

Reformed and Presbyterian churches, following Calvin, reinstated the office of the deacon alongside that of ruling and teaching elders. However, the task of deacons and the diaconate is often poorly understood and applied in our churches. The Diaconal Committee of the International Conference of Reformed Churches has therefore prepared a statement entitled 'The Diaconal Ministry of the Church' in order to clarify and encourage discussion on this vital ministry. We would urge local church courts and church members to receive and study this document accordingly.

The Diaconal Ministry of the Church

Old Testament

Already in the Old Testament the Lord impressed upon his people Israel the obligation to show mercy to the needy. God repeatedly commanded that the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow might eat within their towns and be filled (Deut. 16:11,14). In the old dispensation the needy and suffering were protected and provided for by God's fatherly love (Deut. 24:19-21; 26:12,13; 27:19). His ordinances taught the covenant people to imitate that love as beloved children. We read many times that God's old covenantal people had to show mercy, especially towards the sick, lonely, poor, foreigners and strangers. God's people of the Old Testament also had to be a diaconal people (Isaiah 58:6-7; Micah 6:8).

Christ's example

The Lord Jesus Christ, who has shown us the Father (John 14:9), came into the world to serve (Mark 10:45). In his mercy he fed the hungry, healed the sick, and showed compassion to the afflicted (Matt. 4:23,24). Thus he gave an example, that his church should do likewise (John 13:15, 12:26; Matt. 20:26, 23:11, 25:42-46; Mark 9:35, 10:43; Luke 6:36, 10:25-37, 22:26-27). The ministry of mercy, as assigned to the deacons, proceeds, therefore, from this love of our Saviour (1 John 3:16-24).

The New Testament Church

After the example of her Lord, the first Christian congregation took care that no one in her midst suffered want (Acts 2:45). To each was distributed according to need (Acts 4:32-37). The office of deacon is a new office Christ gave to his church (Acts 6.1-7). With it he ensures that his liberation from the powers of sin and death receives hand and feet in everyday life. He ensures that mutual care is given in his congregation in the face of challenges like illness, loneliness, poverty and old age, in line with his own example when he was on earth.

The purpose of diaconal ministry

The reality of the new covenant helps us to understand a little why Christ instituted the diaconal office. It is a gift of Christ for an era in which Christ's church consists of converts from every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev. 7:9). It is the task of the deacons to ensure that the congregation functions like a harmonious family, taking loving care of each other's needs. So 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 (2 Cor. 9:12-15). No one in the congregation of Christ may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, old age, poverty and the like. 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, comfort and exhort with the Word of God those who receive the gifts of Christ's love. In this way God's children will increase in love to one another and to all men.

Scope

The scope of the deacons' ministry is not limited to the church. The apostle Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia: "let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." (Gal. 6:10) Deacons are called to help equip the church to fulfil this ministry also in the world. Through the ages the church has demonstrated Christ's ministry of love in the world. The early church reached out to the sick during epidemics and to those orphaned and abandoned. Missionaries not only preached the gospel, but also practiced it by giving medical care, educating the illiterate and teaching trades to the poor. In the past deacons often stood at the cradle of institutions like hospitals, homes for the elderly and for those with physical or mental disabilities. In Church history, when believers ministered to the needy around them in both Word and deed (Col. 3:17) the Lord has saved many. Ministering to temporal needs can, and with God's blessing should, become a wonderful means of ministering to eternal needs as well.

Task

Those called to the special diaconal office are to spearhead the church in the ministry of love, as Christ taught us. This ministry starts in the church towards fellow believers, yet also radiates into the world. In this ministry something of God's future purpose and plan becomes visible in this broken world. In its diaconal ministry the church works out Christ's plan to demonstrate and restore God's righteousness, mercy and peace in this world (Rom. 12:9-21). Deacons are called to lead and equip the members of Christ's church in this ministry of love (Rom. 12:6-8). This ministry already reveals the basic principles of the future recreated world, the kingdom of God, where there will be no more loneliness, poverty, aging, imprisonment, illness, disabilities or refugees (Ps. 72:12-19; Ps. 146). With this ministry of love Christians are called to labor for the coming of his kingdom in this still broken world.

Diaconal ministry

It is thus evident that the task of the deacon is not limited to the collection and distribution of funds, maintaining church property, or being a stepping stone towards eldership. Scripture indicates that diaconal ministry includes much more (1 Tim. 3:8-13). A deacon ought to be:

- A man of prayer: he prays with and for those to whom he ministers.
- A watchman: he is vigilant in identifying needs at the one hand and God-given gifts and resources at the other. He seeks out ways to comfort and restore.
- A coordinator: he promotes and facilitates cooperation where necessary, especially in times of need or disaster.
- A bridge-builder: he knows how to establish, maintain and build contacts and connect people.
- A protector: He upholds and protects the vulnerable, and bears burdens.
- A helper: He offers a listening ear, he looks for solutions for those in need, he is quick to help.

- A trainer and motivator: he trains, encourages and motivates the congregation in its diaconal ministry in the church and the world.

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It is our hope and prayer that this statement will encourage and strengthen the diaconal ministry in our churches for the glory of God.