

# Reforming the Diaconate

William Shishko

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## *Part 3: Putting Principles into Practice*

The practical bent of the Western mind makes us always ask, “But how do I actually do it?” Rather than be defensive about this concern to be “practical,” we should be thankful for it. Knowledge is always to the end of obedience (“You are my friends if you do whatever I command you,” John 15:14), and wisdom, in its very nature, means the skillfulness of knowing how to do the will of God (“And Bezaleel and Aholiab and every gifted artisan in whom the Lord has put wisdom and understanding to know how to do all manner of work for the service of the sanctuary...,” see Exodus 36:1 ff.).

After dealing in article one with foundational Biblical principles defining the nature and work of the diaconate, and after dealing in the previous article with a model for training prospective deacons, surely the next issue is “How do you actually put this into practice?” In this final article I will draw from the pattern we use in the OPC, Franklin Square, New York. In explaining our model I do not intend to imply that you must do as we do. Because the diaconal office is essentially the work of freeing the elders for their primary task of prayer, the ministry of the Word, and rule (see Acts 6:4), their specific responsibilities will, in some respects, be different from place to place. Nevertheless, I think you will cull enough from our model to help you in your situation. I hope that you will at least be motivated to give attention to developing your Board of Deacons, and not letting this precious resource lie fallow.

We are blessed with three mature, gifted, and well-trained deacons who manage the diaconal responsibilities of a congregation of approximately 85 families. Since we do not have a great number of widows and widowers in need of special attention, this number is sufficient for our “ministry of mercy,” but the growing spheres of church responsibility delegated to the deacons by the Session mean there is increased “holy pressure” to prepare more men for the diaconal office. That’s in our plans for next year!

Appendix A is a copy of a typical docket for one of our monthly meetings of the Board of Deacons. The deacons meet once a month for approximately four hours, and their ranks are small enough that they can caucus throughout the month to deal with the multitude of “surprise” things that come their way. Either I or another Session member appointed by the Session meets with the Board of Deacons during its regular meeting. This is most important, because the Board of Deacons operates under the authority of the Session, and it is also dependent on the Session’s guidance in any number of matters coming before it. Some churches follow the model of having the Board of Deacons meet with the Session on a monthly basis to deal with “matters of common concern.” If that is helpful in your situation, fine, but be careful not to blur the distinction between the two offices.

Three foundational principles govern the format for our meetings:

1. The Board of Deacons is a BOARD (cf. the OPC Form of Government, XI:3). It has official authority to act on behalf of the “corporation” known as the OPC, Franklin Square. Hence, we have a docket, minutes, treasurer’s reports, etc., and operate using standard parliamentary procedure. The “informality” of our meetings does not detract from the care to do things in an orderly way, I Cor. 14:40.
2. The Board of Deacons is in charge of “TEMPORALITIES” and the church’s “MINISTRY OF MERCY.” About 4/5 of our time (after minutes, treasurer’s report, and

correspondence) is spent on the former. In churches with more responsibilities in “mercy ministry” that percentage would be different. Since there is a tendency to crowd out “mercy ministry” with “temporalities” (which, like the poor, are always with you!), periodically we deal with “Ministry of Mercy” matters earlier in the docket.

3. 3. The Board of Deacons operates under the supervision and authority of the Session (cf. OPC Form of Government, XI:5). There is regular communication between the two bodies (e.g. “Matters From/To Session” on the docket in Appendix A). Over the years we have developed our understanding and appreciation of the fact that both groups of officers serve, practically, as one body: The Session as a head, and the Board of Deacons as hands and feet. Their unified goal is to so function that the local church is ruled and served in such a manner that it grows more and more into a “pillar and ground of the truth” (I Tim. 2:15). It is important that your officers become comfortable with this model, and continually work together toward this goal.

Everything the Board of Deacons deals with during its meeting(s), and everything the deacons do from day to day is, basically, to assist in seeing the church function as an efficient organism in its work of presenting the Gospel. “Subcommittees,” each with a deacon or elder representative acting as “liaison,” connect the officer with church members who manage various elements of the church ministry. Does the book table manager need more space for her growing number of volumes for sale? What can be done to improve the invoicing mechanism for the tape ministry so that this ministry is financially well-managed? Are the nursery rules being enforced? What problems is the nursery superintendent having? What recommendations are there from the various people who work with the church sound system(s)? What equipment should be ordered? How are visitors being ministered to by families handling Lord’s Day hospitality. All of these are tasks which are directly connected with the church’s Gospel ministry; all are under the oversight of the Session; but all are given to deacons to manage under a system of wise delegation. Subcommittees are created as new spheres of ministry develop. Each deacon’s ability to deal wisely with people as a manager is most important in this regard. Remember that both elders and deacons must be men who have proven abilities to manage others, see I Timothy 3:12, cf. vs. 4.

“Old and New Business” usually pertains to matters regarding the church physical plant, the church manse, or order with respect to Lord’s Day activities. It is incorrect to think that fine tuning the air conditioning or heating, preserving cleanliness in the church bathrooms, or making provision for the maintenance of a church house are less “spiritual” matters which can be given over to a “Board of Trustees.” Everything in corporate church life is connected in some way or another with the church’s calling to “make disciples” (Matt. 28:19), and deacons must operate out of that conviction in every “physical aspect” of their work. If worshippers are too hot or too cold in the church sanctuary, if people cannot hear the minister because of poor amplification, if visitors do not know where to take a baby who cries during worship, if children are being destructive of church property due to poor supervision by parents after worship, etc. etc. etc., the church deacons have an official responsibility to deal with and correct these problems.

Some will ask, “Why don’t the elders handle these matters?” Certainly it is better that the elders deal with these things than that no one does; but it is better still that the deacons realize this is their sphere of responsibility. “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables...we will give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:2,4). Our Session members spend time dealing with the official public, family, and personal ministry of the word, and how to exercise our office of rule in each, and also in praying for the various matters before us as a church. This consumes our 4-5 hour-long regular monthly Session meetings, and other time during the month besides. “Temporalities” are referred to the Board of Deacons. If the deacons are “stuck,” or if they need the assistance of the Session (e.g., We need another “housekeeping meeting” after worship one Sunday soon to remind families about supervising their children before and after worship), they consult with us and we respond as necessary. This is good order, and it works well.

“Ministry of Mercy” receives much attention in the customary treatments of diaconal work, so I will not delve as deeply into this facet of labors of the Board of Deacons. It is sufficient to note that widows should always be the object of special care by deacons, cf. James 1:27. This does not mean that a church Board of Deacons is responsible to replace family members in meeting needs. Well-intentioned and kind-hearted deacons must never let their human compassion override the clear pattern of I Timothy 5:3-16. In many cases deacons will carry out their work in tandem with elders, and often their role will be to facilitate the providing of assistance in working with family members (e.g., “We are happy to help you work out a schedule for some of the church members to come and help you care for your aged mother during the times you need assistance.”), but widows (and, where applicable, orphans) must be seen as a special responsibility of the diaconate. This was the need which precipitated the formation of the diaconate in Acts 6!

Similarly, the aged, infirm, and shut-ins are a particular ward of the Board of Deacons. Each person in these categories needs pastoral ministry of the Word under the oversight of the Session, but each also needs the ministry of care which goes beyond what the elders bring. Is there an organized program to visit these needy saints, seeking to fulfill our Lord’s words in Matthew 25:35-40? Too often a church thinks of “ministry of mercy” as a means of evangelizing the lost, forgetting that Jesus’ concern in Matthew 25 was ministry to the saints (read verse 40 very carefully, cf. Gal. 6:10). At the same time, Boards of Deacons should be sensitive to the fact that both believers and unbelievers (e.g., “inquirers” about the Christian faith who regularly visit the church, unbelieving spouses of church members) who are brought within the orbit of a local church’s ministry must be treated as “neighbors” to whom there is a special responsibility.[\[1\]](#)

We have also found it necessary for our deacons to assist certain individuals and families in matters pertaining to budgets and financial planning. The extravagance and ill-discipline of our debt-laden generation have infected well-meaning Christians who need reform in this area of life. Boards of Deacons, due to the very nature of their work, must be models of good management in temporalities, including finances. When financial assistance must be given to “bail out” a family, this should also carry with it a willingness on the part of the beneficiary to receive counsel in bringing his or her finances in line with Biblical patterns of moderation and self-control. Deacons must, of course, show great discretion in this aspect of their work, but they must still exercise their official authority in this area if they are not to become welfare agencies akin to those managed by the State.

I trust that this will be suggestive enough for you to begin NOW on the work of practical reformation of your Board of Deacons. God has wisely given a wonderful resource in the office of official service. The Scriptures are sufficient to guide our formation, development, and functioning of the diaconate. No supplementation by creative imagination sparked by contemporary social problems is necessary. Let your deacons assist the elders by freeing them for prayer and the ministry of the word (both by rule and teaching), and God will magnify the extent and quality of your local church ministry in ways you would never imagine (see Acts 6:7). When the church IS what God calls it TO BE there is no doubt that His blessing will be present.

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## **Appendix A: Sample Docket for Board of Deacon’s Meeting**

Scripture:

Opening Prayer:

Minutes:

Treasurer’s Report:

Matters From/To Session:

- 1.
- 2.

- 3.
- 4.

Correspondence:

Matters To/From The Covenant Christian School [\[2\]](#)

Subcommittees:

1. Housing (Gene)
2. Book Table (Gene)
3. Tape Ministry (Gene)
4. Nursery (Phil)
5. Sound system (Joe)
6. Hospitality (Phil)

Old Business:

1. Manse/Parsonage matters.
2. Church physical complex.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

New Business:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Ministry of Mercy:

1. Financial Statement.
2. Specific Needs, Problems, etc.
  - a. Visiting Shut-ins.
  - b. Aged, Infirm, & Widows:
  - c. Unemployed:
  - d. Medical assistance?
3. Other?
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.

Miscellaneous Business

1. Future Projects:
- 2.
- 3.

Adjourn:

Closing Prayer:

Next Meeting:

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## Endnotes

[\[1\]](#) R. B. Kuiper treats this and related matters in his chapter “The Office of the Deacon” in his superb volume *The Glorious Body of Christ* (reprinted by The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983). I commend both this particular chapter and the entire book to you as a masterful treatment of the doctrine of the Church.

[\[2\]](#) A family association Christian school which uses the church facility.

[William Shishko](#) is pastor of Franklin Square OPC, Franklin Square, N.Y.