the pastor and deacon chairman may do the interviewing.

It is appropriate to have the prospective deacons' families present during the interview. The interviewers should be prepared to present thorough information about qualities, the duties of deacons, and church expectations. Questioning should be in a positive spirit. The best questions are the ones the candidate needs to answer in deciding whether he agrees to be nominated. To avoid possible embarrassment, the personal interview should seek to cover anything that might be brought up later in an examination council.

If a church uses an examination council in addition to or instead of the more personal interviewing process, the council should be scheduled well in advance of the election and ordination service. Prospective deacons should still be informed of the qualities and expectations of a deacon. This could be in written form. The council should possess a positive spirit and never become an inquisition. Areas of inquiry would be the same as in the more personal screening.

Sometimes a period of training is also required before a nominee is presented to the congregation for election. The period for the deacon selection will often be determined by the amount of time needed for both the screening and training process. Adequate time is essential. See page 10 for more on resources for deacon training.

Preparation of the Congregation

The congregation needs to be prepared adequately for the election of deacons. If the congregation nominates as well as elects, preparation should begin before the nomination. Biblical and church qualifications, the duties of deacons, and the selection procedure should be interpreted. This can be done through sermons, articles in churchwide communication, or churchwide training using this book.

Following the nominating and screening process, the nominating group will bring a list of nominees to the congregation for

election. In some churches, the number is the same as the number of vacancies to be filled. In other churches, the list is larger, up to double the number of vacancies. If the latter plan is used, the list should include several more nominees than vacancies to be filled. This avoids the embarrassment of a single nominee not being elected.

Deacon nominees should be introduced to the congregation. To assume everyone knows them is a mistake. The pastor can introduce prospective deacons in a church service, or photographs and biographical sketches can be printed in churchwide communication. Some churches provide a reception where members can meet and talk with nominees.

The election itself should be by a printed, secret ballot. This is often held on a Sunday morning to get the widest participation possible. Some churches make provisions for absentee voting. To announce the number of votes each person receives is unwise and unnecessary.

The entire selection process should be long enough to be orderly and efficient, but not so long that church members get tired of the process. Once a church determines its selection procedure, it should record the process in detail in the church bylaws or in an official document on "Guidelines for Selection of Deacons."

Setting Deacons Apart for Ministry

The New Testament records surprisingly little about ordination. Churches often refer to the account of the laying on of hands of the seven new leaders in the sixth chapter of Acts as support for ordaining deacons. This act apparently followed the Old Testament custom to symbolize the setting apart for divine service and the expressing approval by God's people upon those who would serve (see Num. 8:10). Ordination does not grant deacons any authority or responsibility that the church could not also entrust to other members.

The ceremony of deacon ordination is a meaningful act of Christian encouragement and recognition. The church members are saying to each person ordained, “We have confidence in you. We will pray for you as you are set apart to minister among us as a deacon.”

Churches often devote an entire Sunday worship service to the ordination of deacons. Careful planning can assure that this significant event is a worshipful encounter with God. Early planning allows time for those being ordained to invite relatives, coworkers, and other special friends. The church may send letters or cards of invitation.

Some churches use an examination period just prior to the ordination service. Others incorporate this questioning into the ordination service. The intent of this is not to screen out those who are unqualified. This must have been done in the earlier screening process. The purpose is more like the questioning and vows in a marriage ceremony. It allows the congregation to hear the deacons publicly share their Christian testimonies, beliefs, and commitments.

Questions can be phrased so deacon nominees can answer simply with “I do” or “I will.” Some churches include brief testimonies by new deacons. The candidates will usually include an account of their conversion experience, the subsequent change in their lives, and recent spiritual growth. They may also share their attitude toward the role of deacon and their hopes for the church.

Often, two major parts of the ordination service are a charge to the deacons to present the challenge of deacon ministry and a charge to the church to encourage the congregation to support and pray for their deacons. Sometimes these are combined in an ordination sermon.

Acts 6:6 does not clearly say whether the laying on of hands for the new church leaders was done by the entire congregation or only by the apostles. If only ordained pastors and deacons lay on hands, they are doing so as representatives of the congregation.

This approach is often taken in larger churches for the sake of time. However, if all church members present lay hands on the deacons, it may heighten the significance of ordination for the whole church and those being ordained. Each person, in laying hands on the deacon's head or shoulders, usually whispers to the deacon a sentence or two of prayer, an affirmation or challenge, or a verse of Scripture. An ordination prayer often precedes or follows this part of the service.

The service may also include congregational singing, special music, Scripture reading, prayer, recognition of previously ordained deacons returning to active deacon service, and recognition of the deacons' families. The service usually concludes with the presentation of a Bible or an appropriate book (such as this book) and an ordination certificate to each person being ordained. After the service, the newly ordained deacons and their families can stand at the front of the worship center to be greeted by the congregation. Some churches have a reception following the service.

Preparing Deacons for Effective Ministry

If deacons are to be prepared for effective service, they need training and resources to help them. They will want to learn what their work involves and how they can accomplish it. Since deacons often feel inadequate in areas of ministry in which they have minimal skills, training will have practical value. Deacons who are eager to minister express a desire to be trained for greater effectiveness. A hunger for personal, spiritual growth and for improvement of ministry skills will give deacons a desire for training.

Training can be done in several ways. Deacons in some churches are finding that one of the best times for training is the monthly deacons' meeting. They use fifteen minutes to an hour of each meeting for training.

Some churches, associations, and state conventions sponsor deacon ministry conferences or retreats to provide this needed training. *Deacon Magazine* is a quarterly publication by Lifeway Christian Resources that helps deacons understand their role and assists them in performing their ministries in the church and community. This book could be a resource for training.

Unfortunately, some deacons fail to live up to the commitments they made at the time of their election and ordination. Deacons who seldom attend worship services, who fail in their responsibilities of ministry, or who dishonor their role disappoint their fellow church members. The congregation should be challenged to relate to them redemptively and forgivingly. Church members should remember Jesus's caution, "The one without sin among you should be the first to throw a stone" (John 8:7). The deacons may have some spiritual, family, financial, or work problems. Some may feel uncomfortable and inadequate in meeting ministry responsibilities because of a lack of training. The pastor, deacon officers, and fellow deacons can reach out personally and lovingly to draw them back into fellowship, growth, and service. Careful screening before election, adequate training, and early sensitivity to warning signals can avoid many dropout problems.

In summary, the way the church elects, examines, and ordains its deacons should be consistent with what the congregation is seeking—servants for the Lord through his church. Chapters 2 through 5 will focus on who a deacon is. Chapters 6 through 9 will discuss what a deacon does.

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