

**The deacon and the church**  
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**Inhoudsopgave**

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**1 Introduction**

The theme of this conference is 'Caring for the church of God'. Great! God's call to 'rule over' (care) was already given at the dawn of creation (Genesis 1.26, the Cultural Mandate). The theme of our conference is therefore foundational as well as important in every respect. I'll try to highlight the diaconal angle of 'caring' in my presentation this morning.

The call to diaconal ministry (serving, caring for others) is as old as creation and remains as relevant as ever today. In the early church, defending and helping those in need was an essential responsibility

- a) Acts 2:41-47 (They sold their property and possessions to give to anyone who had need);
- b) Acts 3:1-10 (The crippled man asked for alms, but got what Peter had...instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong)
- c) Acts 4:32-37 (No one lacked anything. They shared everything they had and distributed to anyone as he had need.)

Helping, caring for each other lies at the heart of the gospel...!

Is it also in our hearts??

**2 Old Testament credentials**

*Diakonia*, caring and serving others, has credentials that are ancient indeed. The story of creation highlights that caring for one another is a divine mandate (Gen 1:26-28)!

Belonging to God implies that we must fulfill it. To confess that we love our Father in heaven, to witness about Him who saved us, involves caring for our neighbour (*diakonia*). That is God's mandate to us. There is no choice.

However, there is a decisive disconnect between the original context of this mandate and our present situation: **Genesis 3** – the Fall and our fall too!

It is telling that one of the very first acts of man recorded after the Fall was the murder of Abel. Cain flatly refused to take care even of his brother. As a disastrous follow-up, Lamech told his audience that everyone who touches him will be killed (**Genesis 4.23,24**)

When reading this it is easy to conclude that the Fall brings to an absolute end the willingness or ability of human beings to care for one another. Indeed, Scripture reveals that, from the moment of the Fall, man wants to be in charge and determine his own destiny – pushing God and neighbor aside.

Mercifully, God did not accept as inevitable the way of Cain and Lamech. Time and again He calls His people to take care of and help each other... 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' (**Leviticus 19.18**, etc.)

I note that **repentance** in the Old Testament is very closely connected with taking care of one another. This is a constant, continuing theme in Scripture. The Lord God insisted that His people care for one another. Whenever Israel drifted away from the Lord the prophets addressed that fundamental call to care for each other. This call is constant and emphatic. '*Repent and take care of the widow, the fatherless and the stranger...!*' **Exodus 22:21** reveals God's anger by to those who do not do this.

Do we truly care for our neighbour?

### 3.1 Diaconate in the Old Testament

Where to start a discussion on *diakonia* in the OT?

The concept of love, mercy and justice, as well as stewardship, reciprocity and compassion in the OT is the foundational background for the New Testament use of the word *diakonia*. In the book 'Diakonie in Beweging' (*Diakonia in action*) it is argued, among other things, that the practice of mercy and justice in the Old Testament, providing help to poor, hungry people, is at odds with world view (philanthropy) of the Near East at that time. The focus was on strengthening the power and influence of the ruling party. In contrast, the biblical concept of justice goes in a different direction. It was not a matter of '*I give you of my wealth so that you support me*', but of grace.

It is therefore not the donor who determines the help that is needed, but the dignity of the recipient. Caring for and helping others presumes the equality and dignity of all people. Hence the concern that anyone who receives help should never be looked down on and humiliated.

The OT concepts of mercy and justice preclude the idea that those being ministered to are inferior or made beholden. Growing out of this, *diakonia* in the NT is closely connected with Christ and the way he came to serve. This is characterized as the message of the reconciliation of fallen humanity with the Father and of serving His people. This leads us as Christians towards gracious, loving reciprocity with each other. Regarding someone being served as inferior or beholden is out of the question!

It should not surprise us that in the search for the roots of diaconal working in the OT terms such as 'equipping', 'leading', 'caring' are dealt with, in addition to 'helping out', 'helping to prevent' and the like.

It is not possible within the scope of this lecture to present more evidence that speaks about *diakonia* found in the OT. You'll find this in the internet-copy of my paper.

In the book 'Dienen en Delen' (Serving and Sharing) (page 27) Prof. Noordegraaf points out what Prof. Versteeg once wrote (and often told his students): The story of creation must be the starting point for understanding one's own life.

Genesis 1-11 can also teach us a lot about what is fundamental for diaconal action. The most remarkable thing is that the content of the diaconate is dealt with quickly and succinctly at the beginning of the creation account. This is also true when God established the covenant with mankind. There are the important notions with expressions such as 'being involved in', 'service to', 'helping', 'caring for', and / or helping to prevent. These terms are used not as something that enslaves or humiliates the recipient, but as something essential to being human. We have often lost sight of that because of our sinfulness and ignore that humility must be understood as humility - realizing our own smallness and that we are able to serve a great cause. It is not for nothing that the term 'steward' and 'stewardship' (in all its variations!) is often used to describe our diaconal tasks.

When God speaks to us as human beings, he provides guidelines for our entire existence: for who we are, what we say and what we do. We have been placed by God on this earth and in this world as His 'son' and 'servant' (Gen. 1: 26-28), created in His image and likeness. That is not only important for the biblical view of man, but also for the diaconate.

This is even more striking when reading these words against the background of the prevailing worldview of the Middle East, Mesopotamia and Egypt at that time. There the king was regarded as being divine (a god). Ordinary people had to work in the service of king and temple. But in Genesis 1 mankind (man and woman) is created in God's image (cf. also Gen. 5: 1ff).

This has huge implications for the diaconate. According to Scripture every man deserves respect and has value in himself, regardless of sex, intelligence, achievement, power, nationality, etc. He represents God on earth. He is created in the 'image of God'. The Creator calls man, as His image bearer, to imitate Him in the care for mankind and creation as God's steward. Psalm 24 sings that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. God calls man to make this earth a good place to live, to form a society focused glorifying name and the welfare of all its people. To be God's steward means that we are not allowed to plunder the goods that are entrusted to us, but to look after them as belonging to God and the enrichment of our neighbor (cf. also Luke 16:2, 10-12).

We must also mention terms such as guidance, worries, equipping, encouraging, serving and leading as expressions of life as servants of our Creator and Lord.

What is noteworthy is that we are given guidelines in the 'Cultural Mandate' (Genesis 1:26-29). We have been created to be caretakers not plunderers, to be servants, stewards in caring for our fellow creatures. This means that everyone has his own unique, personal value and must be valued for what he/she really is. We have God's command to serve one another in such a way that he/she increasingly learns to how live as a child and servant of God. The Lord calls us to respect and be involved in everything that God has created. We find that in Genesis 1.28, 'And God blessed them and God said to them: Be fruitful, and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea, over the birds in the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'

This is much more than pointing to the fact that humans must fill all the earth and increase in number! We must put these words in a much broader context. They also mean:

- We are personally responsible for our behavior and our use of what is entrusted to us;
- We must allow our lives to blossom and use our gifts for the wellbeing of God's creation;
- We help, encourage and spur on each other in bringing God's creation to its full potential;
- We make sure that this is seen, known and confessed everywhere on the earth!

This is 'word and deed' ministry. It means being a missionary and a deacon at the same time. We cannot and may not minister in one area to the exclusion of the other. It also means that diakonia (serving, caring) is essential to being God's image bearers. We may not lose sight of this essential truth. Someone who is true servant/image-bearer of God is, by definition, someone who 'deacons' (serves).

True, this was fundamentally disrupted by the consequences of the Fall (Genesis 3). What happened then had a destructive effect on that diaconal foundation laid Genesis 1.26ff. From that day mankind chose and always demonstrates that the inclination of his heart is, 'I can do it without God'!

Genesis 4 highlights this dramatically. Caring and responsibility for our brother's wellbeing is lost sight of and rejected. This chapter highlights the way of thinking that says, 'I am not prepared to be responsible for what I do even to God notwithstanding his mercy and giving me so many chances ...

We do not face up to or think important that we are our brother's keepers. We don't want to be involved, to be protective, watchful and caring for one another. In the refusal to be of service to others alienates and isolates us totally from God and our neighbour.

But there is a ray of hope. In proto-evangelium (Genesis 3:15) the LORD promises that He will, out of sheer grace, one day bring about reconciliation and restoration. What no man could do, Christ came to do. Speaking from the context of the New Testament Christ calls us, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to take care of and be responsible for our brother (neighbour) because of what He did for us not just occasionally but continually.

This is highlighted even more by the prophets in the OT. We must interpret their message against the background of God's having called Israel to be his chosen people. The criticism of the prophets is focused mainly on Israel's sins against each other and God's creation. Again and again the prophets highlight that Israel's refusal to care for the poor, widows, orphans and aliens is due to their having forsaken the Lord. In other words, social injustice takes place because people do not know God anymore. When the individual no longer worships God, the social order in the sense of caring for each other as fellow image-bearers falls away. Hence the prophets highlight that we able to fight against social injustice and social problems only if we trust in and obey God in all situations.

It is for this reason that all the OT prophets focus not only on what has gone wrong in society, but equally on the individual's heart. Their message does not stop at criticizing social injustice. It always leads to a call to individual repentance. They call for repentance that leads to turning away from idolatrous cultic worship (Baals, etc), a corrupt monarchy, a distorted justice system. Worship and life, fellowship with God and diakonia (serving) each other) charity and piety are combined in the living a life with God, c/f. Micah 6: 8 (Noordegraaf).

Proclamation of the Gospel and diaconal ministry are two sides of the same coin. One cannot take place without the other. (See our magazine Diacon, Vol. 29, no. 5 on this subject.) Throughout the OT diaconal ministry is clearly God's will. We should be involved with and care for our neighbours, especially those who are on the fringe of society – whether this is self-imposed or not. We must own this responsibility totally. When sin corrupted everything God made, he called us to care for each other. Doing so is an essential expression of being his people.

The command to love the neighbor as ourselves (Leviticus 19.18, 19.34) is found in the context of the Covenant of Grace God established with his people. It is a concrete outworking of knowing and loving God in our daily lives. This is directly connected to the care of those who do not have someone to help them in time of need (Deut. 10, 14, 24, 26, Lev 19, 23, 25).

What is also noteworthy is that this notion is also directly connected to the rest of creation. The words in those previous references are 'loving', 'showing mercy', 'doing justice' and/or making it happen, providing, being involved and being a good steward in every direction.

There are certainly many more points and issues from the OT that can be mentioned. We want to leave it here for now. We are already starting to make connections/application to ourselves in proclaiming and experience the gospel of God in in daily life.

In conclusion, we must acknowledge that *diakonia* (serving, caring for each other) lies at the heart of Christian life and our mission to the world. Our call is to explain, equip, guide, stimulate and enable this in such a way that God's sovereignty comes to expression in the world through the life of every Christian.

To highlight this, focus on the meaning of the word 'serve'. The task of the deacons involves highlighting and explaining this idea of serving to the congregation. This includes equipping, directing and enabling it to serve. This is especially necessary today when the idea of 'service' is increasingly perceived in a negative manner because it is misunderstood. This makes it even more important that we spend time in formulating these matters carefully and even establish a carefully written mandate to make this real and workable.

### 3.2 Diaconate in the New Testament

What we understand by *diakonia* (serving) is derived mainly from the NT. However, the OT background of service is deeply embedded in the ministry of our Saviour and his apostles. They were, after all, products of the OT world and life view. Even when using other languages (Greek), they took their OT ideas with them. They therefore needed five word-groups in Greek to express what it means to serve.

The word *diakonia* – the root of the word diaconate – covers only part of what we mean by the diaconate of the church. Besides *diakonia* four other word-groups are also used, each with its own accents.

- δουλεω - usually this word is associated with 'forced serving', especially in the sense of being 'slave'. Sometimes it also incorporates the notion of voluntary serving and then it gets is more a matter of 'being a servant'.
- λειτουργεω - originally a social-political concept: working for someone else; but slowly this meaning changed to working performed in the sanctuary, cf. the work of the priests in the OT.
- λατρευω- first used mainly in the sense of 'to serve for wages', but later just to 'serve' in the service of the deity, (cf. Ex. 3:12, 8: 8) - Israel wanted the freedom to serve God (λατρευω) in the desert.
- θεραπευω - the emphasis is on the good intention of the servant. It quickly becomes 'taking care of' or 'giving help', sometimes even 'healing'; - 'serving' of your fellow man, because you're in the position to do so!
- διακονεω - means especially in the OT: serve in commission and in imitation of God. That had a negative sound in the Greek world (sic!). In the NT, however, the emphasis is increasingly on serving less fortunate fellow man, the needy (see, for example, Luke 22: 26-27 - who is the most important, needs more) and serving each other with the bestowal of gifts.

We therefore need to note that the work of the diaconate (congregational and official) must take into account that Scripture uses more words than only just *diakonia*!

### 3.3 Our God given mandate

*Diakonia* is a continuing theme throughout the Scripture that reaches its climax in the life of Jesus Christ. He came to serve as an example and at the same time to equip/enable us to do so. He calls those who commit their lives to Him to serve as he served. After all, a tree is recognized by its fruit. Diaconate is in fact all what we do as believers to honor Him in this world!

Jesus Himself demonstrated this in his ministry. He preached Gods Kingdom as the time of the acceptable year of the Lord (**Luke 4:18ff**).

*'When he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, 19 To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. 20 And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. 21 And he began to say unto them: This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.'*

#### **4 Source and example**

Jesus is both the enabler and the example for our diaconal ministry. He first washes our feet and then asks us to follow His example (**John 13**). He calls us to serve, share and care. This is the fruit (outworking) of our faith, being a Christian. But it is more. It is a basic component of faith. Without it, faith isn't true faith.

When Jesus told us the story of the coming of the Son of man in his glory, and all the holy angels with Him (**Matthew 25:31ff**) He made it very clear that those who take care of their fellow countrymen will enter His kingdom: *'The King shall say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.....'*

Matthew 25 shows that diaconal ministry can never be outsourced to deacons alone. Diaconal ministry is the task of every Christian when and wherever he comes across a neighbor in need. In this passage the urgency of the diaconal lifestyle strongly confronts whoever hears what the Lord Jesus says. *'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.'* And for not caring it is the other way around: *Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was an hungry, and ye gave me no meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me not in; naked, and ye clothed me not; sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.....Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal.*

You also find that sense of urgency in the parable of the good Samaritan (**Luke 10**). But note: this parable is Jesus' answer to the question, *'What must I do to inherit eternal life?'* You should be neighbors towards each other! The Lord explains in the parable of the Good Samaritan that being a neighbor is depends on how you treat that neighbour. You are not automatically a 'neighbor' in the biblical sense of that word! You become one by loving him. The priest and the Levite did not. They were going down to Jericho and were therefore not on their way to work. They were on their way home. They certainly could help this man as it would not have any repercussions to their work at the temple. By not helping, they fail to be a true neighbour. Furthermore, a helper cannot and may not choose who he wants to be close to. Jesus says we become a neighbour when we help and establish a relationship with that person we help. He makes it very clear with this parable that we should *'go and do likewise.'* We serve and help so that others may recognize us as those who show mercy, that is, act diaconally.

This direct connection between God, me and my neighbor brings the diaconate into the heart of the life and ministry of the church. Diaconal ministry is not a byproduct of our faith. It belongs to its essence. Without diaconal ministry, faith in Christ is not faith. On the other hand, diaconal ministry without faith in Christ is merely humanitarian help. The Samaritan knows what he must do and acts accordingly. The priest and the Levite know what to do and fail to act. The Samaritan gave help to someone who would in normal circumstances despise him. As a Samaritan he knew that, but still loved his neighbour.

It turns out that faith needs *deeds* to be faith. The reverse is equally true. Deeds need faith. James 2,18: *'You have faith; I have deeds. Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.'* The Samaritan was, according to Jewish belief at that

time, not a member of God's household. Yet he shows his faith by his deeds. The leaders, who knew better, did not behave as members of God's household.

In Matthew 25 and Luke 10 Jesus teaches us that it is not our religious and theological knowledge determines who our neighbour is, but the way we deal with the needy. The implication is that the diaconate lies at the heart of obeying the Great Commandment. *'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and soul, and mind, and strength; and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is no other commandment greater than these.* There is a lot at stake in these two Bible commandments, including the role of the diaconate. Do you agree?

## 5 We all are deacons

To fulfill the Great Commandment, we must take care of each other and the needy and/or neighbor because of our relationship with our God. This is a fundamental expression of our submission to God's Word.

Therefore, the very first task of the deacon is to prepare church members to care for and help one another and the needy neighbor. This is highlighted by the Lord Jesus in **John 13:14-15**. *After He washed the feet of His disciples he said: If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.*

In the light of this, we as pastors and elders and church members alike should consider ourselves deacons, even without being labelled as such formally. This alongside our calling to be missionaries!

This is not something you don't already know. Therefore, without elaboration, let me draw the **first conclusion**: we are all deacons. We must all act as deacons in taking care of, serving, helping one another and the needy, irrespective of who he or she is! That is the first biblical truth we must accept if we want to discuss the work of the diaconate in our churches.

Based on what I have highlighted thus far, I believe that we ought to make a distinction between the diaconal calling of every believer and the office of our deacons. It is only when we see this that a discussion on the **office** of the deacon can take place.

As Christ's servants, we must all fulfill our calling in this matter of diakonia. Many chapters in the New Testament reveal this calling as ours. By way of example, see **Galatians 6:10** where Paul writes: *'do good to all men... especially to them who are of the household of faith.'* He wrote these words to the Galatians because there were huge problems there. There was quarreling and fighting amongst each other. Therefore, he told them that they themselves should not only be good to those outside the congregation but especially to their own people! In the household of faith we ought to learn to do good to one another in order to be equipped to do good beyond all men and women, the whole world!

## 6 The Kingdom and the church

The **Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)** may perhaps be called the civic integration course for the Kingdom of God (how to be citizens of the Kingdom of God). It is also a powerful foundation for the diaconal work in every local church. It is therefore necessary to focus on this passage.

The words 'justice' and 'mercy' are, not only basic descriptors of diaconal ministry, but also for understanding the Kingdom of God. Let me explain.

In the church we believe that through the life and work of the Lord Jesus, God has shown that He has all power and authority. He is the King who sympathizes with the congregation, who allows it to reign with Him and even to take charge with Him as co-regents. He a king who engages His people and makes them responsible – but *he* sets the boundaries Himself and makes all the decisions because He has a well-defined goal and sticks to it. His goal is to restore this world as His own, totally, fully!

The Bible tells us that although the world belongs to Him it has rejected Him and no longer wishes to accept His sovereign rule. Through His Son He reveals that this world is still His. It is and remains His world!

This is what becomes visible when the church of the Lord Jesus takes mercy and justice seriously in everything they strive to do. That is why we say: God's kingdom has come but at the same time is still to come in all its glory. We are called to show biblical mercy and justice as the signs that the Kingdom of God has come and is coming.

## **7 Mercy & justice**

God asks us to show mercy and justice in our lives. He has transformed us and he loves us. That is why we ask Him to teach us to live according to His will. And that is why these two words, 'mercy' and 'justice' are so important. Being merciful has everything to do with an awareness of our neighbour's need which moves you, both spiritually and physically, as it did Jesus. Suffering led Him to have compassion (**Matt 9.36**). Mercy grows out of your heart, your inner being, touched by what you see and what you do as a result. It is a way of life. It shapes how you live and see the purpose of life, how you use what God has given you. Mercy is not interested in reward at all.

In sum: righteousness means living a pure, sincere life as our Lord intends. It is therefore about your attitude, about how you live in harmony/peace with God, your neighbor(s), creation and yourself. In each of these four areas God calls you to live pure and sincere lives because He has given everything - even His own Son - to give you that life.

This inevitably leads to worship and praise. We want to live a different life in Christ. Our hearts seek to be filled with his presence and power. We speak as He wants us to speak. We do what he commands. We serve Him with deeds of mercy and justice.

A Christian community becomes visible when its members serve and submit to one another and the wider community and, ultimately, the world in which it lives. A Christian community shows mercy and justice to the people and the world in which it lives.

Seeing how important it is to be aware of the biblical context of diakonia, let's move on to the deacons themselves.

## **8 The credibility**

We know that Acts 6 is very important. It describes how the office of deacon was established because there were problems in the NT church. A structure was created to ensure that people who are neglected would be taken care of. Apparently the 'cultural problem' presented by the Grecian Jews was overlooked. (i.e. people who were 'different' were not fully accepted and/or respected. They were overlooked happens quite often when a congregation grows). The Greek-speaking widows were helped by the appointment of the seven who are to engage themselves also with the Holy Communion ('waiting on tables'). In other words, the deacons were called to coordinate and stimulate care for each other and to serve the tables (the daily ministrations, or the daily distribution of food)! We may not conclude that Stephen and his colleagues in so doing define the task of our deacons today! The essence of their mandate is clear: encourage the church members to take care of each other, our neighbors, the needy and the world around us. Show them by being an example, being salt and light to the world!

We need to take careful note of the work of deacons as described in Acts 6. The mandate given to these original deacons has, at the very least, become somewhat neglected and overlooked in many churches today. Stephen and Philip were deacons, but even more so, evangelists! Furthermore, most deacons in our churches today are not caring for the needy (neglected). They may be doing so for the needy in their own church, but what about the needy wider community? I think they rarely do that!! In Acts 6 the real reason for the appointment of the seven was to help the Greek-speaking widows who were being neglected. Therefore, a minority group should also be helped by us!

You may disagree with me by pointing out that mandate of the deacon as reflected in your church order doesn't reflect that task. You may be right. But, in the light of Scripture, I think you should rethink their mandate. It is also noteworthy that in Acts 5 (Ananias and Sapphira) the issue is not the preaching of the gospel, but the care for one-another with no strings attached, that is at stake.

From a diaconal point of view the credibility of the message of the church is blurred when we do not maintain the relationship between word and deed. I think that there is no need to say anything more about the unity of diakonia and testimony, about word and deed.

## 9 The church and diaconate

Someone has said: *'The church is a saving angel in the sense that the church has always looked after people in need. Look at the early church. If there was a plague in the city, Christians offered help, even putting their own lives at risk. They did so whether one was a Christian or not.'* (letter of Diocletus). Monasteries also played an important role in mercy and hospitality.

Even today most of the time charity starts in the church! The diaconate helps the congregation by giving instruction in its diaconal task. They explain and make clear what the meaning of key words such as mercy, justice, service, sacrifice and hospitality. These words explain what the hands and the feet of the church (what it does and where it goes), of our faith are!

Diaconal ministry is deeply involved in addressing social, material or physical needs. This involves a focus on financial problems and debts, loneliness, imprisonment and illness. But it also includes the needs of refugees and people with disabilities. We are called as churches to seek out these diaconal needs and develop a strategy to become involved in them.

Historically there has been a lack of clarity about the role and office of the deacons in the local church. This lack of clarity in the reformed family of churches has been there from the time of Calvin onwards. In our churches (CGKiN) the decision to make the offices of elder and deacon equal (1965) has led to the deacons a study of their task. It became clear that, historically, this office has received very little attention. It was also found that the office of deacon is not that 'attractive' and that many deacons have some sort of inferiority complex in the sense of feeling that they are second-class office-bearers. Numerically they are fewer than the elders in a church council. Their role is inferior to that of elders. Their status at broader ecclesiastical meetings is lesser in comparison to other office bearers in the churches.

## 10 The tasks of the deacon

However, the deacon must provide direction to the congregation in equipping all the members to serve. As the elder gives pastoral guidance and direction, the deacon does so diaconal ministry. This is a joint ministry.

The deacon may be regarded as a conductor, but he does this from within the body of the congregation that called him to this task. Although deacons are often only busy as doers (performing 'diaconal duties') their core task is really to make church members aware of, stimulate and show them how they can express and work out their salvation to their neighbors far and near. The deacon equips and demonstrates to the congregation how this works and also enables them to do it.

In the past the government in the Netherlands took over many of tasks that belong to the church. This is now being reversed. As a result, our deacons are being presented with a wonderful opportunity to show the congregation how to take on these tasks once again. This governmental 'shift' requires guidance to and from the deacons because there is now a new emphasis that involves engaging in personal conversations, home visits, etc.

There are therefore four task fields for the deacon:

- a. to **equip** the congregation to live effectively by faith in God's grace in Christ Jesus (focus on sanctification).
- b. to **promote** the role of the diaconate to its proper place in the worship service, especially the in the liturgy.
- c. to **encourage, stimulate and equip** the congregation to be actively involved in serving each other, especially those who are in need wherever/whoever they may be. (being true community in the biblical sense).
- d. to **lead and stimulate** the congregation to work on its calling to build and preserve the earth (focus on stewardship).



The task is to provide information, stimulation and to equip the church to be a church in wider community. Therefore, the deacon needs to create an awareness in four areas:

- a. being diaconal (serving) is an expression of the **core business** of a true Christian who believes in the risen Savior.
- b. diaconal involvement by the **entire congregation** is the starting point for the deacons of the church.
- c. the deacons are meant **to support and stimulate** the diaconal ministry of the congregation;
- d. every believer is called to live a life in which word and deed are **working in tandem**.

Members of the congregation should, by definition, be missional and diaconal in spirit. Both aspects are basic expressions of being members of Christ's congregation. The entire congregation, and that includes office bearers and pastors, is important for the community (local and international) in which it lives. It must be so enthusiastically, fully and responsibly because it is aware that everything it has, has been given it by God. At the same time the congregation also realizes that God's plans for the church and world are not yet finished and that there is still a lot to do in His service.

### **11 Our diaconate: a missionary dimension not a missionary intention**

The deacon needs to understand that the church has a diaconal character and that its growth can only take place as it embraces this truth. Therefore, the task of the deacon is to strengthen the awareness of diaconal ministry and the way this shapes the church. History repeatedly demonstrates that diaconal ministry has been shaped by the circumstances in which the church finds itself. The church is forever responding and adapting to its environment.

This means that the diaconate should focus on the varying challenges which confront the church in any given situation. The diaconate should be able to 'translate' (apply) God's Word into the time and the situation in which it and the congregation live. The proclamation of God's Word is then immediately followed by application, and/or equipping. The deacon is called to articulate what the diaconal responsibilities of the congregation are in any given situation and then teaches and encourages it how to 'serve' in it. He continues to live and coordinate the diaconal tasks that arise in the congregation in response to the proclamation of God's Word. These diaconal deeds give him his spiritual motivation. When that happens, it becomes clear that his actions and the actions of the congregation are a living and clear diaconal testimony, i.e. the missional dimension of their diaconate comes into being. The deacons do not in and of themselves have a missional task. However, when they function properly in the congregation it testifies to the love of Christ that controls us!

The congregation must therefore be aware of its own character and of the source from which its life and character is derived. Every church member should therefore accept their responsibilities to God, his fellow man and everything else that God has created, with everything with which he or she comes into contact.

Think of a flower. It is fed by the soil its roots as it grows slowly from bud to flower. Likewise, true to Christ, a person's gifts blossom as he/she takes their place in the congregation and the community for the praise of God's glory. God's dealings with this world continue: saving and judging, building and breaking, whereby he uses us, his children, as His 'servants'. The aim is to make the congregation aware of its God-given place in society and to do so in a manner that suits both the gifts and potential of the congregation and its surroundings. In all of this, the deacons must articulate and promote a clear policy and provide what is needed in a variety of ways (for example: special courses, discussion groups, home visits). They should also give special attention to the young people and their role in all of this.

## 12 Things to consider...

The congregation needs to become more aware of its deacons and take on board what they are able to contribute in equipping it in its ministry in the name of Christ for the well-being of its neighbors far and near. This all the more so in situations where that neighbor has no helper at hand.

To be more precise: the presence of the church in society as such is diaconal as it proclaims God's saving love in Christ (c/f **John 3.17** and **Mark 10.45**). We must shine our light before men *'that they may see your good works and glorify your Father'*, (**Matt 5.16,**) to everyone who is our neighbor. We must do good to all, fellow believers as well as close and distant relatives, neighbours and aliens. (**Galatians 6:10**).

This leads to a number of diaconal issues that must be pointed out and emphasized:

- real sympathy (love) for one another other brings to live 'caring for each other' as well giving true warmth to diaconal ministry.
- supporting people who have real needs.
- enabling people; working together with young and old, etc .
- placing individual believers in accordance with their gifts. (finding a good fit for each person.);
- praying with and for each other.
- forming a real community connected through common values and ideals.
- pursuing a lifestyle that is in line with what we have learned about our Savior, its cost notwithstanding.
- doing justice and showing loyalty to society, near and far.
- realizing that everything we have received is from God and that we are to share with those who have less in society;
- showing God's love in Christ for us by doing 'good things' that imitate Christ demonstrate heartfelt love for God. When these things happen, God's people will be compelled to do what is just, to love kindness and to walk humbly with their God (**Micah 6:8**).

They will seek to do good with heart and hand by giving becoming aware, providing care and food whether indirectly or directly. They will do so whoever they are – simply caring Christians, or as those specifically designated and called to office as deacons, pastoral or diaconal workers.

At the same time, we must also bear in mind that diaconal work is a testimony to God's saving love. That includes ministry done as informal care, volunteer work or that involves initiating and motivating organized help in society at home or abroad.

It is essential to ask the basic, foundational question again and again. Is the Word proclaimed and heard in the lives of the hearers as we serve them?

For example:

- a diaconal community should be a welcoming congregation;
- hospitality is a fundamental expression of congregational life;
- diaconal ministry is more a lifestyle than just a list of activities;
- doing more than just inviting people over for coffee;
- hospitality it is about making room for the other person;
- it could even be space on the coat rack, in the shopping bag, in your diary and in your heart;
- a congregation should be like an inn along the road of life, a place to catch your breath, an oasis of peace, where the doors are open without the warmth being lost.

## 13 The profile of the deacon

What has been said thus far strongly influence what, in our view, is a possible profile of the deacon. In the practice of church life the deacon is mainly seen as an 'doer'. But I would argue that this 'doing' (administrative) side should not be of more prominent than the policy-making and equipping side. We should not put too much emphasis on the administration side of his office because when this happens the spiritual source and origin of

the office fades into the background or even disappears. Acts 6 tells us that this should not happen.

Moreover, it remains unclear what the 'doer' task of the deacon is in relation to the diakonia. After all, diakonia is the task and assignment of the entire congregation. Deacons cannot and should not take over this task. In daily church life the office of deacon is so narrowed down that it is largely limited to only administrative tasks. Unfortunately, this is also clear from when, in our churches, we see that many young deacons return as elders after a first term of office as a deacon. That shows, among other things, that there is too little attention for the biblical nature of the office of the deacon. Specific gifts for the deacon office are recognized only to a very limited degree.

From what I have said thus far, a number of roles and responsibilities of the deacon have become clear. We used a variety of verbs to describe this. It goes without saying that not every deacon has to be fit for every role or aspect of every profile. It is enough that these roles can be shared among the deacons – with some strengths and gifts in one area, and others having different abilities.

#### **14 the roles of deacons**

The role of the deacon as 'instructor' and 'processor' I see as multifaceted and almost impossible to display in a profile. We therefore focus on his role. The deacon:

- prays - the deacon prays and intercedes for those who do not have someone alongside them;
- pays attention - the deacon is especially vigilant in paying attention to the areas where there are needs;
- cooperates - the deacon promotes and/or facilitates cooperation where necessary, especially in times of need and disaster both in a both in personal and communal way;
- builds bridges - the deacon is like a mediator, a bridge builder; he is someone who knows how to establish, maintain and build contacts and connect groups;
- helps - the deacon will roll up his sleeves; he will offer help where no one else does; he will look for solutions with clients, offers a listening ear, help to hold on, carry each other's burden;
- initiates - the deacon is to be a pioneer striving to take initiatives to create awareness of diaconal needs; he motivates others to contribute;
- signalizes - the deacon identifies and points out abuse, as well as those responsible and he is an advocate and voice for the victim[s].

Because the deacon's domain is within the congregation he serves, the nature and range of his responsibilities will be in accord with his local situation. This will differ from congregation to congregation and from time to time. It is certainly not a matter of every deacon should be able to act in every role. However, it is important, that in the diaconate of our churches the roles listed above can be found with the corps of the deacons.

#### **15 The deacon and the elder**

I have sought to demonstrate from Scripture that diakonia is something which church as a whole and that every individual Christian is called to do. The deacon works with all the brothers and sisters of his congregation within that large area I have called 'diakonia'. The deacon's task is to organize and stimulate the diakonia.

The diakonia comes before the specific office or mandate of the deacon. It has its starting point at the Lord's Supper, flows from and out of Christ's sacrifice. A Christian teaches himself to serve others in imitation and on behalf of his Savior. When doing this, he demonstrates the diaconal responsibilities assigned him in both the OT and NT.

History repeatedly demonstrates that what deacons do is determined by the circumstances in which the church finds itself. As we saw, Scripture itself already shows that changes are taking place. Therefore, it must be emphasized that the real nature of the office should not be determined or shaped by what we see deacons doing (or not doing) in many of our

churches today. The office of deacon is to be based on the imitation of Christ and flows from his Word.

Christ's church, as made manifest in a local congregation, has been called and appointed by its Savior, Jesus Christ. He has appointed deacons to equip the congregation for the work of diakonia. congregation has been called into this world. More pointedly, in obedience to Christ, the proclamation of God's Word must include diakonia and apply this to our everyday lives in all situations. The deacon articulates the consequences of the proclamation of the Gospel. He teaches the congregation that we all are to 'serve'. He then coordinates and stimulates the diaconal tasks in the congregation. In this approach, the office of deacon finds the spiritual source (again) in the exercise of the office.

Therefore the deacon is not just a 'do-er'! He will be looking for doers in the congregation and will work with them. He will be example. He will coordinate the diaconal activities of these doers. The deacon emphasizes the direction in which the diaconate should take and focus on. He listens to the Word continually as circumstances and times change (after all: in changing circumstances the diaconate changes) so that the congregation is equipped to serve. *'... equip the saints for service ...'* In this role, the deacon leads the congregation. The elder gives guidance in a pastoral sense and the deacon does so in diaconal sense. Both offices, together with the pastor, should form the church council. They lead the congregation together from their own perspective under the Lordship of Christ our head. As we all know, in our congregational practice the distinction between pastorate and diaconate is often an artificial one. Furthermore, these official areas are constantly merging. Therefore, consultation between the relevant office bearers is necessary and self-evident. Have the offices closely interacting and interdependent. Word and deed go hand in hand, as must the office bearers. This will enable growth in faith and practice.

The deacon as a member of the church council has a role in leading the congregation. In my view we should get away from the idea of inequality and dissimilarity between deacons and elders in our churches. The relationship between them could be expressed as follows:

*'Both elders and deacons must account for their own policy on the entire church council. The elders test the diaconal policy on the pastoral aspect and vice versa, the deacons test the pastoral policy on the diaconal aspect.'*

The proper nature of the deacon office is therefore more equipping than administrative, more 'listening to the Word' or 'practically teaching from the Word', in order to go and 'do what I told you'! But this will only work if the instructor also leads by example. However, the deacons must not, by the example they set, do the work for the congregation. The financial or material support for the work the deacons is the task of the entire congregation. The congregation must provide the deacon with sufficient resources for this support. The deacon is the connecting link between the congregation and the person asking for help. He coordinates.

Today's secularized society and the difficult economic situation teach us again that task of deacons is also a form of proclamation. A missional church is not possible without its diaconal ministry. When we become the church as Christ intended, diakonia will manifest spontaneously and will lead to it once again being 'favored by all people'.

It is striking that in most churches the form used for the ordination/installation of office bearers is relatively quiet about the mandate given to the deacons. From the perspective of the deacon, it often sounds as though that the practice of the churches at the time the ordination form was formulated is the norm even for today. This in spite of the fact that the circumstances have changed dramatically through the years.

I will leave it at that for now wait for the questions of the GA of 2017.

Thank you

Gé Drayer, April/May 2018; Ugchelen – the Netherlands  
translation: Dirk van Genderen, April 2019;