

**OFFICE OF DEACON IN THE CHURCHES**  
Study Committee Report  
Recommended to the churches by  
Synod St. Catharines of the United Reformed Churches in North America  
1997

## **1. MANDATE**

The mandate for the committee came from the churches when they met as Alliance of Reformed Churches on November 16-18, 1993. The Alliance appointed several church councils as a study committee, when the ARC responded to the following overture from the Grace Reformed Church of Dunnville.

The council of the Grace Reformed Church of Dunnville overtures the Alliance of Reformed Churches to mandate a number of church councils to search the Scriptures and Reformed Confessions for clarification of what the work of deacons entails, suggesting avenues of mutual stimulation and interaction.

*Grounds:*

1. The current stage of transition of our churches affords an excellent time period for such an undertaking.
2. The divergence of interpretation of Scriptural data concerning the office of deacon, and the resultant differing applications have produced a lack of unified approach to diaconal work.

-AGENDA, 1993. p.20

Specifically the Alliance decided, "That the Grace Reformed Church of Dunnville join with neighboring churches of the Alliance in studying the matter of the work of deacons (Overture 16) and come with an overture to a later meeting of the Alliance." -MINUTES, 1993, p.9

The following neighboring church councils appointed delegations to form the study committee: Ancaster, Balmoral, Dunnville, St. Catharines Immanuel, and Wellandport. The committee seeks to be principled in its approach rather than pragmatic. Thus we need first to listen to God's Word concerning the idea or concept of office.

## **2. THE CONCEPT OF OFFICE**

Fundamental to grasping the place and work of a deacon is the insight that the diaconal office, in fact any office, is grounded in God's creation of Adam and subsequently in giving His Son to be "Head of the body, the church." (Col. 1:18).

### **1. God's Creation and Office**

The word office may be defined as "a position of authority, duty, or trust." Such a position was assigned to the newly created Adam when God issued the cultural mandate: "God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule over..." (Gen. 1:28).

God created man in His own image, we read in Gen. 1:27. In doing so He "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). The apostle Paul refers to this creative act and suggests Adam's high calling when he wrote in the chapter on the resurrection, "The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam a life-giving Spirit" (I Cor. 15:45).

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The Reformed churches have confessed God's creation of man and his religious response to his Creator in Lord's Day 3. "God created man good and in His own image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him" (Q/A 6), This answer suggests the concept that the calling or office of being human is to be prophet, priest, and king, and thereby to love God above all and one's neighbour as oneself, a concept which both the Old and New Testaments repeatedly teach.

A landmark study of the office of deacon was undertaken in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands by P. Biesterveld, J. Van Lonkhuyzen, and R.J.W. Rudolph. The 600-page work published in 1907 is entitled *Het Diaconaat*, and has assisted the committee greatly with its extensive research materials and helpful insight. In summarizing the fundamental concept of office in Scripture, the author concludes, "To love, to love God above all and one's neighbour as oneself, that was the impulse of life for the in God's image created man" (p. 11, translation provided).

We conclude that also the office of deacon in its fundamental concept finds its origin in God's creation of man and the Creator's mandate to him as His steward on earth. The essential quality of any office is *diakonia* or service. Abraham Kuyper notes, "Man was created for *service*. He is born *ebed Yahweh*, [servant of the LORD], and it is only in the service of his God, that he is clothed with power and dominion" (*Encyclopaedie Der Heilige Godgeleerdheid*, 1909, III. p. 472, translation provided). We now move the focus to the last Adam.

### 2. Christ and Office

God sent His Son into the sinful world to save lost sinners who had broken the covenant and destroyed the image of God in which they had been created. As Saviour, Jesus was God's Image-Bearer, the Servant of the LORD. He was the Christ, the Anointed One. In answer to the question "Why is He called Christ, that is, Anointed?" Lord's Day 12 provides this answer, "Because He has been ordained by God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Spirit, to be our chief Prophet and Teacher...our only High Priest...and our eternal King." (Q/A 31).

When "the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us" (John 1:14), He took upon Himself the office of Servant of the LORD, and "such a high priest meets our need - One who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners" (Heb. 7:26). Christ, "Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...He humbled Himself and became obedient to death..." (Phil. 2:6-8). Thus Jesus entered into the Father's *diakonia* or service teaching its essential nature to His quarreling disciples as He said, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant," adding, "Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve..." (Matt. 20:26,28).

Since Christ came to redeem and to restore His own in their proper service to God, He also renewed the image of God in them as it had been in Adam. With that restoration comes the call to the office of life, which is often referred to as the office of (all) believers.

The office of believer is suggested in the question of Lord's Day 12, "Why are you called a Christian?" The answer echoes Christ's re-creation of Adam's office, "Because I am a member of Christ by faith and thus share in His anointing, so that I may as prophet confess His Name, as priest present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him, and as king fight with a free and good conscience against sin and the devil in this life..."(Q/A 32). Since every special office in the

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Church proceeds from the office of believer, the focus of our consideration now needs to be more directly on the office of deacon in the setting of the New Testament Church.

### 3. A NEW OFFICE IN A NEW CHURCH

The special offices in the Church are temporary and function only on this earth where sin, the devil, and the world constantly attack God's children. Thus we confess in the Belgic Confession, "This Church has existed from the beginning of the world, and will be to the end, for Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects. This holy Church is preserved by God against the fury of the whole world..." (Art. 27). The Confession further states that "this true Church must be governed according to the spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word" (Art. 30).

This "spiritual order" refers to ministers, elders and deacons who together form "the council of the church." The purpose of these special office-bearers is that "by these means they preserve the true religion; they see to it that the true doctrine takes its course, that evil men are disciplined in a spiritual way and are restrained, and also the poor and all the afflicted are helped and comforted according to their need" (Art. 30).

God's Word refers to the office-bearers as Christ's "gifts to men", "to prepare God's people for works of service (*diakonia*), so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:8,12,13).

#### 1. *The Beginning of the Diaconate*

##### a. Use of the Word *diakonos* in the New Testament

The meaning of the New Testament *diakonos* (deacon) is considerably broader in usage than using it for the office of deacon exclusively. As noun it is used thirty times in different ways such as, "It will be good for those servants whose master..." (Luke 12:37), "I became a servant of this gospel" (Eph. 3:7), "He (civil authority) is God's servant to do you good" (Rom. 13:4), and "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Matt. 20:26). In general the word *diakonos* means servant.

##### b. Use of the Word *diakonos* for the Office of Deacon

There are only two places in the New Testament which clearly refer to the office of deacon. One such usage is in Paul's address to the Philippians, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons" (Phil 1:1). Each designation is clearly an office of an official and accepted nature.

The second usage is in 1 Tim. 3:8,12, where God's Word presents the Qualifications for office-bearers, first for overseer/elder and then the two references under consideration. "Deacons likewise are to be men..." (8), and "A deacon must be the husband..," (12). The comparison of the office of deacon with that of overseer/elder leaves no doubt that at the time of Paul's writing, around AD 60, the office of deacon was part of the Church leadership.

##### c. Choosing of the Seven in Jerusalem

Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, carefully conveys that the happenings recorded in it are under the direction of Jesus, the ascended Lord. He begins, "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus **began** to do and to teach until the day He was taken up to heaven" (Acts 1:1,2). Since Christ is Lord of His Church, the need for relief for the apostles "in the daily distribution (*diakonia*) of food" (Acts 6:1,2), and the dissatisfaction of the Grecian widows all led to Christ instituting the office of deacon through the choosing of the congregation and the

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subsequent ordination by the apostles. This institution of the diaconate is recorded: “They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them” (Acts 6:6).

In the Lord’s wisdom the initiation of the diaconate is one ingredient in the growth of the Church, as is seen from the next verse. “So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly” (Acts 6:7). With God’s evident blessing on the Jerusalem Church, the dynamics and means were developing that would produce new churches “in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). It is clear from the New Testament that the apostles, directed by the Holy Spirit, considered the functioning and place of the deacons to be part of the leadership of every congregation in the developing Body of the Lord.

### **2. The Nature and Authority of the Diaconate**

Since the essence of all offices in the Church is service (*diakonia*) to its Lord and Head in exercising love for the neighbour, we need to spell out the particular responsibilities of the diaconate. A more detailed outworking of the diaconal work in our contemporary setting will appear in a later section. In focusing on the nature and authority of the deacon and his office, a number of questions structure our presentation.

#### **a. What Is the General Task of the Deacons Revealed in Scripture?**

The New Testament does not come with a detailed task description for the diaconate. Throughout the Scriptures, however, God’s special care for the widows, the orphans, the strangers, and the poor is evident and well-known and we will not document them. Perhaps the practices of the Jewish leaders in the synagogues and the rulers of the local sanhedrins in collecting and distributing food and other goods for and to the poor and needy were known to the Jerusalem Church. Yet these did not serve as models for the new office.

All the Church of Christ has received in terms of God’s revelation in this matter are the use of the word *diakonia* along with the related words for deacon and serving, the reference to “waiting on tables” as the Greek widows complained in Acts 6, and the requirements for deacons in Acts 6 and 1 Tim. 3, as well as the combination of “overseers and deacons” in Phil 1:1 written to a congregation that had received financial assistance from the Church of Jerusalem.

The result of the limited revelation has led to uncertainty, degeneration and under-development. Much has been written on the subject, and in the Reformed Churches a level of insight has been gleaned from God’s Word which has resulted in the functioning of an office which is distinct from that of elder but is equal to it in honour and dignity.

In the formative stages of the new Church the deacons were ordained as office-bearers in order to facilitate, direct, and develop the communion of the saints or the loving and caring fellowship of God’s people. This basic description rests on a particular interpretation of the circumstances surrounding the beginning of the office in Jerusalem. These circumstances were such that as the Church was growing rapidly, the practice of meeting together in the temple and in each other’s homes became difficult. Some direction and organization was needed for the proper working of caring for each other when the believers may have numbered 25,000.

It is heart warming to read Luke’s account of the Jerusalem communion of saints: “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need” (Acts 2:43-45). “There were no needy persons among them, From time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need” (Acts 4:34,35).

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The pressure on the twelve apostles builds as Ananias and Sapphira are dealt with in a powerful way (Acts 5: 1-11), as they healed many sick (Acts 5:12-16), and as they were arrested and persecuted (Acts 5:17-42). It is “in those days” (6:1) that the problem with the Greek widows developed. Some have said about this event that the Greek widows “were being overlooked” and thus received no food. Others have said they “were being overlooked” in that they received no responsible assignment in the distribution and were upset. There are also those who suggest that the neglect was due to favouritism of the Jewish widows and a certain bias against the Greek widows.

In assessing the various explanations, we conclude that there can be no certainty that one view is exclusively correct. It can be said with certainty that a variety of needs existed at this time in the history of the Church and they were the occasion for the King of the Church to initiate the new office of deacon. Although the task of the deacon is not defined precisely, it finds its fulfillment in a loving and willing service (*diakonia*) for the continued happiness, joy and peace in the fellowship of believers.

Thus we understand the rationale or evaluation of the apostles not as limiting the description of the diaconate to a task of hunger relief exclusively. Their evaluation was: “it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables” (6:2). The last clause in the original Greek language states, “to serve (*diakonein*) tables”, and refers to “the daily distribution of food” which in the original reads, “the daily service (*diakonia*)”, which in turn refers to the daily practice of the believers: “They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God...” (Acts 2:46,47).

The priority of the apostles is “The Word of God” (that is how 6:2 appears in the original, while in 6:4 it says “the service (*diakonia*) of the Word”), and the growing responsibility of caring for the welfare, happiness, and joy of the very large numbers of Christ’s children, designated as “serving tables” is now transferred to the seven men who are chosen by the congregation (“all the disciples,” 6:2). The apostles “turn this responsibility over to them” (6:3).

Since the Scriptures do not provide any other concrete revelation about the general task of the deacons, we conclude that the Word of God teaches that the mandate for the diaconate contains these ingredients as normative:

1. The office of deacon is a particularized and specialized expression of the office of all believers.
2. In their task and calling the deacons demonstrate, model, and teach the Saviour’s love for His own.
3. The primary objective of the particular duties and tasks of the deacons is to facilitate, promote and develop the communion of the saints.
4. The application of the diaconal mandate varies, depending on circumstances and need.

### **b. What Are the Scriptural Characteristics of the Deacon?**

There are two texts in the New Testament addressing the qualifications for believers in the Church who serve as deacons. The first one, Acts 6:3, describes a general principle, while the second passage, 1 Tim. 3:8-12, provides practical virtues.

The condition the apostles place before the Church is based on the reputation of seven men to be selected. Whatever the election process may have been, the congregation must choose men “who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3). The risen Saviour had mandated

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the apostles on Easter day, and “with that He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit”” (John 20:22). Furthermore, on Pentecost day the ascended Lord had sent His promised “Counselor” to the entire Church, with the result that “all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit...” (Acts 2:4).

Thus when some (short) time after Pentecost the apostles instruct the disciples to choose seven men filled with the Holy Spirit, they were to elect them on the basis of **how** the Spirit functioned in them. The nominees were to have a demonstrated wisdom which would be needed to manage the feeding and fellowship of the huge congregation. God’s Word through Paul observes that “we have different gifts according to the grace given us ... if it is in leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully” (Rom. 12:6-8). The particular gift deacons require is spiritual discernment so that as a leader among God’s people, the deacon is a “spiritual man [who] makes judgments about all things” (I Cor. 2:15).

The general principle revealed in Jerusalem also undergirds the practical virtues that become Scriptural characteristics for the deacons in Ephesus. It is here that the apostle Paul has sent the disciple Timothy and to whom he sends his First Letter. He notes, “I am writing these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the Church of the living God.--” (1 Tim. 3:14,15).

The nature of the office of deacon, its importance, and dignity can be clearly seen from the eight characteristics listed in 1 Tim. 3:8-12. We will merely present them here in summary form, noting that they are almost identical to the requirements for elders.

- |                                |                                      |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. worthy of respect           | 5. maintain deep truths of the faith |
| 2. sincere                     | 6. tested and found blameless        |
| 3. not indulging in much wine  | 7. husband of one wife               |
| 4. not pursuing dishonest gain | 8. manage children and household     |

### c. Is There Scriptural Support for Women Deacons?

In Biblical times the question of women office-bearers did not arise. In exceptional times, however, in the Old Testament two women office-bearers are mentioned, Deborah the judge and Hulda the prophetess. In the New Testament the practice does not exist. In fact, there are several concrete reasons that the choice of deacons (and elders and ministers) must be limited to men.

1. Acts 6:3 uses a word for men that focuses on the idea of “male” rather than the generic “man”.
2. 1 Tim. 3:12 specifies that the deacon “must be the husband of but one wife”, and also refers to “their wives” in verse 11.
3. 1 Tim. 2:12 teaches that a woman cannot be an office-bearer since she cannot teach or have authority over a man.

There are, of course, many women in the New Testament who serve their Lord in the setting of the Church. Phoebe is one of these. She is called “our sister Phoebe, a servant (*diakonos*) of the church in Cenchrea” (Rom. 16:1). The RSV and some other translations use the word “deaconess.” Tabitha, also called Dorcas, is called “a disciple...who was always doing good and helping the poor” (Acts 9:36). In Ephesus and perhaps in other Churches there was a “list of widows” who were over sixty and devoted themselves “to all kind of good deeds” (I Tim. 5:9,10). We conclude categorically that the Scriptures do not allow nor support women deacons.

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### **d. Do the Deacons Have Scriptural Authority?**

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me” (Matt. 28:18), the King of the Church said to His office-bearing disciples. He exercises that authority as He rules in heaven, seated at the Father’s right hand. The Church confesses Christ’s Lordship with these words in Lord’s Day 48, “So rule us by Thy Word and Spirit that more and more we submit to Thee” (Q/A 123).

We have noted previously that Christ as Head of the Church is the second and last Adam, and the great Office-Bearer who calls all who believe in Him into the life of being prophets, priests and kings. The Word says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

This office of believer in the Church is guided and directed by the special office-bearers Christ has appointed in His Church, ministers, elders and deacons. It is sometimes said that a local Church council is “autonomous,” which means self governing and refers to the fact that no other Church body can properly exert its authority on a particular congregation. The office of deacon or the diaconate of a Church, however, is not autonomous. The very nature of the service of the deacon calls for the supervision of the office of elder/overseer. We will return to this matter in a later section.

Nevertheless, the deacon’s office is also vested with diaconal authority. It follows from the institution of the office in Jerusalem that the apostles endowed the deacons with authority. They said, “We will turn this responsibility over to them” (6:3). The grammar of the original Greek language indicates an authority which is accompanied by responsibility. That the office of deacon has its own significant worth and standing is further highlighted by the ordination prayers and the fact that the apostles “laid their hands on them” (6:6), indicating, that they were set apart by the Holy Spirit for a special task, in the same way that Barnabas and Saul in Antioch were sent off as missionaries (Acts 13:2,3).

The real source of a deacon’s authority rests in the fact that the Lord Himself called him to the office. And whom the Lord calls He also empowers with ability and authority. In fact the Greek word used for this in the New Testament is translated with the word “power” (as in John 1:12) and with “authority” (as in Matt. 28:18).

### **e. Is the Analogy of Priest Scripturally Applied to the Deacon?**

In concluding the presentation of the Biblical nature of the office of deacon, we need to mention briefly the frequently used analogy of prophet, priest, and king as applied to ministers, deacons, and elders. The express and direct use of the analogy to the office of deacon does not occur in Scripture. Yet, when the three offices are viewed in the light of their unity in Christ, and their close connection with the office of all believers (sometimes called the priesthood of all believers), there can be considerable profit in the three-fold usage.

Perhaps it must be admitted that the use of “analogy” in this context is somewhat imprecise, for the intent is to convey that Christ as the second Adam and Head of the Church carries out His labours as our chief Prophet and Teacher, our only High Priest, and our eternal King (cf LD 12) in His Body also by means of the three offices. Separation of the three “offices” in Christ is impossible, and we may only learn from the Word of God to distinguish them.

Caution should be exercised in referring to the deacon’s “priestly” function, for the Church would move toward formalism if the minister painfully guards against transgressing the borders of the elder, who in turn keeps a distance from all priestly activity, while the deacon avoids anything

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related to prophecy or ruling. It should not escape our attention how carefully the Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons treats the subject. The Form states, “the office of elder is based on the kingship of our Lord Jesus Christ,” while “the office of deacon is based upon the interest and love of Christ in behalf of His own” (*Psalter Hymnal*, p. 175). Such caution is helpful, since the analogy applied to the deacon is not as clear as that of the minister and elder.

### 4. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE OFFICE OF DEACON

Knowing its history not only helps the Church to avoid errors of the past, but also enables God’s people to see the LORD’S faithfulness. There is a wealth of material available on the history of the diaconate, most of which falls outside the scope of this report. We have selected only a few characterizing sketches, focusing on the two formative time periods for the office of deacon, the Early Church and the Reformation era.

#### 1. *Development and Deterioration, AD 100-500*

At the conclusion of the Biblical times, it cannot be said with certainty that the diaconate had developed greatly beyond its starting point of “serving at tables”. Only when the successors to the apostles planted Churches around the Mediterranean Sea can the reports of the unfolding work of the deacons be found in their writings. These Apostolic Fathers, as they are called, encouraged regular offerings to be taken, and developed more or less independent diaconates in the Churches, yet always under the direct supervision of the Church’s overseer. These early writings are found in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. J.B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, 1962.

The gradual decline of the office of deacon is closely linked with a growing trend toward hierarchy in the early Church. It was in the encounter with Gnosticism during the second century, a heresy that many consider the equivalent of today’s New Age phenomenon, that the view developed that the episcopate formed an unbroken succession with Christ’s apostles, and that their authority in certain instances was unquestionable. The consequence was also a division and sharp distinction between “the clergy” and “the laity”.

The office of deacon became a fully paid position in the Church, subject to the overseer. The latter was seen as “the mediator between God and the poor,” while the deacons were “the ear and eye of the bishop.” The Council of Nicea in AD 325 discussed the place of the deacon in the Church and recorded in Canon 28 that they are “servants (*hypertai*) of the bishop.”

The Church was beginning to teach that poverty was an honour and begging a virtue. In the succeeding centuries numerous prosperous landowners deeded their holdings to the Church, which became very rich, while well-to-do people and nobles took up a life of begging and many became recluses. Increasingly good deeds became a means to earn salvation.

As the Middle Ages were about to begin, the office of deacon in the way the Bible teaches it no longer existed. The Church historian Philip Schaff concludes: “When the bishop was raised above the presbyter (elder) and the presbyter became priest, the deacon was regarded as Levite, and his primary function of care for the poor was lost in the function of assisting the priest in the subordinate parts of public worship and the administration of the sacraments. The diaconate became the first of the three orders of the ministry and a stepping stone to the priesthood,” (*History of the Christian Church*, Vol 1, p. 231).

#### 2. *The Reformation of the Diaconate*

During the Middle Ages the development of monasteries and religious orders such as the Dominicans and Franciscans had a profound impact on the social, educational, and charitable ministries of the Church. These parachurch institutions were instrumental in building and



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providing staff for hospitals, orphanages, and schools. The care of the destitute was undertaken by some orders, but in general the state took care of the poor.

When in God's gracious care for His Church He raised up the Reformers in the sixteenth century to call His children back to His Word, there were no contemporary models on which to base the reformation of the diaconate. Luther initially did seek to establish independent diaconates, calling them "service of mercy" in his brochure *To the German Nobility*. However, while the great Reformer was consumed in having God's Word preached and sinners saved, he had no interest in nor talent for organizational matters. He challenged the nobility and the civil authorities to stop the begging and to provide for the poor.

In keeping with Luther's view of the Church, the Lutherans in Germany developed the Territorial Church system in which there were no self-ruling Churches but only a national Church. The Church and state are closely connected in Lutheran countries. The Churches collected money for the needy, but the funds were distributed by civil authorities. It is evident when reading the various historical accounts that the Scriptural concept of office in general, and that of deacon in particular did not develop in the Lutheran countries, a failing that is reflected in their well-known creed, the Augsburg Confession of 1530. We note that in all Lutheran Church Orders produced after 1550 congregational deacons' care for the needy is not mentioned at all.

Since Zwingli is also a significant Reformer, his treatment of the diaconate is noteworthy. Zwingli considered that it was the responsibility of the government of Zurich, where he laboured, to regulate the care of the poor and needy. The result was that the diaconate as a ministry of the Church was nonexistent. In fact no collections were even taken in the worship services for diaconal causes. In passing we note that the Zwinglian view of the intimate relationship between Church and State was adopted by Henry VIII in England. Thus the Anglican Church became the State Church. Here too the government provided for the poor and needy, while the office of deacon remained undeveloped, even though later kings attempted unsuccessfully to bring in some changes.

It was John Calvin in Geneva who was used by God to reform the office of deacon. What stands out in his writing is the conviction that Christ gathers His people as the Church locally, and that such a congregation in its visible manifestation has received from its Lord office-bearers who form a council which governs the local Church autonomously. In his influential work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin considers the office of deacon as one of the Church offices. He concludes his treatment of this office focusing on Acts 6, observing, "See what were the characters of the deacons in the apostolic Church, and what ought to be the character of ours, in conformity to the primitive example" (IV,3,9).

In contrast with Luther whose view of the Church led to the abandonment of the diaconate, Calvin's ecclesiology based on his reading of the Scripture, led to the adoption of a new Church Order in Geneva in 1541 which also spelled out the task of the deacons. The deacons "were assigned the care of the poor and the supervision of the hospital", reports Williston Walker in *A History of the Christian Church* (1959, p.354). Calvin himself explains his interpretation of Romans 12:8 in the *Institutes*, "Unless my judgement deceive me, the former clause refers to the deacons who administered the alms; and the other (clause) to those who devoted themselves to the care of poor and sick persons" (IV,3,9). Thus Calvin envisioned "two classes of deacons, of whom one will serve the Church in dispensing the property given to the poor, the other in taking care of the poor themselves" (IV,3,9). It pleased God to establish in Geneva a strong Reformation Church and Academy. Many Reformed leaders studied there and returned to their own countries to implement and adapt the teaching of John Calvin to their setting.

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Strong Reformed influences were at work in France, The Netherlands, Scotland and among the Puritans in England. While much of Calvin's language finds its way into the Reformed Confessions of those countries, not all of Geneva's views and practices are taken over.

Thus the French Huguenots recognized only three offices in the Church rather than the four that Calvin taught (IV,3,4), omitting his "teachers". The French spelled these matters out in the French Confession, and in greater detail in the French Church Order, adopted at the Synod of Paris, 1559. A.D.R. Polman quotes the job description of the deacon from that Church Order in *Onze Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis* (Vol. 4, p.21), "With respect to the deacons, their task is to receive and distribute, with advice of the consistory, the monies for the poor, those in jail, and the sick; to visit them, and also to catechize in the homes" (translation provided). The Synod of Orleans (1562) deleted the reference to public catechizing as the proper work of the deacons.

In God's gracious providence He preserved His Reformed Churches in Europe when economic hardship and political persecutions in France, the Netherlands, and elsewhere drove many of their members into exile. As refugee Churches were established in Geneva, London, the English islands of Normandy, and in southern Holland, the office of deacon prospered. None of these congregations kept the two classes of deacons Calvin prescribed, and all of them developed active diaconates.

These refugee Churches and their diaconates, were more directly influenced by the French Church Order than by the one of Geneva. It was at the Convent of Wezel (1568), under the leadership of Petrus Dathenus, that these various strands converged, and a detailed description of the work of the deacons was spelled out and thus began to function in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. These Churches also adopted the Form of Installation of Deacons as produced on the Islands of Normandy and altered somewhat in London. Thus God in His sovereign ways used an amazing variety of people and circumstances to provide for His people throughout the centuries, and even in the 20th century He continues the office of deacon.

### 5. THE PLACE AND TASK OF THE DIACONATE TODAY

The King of the Church instituted the office of deacon as a permanent provision for His people throughout all centuries. Thus "the spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word" contains also deacons who see to it "that the poor and all the afflicted are helped and comforted according to their need" (BC 30). This particular formulation of the place and task of the diaconate occurred in 1561 at the time of the Reformation. The Confession expresses the Scriptural revelation concerning the office of deacon in terms of the **principle** that applies to all centuries and the entire Church, but the **practice** of working it out will vary depending on needs and circumstances. We draw attention to the importance of this distinction, so that a slavish adherence to one historical Church Order, for instance, would not take place.

#### 1. Task Description of the Deacon

The responsibilities of the deacons in the Reformed Churches of the sixteenth century were generally described in their Church Orders and Forms for Ordination. Those that endured originated in the refugee Churches and via the Convent of Wezel (1568), entered the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands at the Synod of Embden (1571). At the Synod of Dort (1618/19) a revised version of these documents was adopted and have guided the Reformed Churches up to the present time. We note that the Reformed refugee Churches faced severe political and economic hardship, and poverty was widespread. The result was that their Church Orders stressed that the main task of the deacons was hunger relief and care for the poor and distressed. It is that emphasis that was incorporated in the Church Order of Dort, and regulated the work of the deacons during the succeeding centuries.

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It is helpful to observe how the Church Order of Dort and the Form for the Ordination of Deacons entered the English language in North America at the beginning of the twentieth century, and how both documents function at the conclusion of the century. The development and adaptation illustrates the changing practical mandate for the deacons in a changing social and economic climate, while continuing to be faithful to the Scriptures and Confessions. We have selected the formulation of the Christian Reformed Church of 1914, and the current Church Order and Ordination Form of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

### a. The Task and Mandate in 1914

- i. *The office peculiar to the deacon is diligently to collect alms and other contributions of charity, and after mutual counsel, faithfully and diligently to distribute the same to the poor as their needs may require it; to visit and comfort the distressed and to exercise care that the aims are not misused; of which they shall render an account in consistory, and also (if anyone desires to be present) to the congregation, at such a time as the consistory may see fit.*

*In places where others are devoting themselves to the care of the poor, the deacons shall seek a mutual understanding with them to the end that the alms may all the better be distributed among those who have greatest need. Moreover, they shall make it possible for the poor to make use of institutions of mercy, and to that end they shall request the board of directors of such institutions to keep in close touch with them. It is also desirable that the deaconates assist and consult one another, especially in caring for the poor in such institutions.*

(Art. 25 and 26, Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church)

- ii. *The office of deacon is based upon the interest and love of Christ in behalf of His own. This interest is so great that He deems what is done unto the least of His brethren as done unto Him, thus appointing the needy to represent Himself in our expression of sympathy and benevolent service on earth.*

*The work of the deacons consists in the faithful and diligent in gathering of the offerings which God's people in gratitude make to their Lord, in the prevention of poverty, in the humble and cheer distribution of gifts according to the need, and in the relief of the distressed both with kindly deeds and words of consolation and cheer from Scripture. (Form for the Ordination of Deacons in the CRC)*

### b. The Task and Mandate in 1995

- i. *The specific duties of the office of deacon are to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation; to acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy; and further, to gather and manage the offerings and distribute them in Christ's Name according to need. They shall encourage and comfort with the Word of God those who receive the gifts of Christ's love, and promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord.*

(Art. 23, Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches)

- ii. *Also today the Lord calls on us to show hospitality, generosity, and mercy, so that the weak and needy may share abundantly in the joy of God's people. No one in the congregation of Christ may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty.*

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*For the sake of this service of love, Christ has given deacons to His Church... It is therefore the responsibility of the deacons to see to the good progress of this service of charity in the Church. They shall acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties, and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy. They shall gather and manage the offerings and distribute them in Christ's Name according to need. They are called to encourage and comfort with the Word of God those who receive the gifts of Christ's love. They shall promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord. In this way God's children will increase in love to one another and to all men.*

(Form for the Ordination of Deacons in the Canadian Reformed Churches)

### c. Notes of Comparison

The 1914 Church Order was based on the Dutch Church Order of 1905 which closely followed the Church Order of Dort. The deacon is to "collect alms" and "distribute the same to the poor"; he is "to visit and comfort the distressed." The deacons "shall make it possible for the poor to make use of institutions of mercy." The work of the deacons is exclusively a ministry to the poor and distressed. The emphasis of the Form for Ordination is identical, adding "the prevention of poverty."

The current Church Order and Form for Ordination quoted above have a striking change in focus and emphasis. The reference is to "the good progress of the service of charity (love) in the congregations, to "exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy," and only after that the task description lists that the deacons are "to gather and manage the offerings and distribute them in Christ's Name according to need." The summary is that "in this way God's children will increase in love to one another and to all men." The principle of the Confession in Art. 30 is adhered to, but the practical application is much different and much broader than the Church Order of Dort.

### 2. *The Place of the Deacons in Council/Consistory*

There is a difference of opinion and practice about how the office of deacon relates to that of elder. It has pleased God not to spell out this difference in Scripture. What is clear, however, is that the elder's task is supervisory, and that his office comes with the authority of overseeing the flock, including the work of the diaconate. Yet, the elder's authority must be exercised also as *diakonia*. The lack of consensus and the resultant ambiguity in the Reformed Churches can be traced to the time of the Reformation.

John Calvin stressed the **distinction** of the Church offices. He wrote, "Therefore, from the beginning, every Church has had its senate or council, composed of pious, grave, and holy men, who were invested with that jurisdiction in the correction of vices ... This office of government is necessary, therefore, in every age" (IV,3,8). The result of this emphasis was that deacons were not included in the senate or council. (This designation was changed to "consistory" at the Synod of Nimes in 1572 in order to avoid confusion and comparison with the secular government Senate).

The French Confession focused more on the **unity** of the offices in Christ, and their interrelatedness. This Confession reads, "The elders and the deacons are the senate of the Church, over which the ministers of the Word must preside (Art. 24). The Confession explains, "With respect to the true Church, we believe that she must be governed according to the polity instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ, namely, that there are ministers, elders, and deacons, in order that purity of doctrine may continue, that sins may be punished and curtailed, and that the

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poor and all other needy may be helped and that the meetings may take place in the Name of God for the edification of old and young” (Art. 29).

The two factors or facets of unity in Christ, and distinction in task are always present in the government of the Church. The question was never whether deacons are part of the Church government, but whether they should be part of the council/consistory. Wherever the French Confession and the French Order Church shaped the mind of the Church, the deacons were regularly part of the council. But where the teachings and practices of Geneva prevailed the deacons were not part of the council. It was in London where the refugee congregation was led by the competent and resourceful John a Lasco that the practice was begun to include the deacons in regular monthly meetings while the elders and minister met without them on a weekly basis.

Reformed scholars have written much about the supposed discrepancies between Article 30 of the Belgic Confession which includes the deacons in the council, and the Canons of Dort which does not. A.D.R. Polman in his commentary on BC 30, after surveying the subject at great length, concludes, “Thus it has become clear to us how it was possible that the Fathers never saw any discrepancy between our Confession and the Church Order” (Vol.4, p.29). P.Y. DeJong in his commentary on the Belgic Confession observes, “Neither position, it would seem, ought to be pushed to an extreme. The underlying unity of all three offices in Christ may never be obscured. Yet the distinctive contribution of each office ought not to be forgotten either ... The differences in emphasis supplement each other beautifully, and we do well to preserve them” (*The Church’s Witness to the World*, 1980, p. 296).

In today’s setting, we believe, an appropriate measure of cooperation should function between elders and deacons. The deacons should meet regularly as diaconate to conduct and facilitate their task, and should meet on a monthly basis as part of the Church council participating in the general leadership of the congregation. Appropriate report of their work should then be made to the council.

### **3. The Task of the Diaconate, Congregational or Global?**

In seeking to clarify the work of the deacons as well as its extent, it is valuable to gain a proper perspective. It has pleased God to show His people in Scripture that the roots of the diaconate originate in the Old Testament, while the shape or structure of the office is a New Testament introduction. In designating the task of the deacons as a “Ministry of Mercy” as is often done, the Church indicates thereby the diaconal task is covenantal in essence, and is undertaken within parameters of the covenant people.

The LORD Himself led His people out of Egypt where they had been slaves for over four centuries, suffering oppression, poverty, and abuse in many ways. As the LORD guided them into the wilderness He established His covenant with them and gave them His law and numerous prescriptions for living as a covenantal community in the promised land of Canaan. The summarizing reason for such observance recurs frequently; “I am the LORD your God!” God Himself will live with His people, revealing His nature or Name as He did on the mountain to Moses saying, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exod. 34:6,7). The central ingredient in God’s covenant is His mercy and love which must be echoed and reflected by His people.

Thus they were to observe the Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee as they are outlined in Lev. 25, with the reason given: “I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 25:55). There must be rejoicing

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in Israel as the special feasts are observed, for God has set His people free. In remembrance of that captivity and hardship the injunction comes: "And rejoice before the LORD your God at the place He will choose as a dwelling for His Name - you, your sons and daughters, your men-servants and maid-servants, the Levites in your towns, and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows living among you" (Deut. 16:11).

Thus the covenant is the soil in which all *diakonia* grows and prospers. And it is the covenant people whom the deacons in the New Testament are to motivate and mobilize for "works of *diakonia*," as God's Word teaches (Eph. 4:12). It is that covenant community or congregation that the Saviour came to gather "in the unity of the true faith [as] a church chosen to everlasting life" (Q/A 54). The word for Church in this clause is *Gemein* in the original German, indicating congregation or community.

At the very centre of the congregation is the Table of the Lord, where God's people, with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, celebrate their salvation and freedom from the tyranny of Satan. The Saviour said, "Do this in remembrance of Me," (1 Cor. 11:24,25) as the apostle Paul reports. We also remember at that celebration the fact that Jesus demonstrated His love at the institution of the Supper, when He washed the disciples' feet and said, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15). These words form the heart of all diaconal service.

We conclude that the task and place of the deacons is essentially local, in the midst of the congregation and not global in the sense of world relief which seeks to address the needs of mankind when disasters, famines or earthquakes strike. Thus when our Lord shortly before His death illustrated the details of compassion and love in the story of the Sheep and the Goats, He pointedly explains, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did it for Me" (Matt. 25:40). We do not suggest that Churches in a federation should not assist each other in diaconal matters. It is quite evident from the financial support the Jerusalem Church received from the Corinthian congregation, conveyed to them by Paul (2 Cor. 8:1-15), that such is not the case. We now focus more directly on the work of the deacons.

### **4. The Diaconal Ministry of Mercy**

In some Reformed congregations the deacons are charged with the administration, maintenance, and financial arrangements of the Church. In some instances they even have to prepare and submit the annual budget for all projected financial expenditures, as well as presenting to the council and congregation a financial statement. Such assignments in the diaconate fall outside the Scriptural mandate for the office, and do damage to the effective ministry of the deacons. There are two faces to the work of the deacons, and we will focus on each in turn.

#### **a. A Biblically Goal Oriented Diaconate**

The first and perhaps the deacons' most important task is to help the Church members to help each other when needs arise. In the Old Testament there was no special office mandated by the LORD to assist His people in being a merciful community. The responsibility belonged to the farmer in harvesting as well as to the money lender in assisting the needy. All of God's people must be merciful, the Head of the covenant taught. He said in the New Testament, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

Deacons may consult with those of sister Churches, and even together undertake some special labours. Yet the primary goal of the deacons is to stimulate the congregation to be caring, loving, and as such to be a witness in today's selfish, individualistic and materialistic society. In

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this way the freedom God's people have in Christ comes to obedient expression in the way the apostle Paul instructs: "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love" (Gal. 5:13). In that same Letter, Paul summarizes: "therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10).

The goal of every diaconate is to be catalysts in order "to prepare God's people for works of service", to refer to Eph. 4:12 once more, so that *the communion of saints* of Lord's Day 21 may become a functioning reality: "Everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members" (Q/A 55). The first part of that answer addresses the communion each and all believers have with Christ, and how they "share in all His treasures and gifts."

Such sharing and caring needs to be taught, guided, and structured by the deacons. To work out this objective requires that the deacons visit every family regularly, preferably once per year. They should visit every new member as well as every newly married couple in order to learn what needs there are and to encourage the members to exercise the communion of saints. The annual visit of the elders in family visiting is for the purpose of focusing on the member's life and doctrine. The visit of the deacons does not compete with that, but seeks to promote the use of the member's gifts for the mutual benefit of all.

Deacons ought not to wait until an urgent need arises in a family setting, but enter in before such a crisis comes. Many church members wait to ask for help because they fear the stigma, and perhaps such a request for help is a blow to their dignity. When the deacons are in tune with congregational events, they often are able to marshal others to minister to developing problems before they reach critical proportions. The Scriptural and Confessional view of the diaconal task as facilitators of the communion will be blessed by God for the maturing of the saints.

### **b. An Obediently Active Diaconate**

It has frequently been contended in the Church that the elders deal with spiritual matters, and deacons with material ones. In light of all the Scriptural and Confessional evidence presented we conclude that this distinction is unwarranted, unacceptable, and counter-productive. To function well in his office a deacon needs to be a deeply spiritual man who "must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience" (I Tim. 3:9). They are "faithful men chosen in agreement with the rule that the apostle Paul gave to Timothy" (Belgic Confession Art. 30).

When an accident happens or sickness occurs, it is the deacon's task to be involved. Clearly the deacons are not the only office-bearers ministering at such times, and coordination should be arranged. In an accident with subsequent hospitalization transportation may be needed. Family members should be involved (I Tim. 5:9), but in many instances friends and church members should be mobilized. This is a diaconal task. When there is prolonged hospitalization, loneliness and other needs may arise. One Reformed Ordination Form for deacons states, "No one in the congregation of Christ may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty."

The diaconal care extended to older widows and widowers, or other singles is a measure of the deacons' obedience to their mandate. They should be visited by the district deacon on a regular basis, minimally every three months, and a report of this and all such meetings should be made at the monthly deacons meeting. Sometimes these aging members need transportation to Church or for shopping. Sometimes lawn care, snow removal, or home care is required. If no

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immediate family takes care of these needs, the deacons must assume responsibility for doing this or arranging for the needs to be filled. In assisting such members the deacons “look after orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27), where God’s Word assesses that such “religion ... God our Father accepts as pure and faultless.”

Death takes place in every congregation eventually. When God in His sovereign wisdom translates one of His children into eternity, comfort and consolation is needed by the family members. Even though the other office-bearers are involved, deacons need to provide proper diaconal care. Sometimes food, funeral arrangements, or grave plot selection call for diaconal involvement. In almost every death the deacons are part of the loving, sustaining comfort provided by God’s people, which gives expression to the communion of saints.

Prolonged unemployment or business reverses and bankruptcy generally call for the helping involvement of the deacons. In the first place these tension-producing situations in life generate a need for loving understanding and emotional support. For the deacons and other members to show interest in such or other hardships demonstrates the love of Christ, Who lay down His very life for His own. Some Church members live beyond their means and income, and may need admonition and assistance in how to restructure their lives. Some may plead an inability to give for Church causes because of their burden of Christian School tuition. Deacons need to look for avenues to have such members live the Christian life with joy and full participation. In such sensitive visits, also when family budgets are monitored, confidentiality is an essential ingredient in the deacons’ ministry. In reporting these matters to the elders, great care must be taken not to betray confidences.

It is in these ministries of mercy the deacons follow and exemplify the great Deacon (*diakonos*), the Lord Jesus Himself in His diaconal and sacrificial service. At the final Assessment of history, He will say to the faithful and obedient deacons and to all His children, “I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in, I needed clothes and you clothed Me, I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you came to visit me... Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me.” He will then also say, “Come, you who are blessed by My Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (Matt. 25:35,36,40,34).

### 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Having come to the conclusion of the report, the committee formulated the following recommendations.

1. That the Report is recommended to the Churches for further study and implementation.
2. That the diaconates of the Churches are urged to cooperate regionally on a regular basis for mutual stimulation and interaction.
3. That in formulating and adopting a Church Order Article to frame a task description for the office of deacon the contents of this Report be considered and implemented.
4. That in formulating and adopting the part of the Form For Ordination of Elders and Deacons that deals with deacons, the contents of this Report be considered and implemented.