

Paper 4. The deacon and the church

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1 Introduction

The theme of this conference is wonderful: Caring for the church of God.

Caring is the mandate our Lord gave us from the beginning - Genesis 1:26 already speaks about it! So, the theme of our conference is very basic and very important in every aspect. I'll try to highlight the diaconal side of it this morning. Diaconate is as old as the world! Yet it is still very relevant today. To stand up for and help people in need is essential for the early church, even from the beginning:

- a) Acts 2:41-47 (They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need);
- b) Acts 3:1-10 (the man asked for alms, but only got what Peter had ... and his feet and ankle bones received strength);
- c) Acts 4:32-37 (Neither was there any among them that lacked... because distribution was made unto every man according as he had need).

So helping is at the heart of the gospel...! Also on ours??

2 Old papers

Diaconate has very old biblical papers.

The story of creation tells us above other things that we have to be involved in caring for one another, Gen 1:26-28! Our relationship to our God implies that we do! There is no excuse when we don't! To confess that we love our Father in heaven, to speak out for Him who saved us, means we have to take care of our neighbors! There is no way out! But, by saying this we also imply that there is a decisive rupture between the origin of this mandate and our present situation because there is Gen. 3 – the fall, our fall too!

Moreover, the most disturbing problem is that one of the very first acts of men that are recorded after the fall – the murder of Abel – is that Cain flatly refused to take care of even his brother. And as a disastrous follow-up Lamech told his audience that everyone who will touch him will be killed. We read this and could think: this is the absolute end for mankind concerning the mandate of caring for his brothers and sisters. Mankind itself wants to be in charge and handle his own existence – pushing God out of sight, and his/her neighbor at the very same time!

Fortunately for you and me our God did not accept that as a way of living! Time and again He encouraged His flock to take care of and help each other. Even more: repentance in the Old Testament is very closely connected with taking care for one another. It's written down again and again in Scripture. Our Lord **insisted** that His people take care of one another and when Israel drifted away from Him, His prophets addressed that caring and helping very vigorously and repeatedly: repent **and** take care of the widow, the fatherless and the stranger...! Exodus 22:21 states God's anger by not complying to that ruling. But do we?

3.1 Diaconate in the Old Testament

While reading in the OT, the question quickly arises where to start.

In the Old Testament it appears that especially the concept of love, mercy and justice, but also stewardship, reciprocity and compassion form the background for the New Testament use of the word diakonia. In the book 'Diakonie in beweging' it is argued, among other things, that the practice of mercy and justice in the Old Testament, proven to poor, hungry people, is at odds with philanthropy in the Near East. Philanthropy was aimed at strengthening the power and influence of the ruling party. The biblical concept of justice goes deeper. There is not the principle 'I give you of my wealth so that you support me', but **grace**. Not the giver determines the help that is needed, but the dignity of the recipient. Helping the other is based on the fundamental equality and dignity of people. That is why anyone who receives help should never be humiliated. The concepts of mercy and justice do not emphasize the slavishness or inferiority in the

ministry. Because in the NT diakonia and the like are strongly connected with Christ and His service. A service that we have to characterize as a service of reconciliation of the world with His Father and of serving His people. This leads us more into the direction of gracious, loving reciprocity with each other. Inferiority and slavishness is therefor 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, however, not possible within the scope of this lecture to present more of all the evidence that speaks about *diakonia* found in the OT. You'll find it later on on the internet-copy of my paper.

In the book 'Dienen en Delen' (page 27), Prof. Noordegraaf points out what Prof. Versteeg once wrote (and often told his students): The creation had to be the starting point for Israel for understanding one's own life. Genesis 1-11 can also teach us a lot about what is fundamental for our diaconal action. The most remarkable thing is that the content of the diaconate is dealt with quickly and accurately, namely at the beginning at creation, but also at the covenant that God makes with man. There are the important notions that we present with words such as 'being involved in', 'service to', 'helping', 'caring for' and / or helping to prevent, and then not as something slavish, something humiliating but as something principled, something that belongs to our being human. We have often lost that through sin, so we no longer realize that humility must be understood as humility - realizing our own smallness in the knowledge that we can serve a great cause.

It is not for nothing that the term steward (in all its variations!) is often used for our diaconal tasks.

When God begins to speak with us as human beings, he gives us guidelines for our entire existence: for who we are, what we speak and what we do. We have been placed by God on this earth and in this world as His "child" 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. All the more when we read these words against the background of the then Middle East, Mesopotamia and Egypt. There the king was seen as an image of 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: 1v). For the diaconate, this implies that according to the Bible every man deserves respect and has value in himself, regardless of sex, intelligence, achievement, power, nationality, etc. They represent God on earth.

That 'we are created in the 'image of God' implies that the Creator calls man, as His image carrier, to follow Him in the care for mankind and the world, as God's steward. Psalm 24 sings that the earth is God's crown domain. God calls man to make this earth a good residential area and to form a society in that area, focused on the honor of His name and on the welfare of all people. To be God's steward means that people are not allowed to consume the goods that are entrusted to them, but to administer them in the service of God to the blessing of the neighbor (cf. also Luke 16: 2,10-12). Then we have to mention terms such as guidance, worries, equipping, encouraging, serving and leading with a view to life for and in the service of their Creator, their Lord.

The most remarkable thing is that as a human being we are already given (guide) lines in this 'creation assignment': we have been appointed as a human being in creation, not as an activist, but as a caretaker, as a servant, as a steward. In relation to our fellow creatures, this means that everyone has his own unique, personal value and should be valued as he/she really is. That is to say: we have God's command to serve each(!) other in such a way that he/she (also more and more) increasingly learns to 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 vs. 28 where it says: And God blessed them and God said to them: be fruitful, become numerous, fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea, over the birds in the air and over all the animals that crawl over the earth!

That, according to the context in which this verse stands, reaches far beyond the fact that the human race spreads across the earth and increases in number! We have to put these words in a much broader perspective: what we are because of Him spreads out across the whole world. In short, it means:

- We are personally responsible for our behavior and our dealings with what is entrusted to us;
- We allow our lives to blossom and make all our gifts fruitful for God's creation;
- We help, stimulate and support each other to bring God's Creation to fruition, to serve;
- We make sure that this is seen, known and confessed everywhere on earth!

That is word and deed in one, to be a missionary and a deacon at the same time. We cannot and may not act or live one sided.

We have to conclude that the diaconate belongs to our original humanity: from the beginning God gave these tasks to the human being and through our faith that becomes visible in our being human. That is the main line we have to keep: a God loving person is by definition a diaconal (and missionair) person. This main line is fundamentally disrupted in the following chapters of Genesis and with far-reaching implications. What happens in Genesis 3 has a destructive effect on that diaconal foundation. That is where man decides, and he always shows, that 'I can do it without God'!

In Genesis 4, the meaning of this is immediately painted in bright colors and is staggering: the care for the other is grounded in every respect. The bond with the other is *loose, disconnected* from that moment on. Genesis 4 tells us: as a person I am basically not prepared to answer for what I think and do, not even to my God who approaches me so exceptionally lovingly and gives me so many opportunities ... We do not value that we have brothers and sisters. We don't want to be involved, to be protective, watchful and caring. In the end, the refusal to be of service to the other means: we are left alone... and are on our one, totally.

However, in the mother promise of Genesis 3:15, the LORD promises that He will provide reconciliation and restoration. What no man could do, Christ came to do as Messiah. Speaking in line with the *New Testament* we can say: Christ asks us – guided by the Holy Spirit – to take care of and be responsible for our brother, for whom we are the neighbor, because of what He did for us – not just for a certain moment, but every day of our life.

That becomes even more important because we read in the OT the words of the prophets. We must listen to them against the background of God's loving choice for Israel: their criticism is mainly focused on Israel's dealings with each other and with God's creation: they don't want to take care for them all **because** they have forsaken the Lord. Social injustice takes place because people do not know God anymore. The social order, society no longer needs God, because man no longer needs God ... We are only able to fight against social injustice and social problems if we see that faith and life are one: our everyday life is determined by the way we 'walk with our God' and vice versa! In his criticism, every prophet not only looks at what goes wrong in society, but also at the personal relationship of every Israelite with his God. Their appeal does not stop at criticizing social injustice, it succeeds with a call to repent to everyone, from high to low - an appeal to break with a degenerated cult, a degenerated monarchy, a devalued justice. Worship and life, diaconate and fellowship with God, charity and piety are combined in the unity of life before God, cf. Micah 6: 8 (Noordegraaf).

The unity of diaconate and testimony has to be taken for granted: for this we refer to our magazine Diacon on this subject, Vol. 29, no. 5.

Everywhere in the OT it is clear that the diaconate is God's mission: we should be involved with and care for our neighbors, especially those who are at the edge of society - whether or not by their own fault. 'Belonging' means on the one hand that it belongs to us, but also that it is our mission and that it does not go without saying that we do the same. When sin spoiled everything God made, He told us to act like this: it is an inseparable part of the covenant He made with his people. The command to love the neighbor as ourselves is in the context of the covenant, Lev. 19:18 & 19:34. It is knowing and loving the concretization of God in our daily lives. This is directly connected to the care of those who do not have a helper for the people of Israel (Deutr. 10, 14, 24, 26, Lev 19, 23, 25). The remarkable thing is that this notion is also directly connected to all that is created. The words that we then come across are loving, showing mercy, doing justice and/or making it happen, providing, being involved and being a good steward.

There are certainly many more points and issues from the OT that we can mention. For the time being we want to leave it here because according to us we are already drawing lines to today to go to work with the gospel and to apply it in daily life.

In conclusion and summarizing it is worth noting that the diaconate is an inseparable part of the Christian life and at the same time our mission. The official diaconate wants to go for it, equip for it and give it guidance and stimulate it in such a way that God's Kingship takes shape in the world through the life of every Christian.

In other words, diaconate means that we live from the love and grace received in Christ. We also want to mention the meaning of 'serve'. The work of the official diaconate, and in the extension and in support

thereof, (also that of deputies diaconate) is then pointing to the above-mentioned core idea, to submit it to the congregation, to equip and stimulate it so that the actions of the congregation (members) is seen as a diaconate - working as a diaconal. There is one but: the word 'service' has received a negative sound more than once in our time. That is absolutely not right. Especially when we consider what the Bible means by this word. In our context, it is important to avoid misunderstanding. However, the relationship with the service of Christ as a source for the diaconate is so essential that it should be expressed in a working formula.

3.2 Diaconate in the New Testament

The word *diakonia* – the root of the word diaconate – covers only partly what we mean by the diaconate of the church. What we understand by diaconate comes mainly from the NT, but it's so closely connected with what we find in the OT that we should not be surprised that our Savior and his apostles use that to express what they understand by it. They ensured that the conceptual ideas of diaconate in the OT ended up in the NT: they came from that 'world'. When using other languages, they took their ideas with them and thereby filled those words they needed from that other language to pass on the gospel. They therefore needed five word groups in Greek, each with its own accents:

- **douleuo** - usually this word is represented with 'forced serving', especially in the sense of being 'slave', sometimes it also incorporates the notion of voluntariness and then **it gets more** the meaning of 'being a servant'.
- **leitourgeo** - originally it is 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.
- **latreuo** - first used mainly in the sense of 'to serve wages', but later only 'serve', namely in the service of the deity, cf. Ex. 3:12 & 8: 8 - Israel wanted the freedom to serve God (latreuo) in the desert.
- **therapeuo** - in particular the emphasis is on the good intention of the servant; it quickly becomes 'taking care of' or 'giving help', sometimes even of 'healing' - 'serving' of your fellow man, because you're in the position to do so!
- **diakoneo** - 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 the 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.

So, we have to be aware that our diaconate (congregational and official) has to take into account that Scripture uses more words than only diakonia...!

3.3 Our God given mandate

It is a recurring theme throughout the Scripture and it finally reaches a climax in the life of Jesus Christ Himself. He came to serve and He is the source of our helping and caring and at the very same time He sets the example we should follow every day, everywhere. Merciful He calls us who commit our lives to Him to serve, share and take care also - after all, a tree is recognized by its fruit. Diaconate is in fact all what we do as believers in this world to honor Him!

Jesus Himself puts this mandate into regular practice: He preaches Gods Kingdom as the time of the acceptable year of the Lord, *Luke 4:18ff: And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, 18 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

So, Jesus Himself is the source **and** the example for our caring, our diaconate. He first washes our feet **and then** asks us to follow His example, John 13. He calls us to serve, share and care. That is what we call fruit of our faith and part of being a Christian. But it is more than fruit: it's the necessary part of our faith – without it, faith isn't faith anymore.

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 an 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.*

Matt. 25 shows that diaconate can never be outsourced to deacons alone. Diaconate is the task of **every** Christian when he comes across a neighbor in need. In this text the urgency of the diaconal lifestyle strongly resonates with the other person: *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's the other way around: *Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: 42 For I was an hungred, 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 find that urgency also in the parable of the good Samaritan, Luke 10. But note: this parable is Jesus' answer to the question 'what do I have to do to get eternal life?': you should be neighbors towards each other! He explains in the parable of the Good Samaritan that being a neighbor is dependent on the situation in which a person will **behave** as a neighbor. You are not automatically a neighbor! You will become one by behaving as a neighbor. The priest and the Levite did not. They descended to Jericho and are therefore not on their way to work. They're 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 do not become his neighbor. Moreover, a helper cannot and may not choose who he wants to be close to. Jesus says that only those who are helped could decide who on being his neighbor by helping him **and** establishing a relationship with him. He makes it very clear with this parable that we should follow Him and take up our task to serve and help so that others may recognize us as those who show their mercy, act diaconal, are their neighbors.

This direct connection between God, me and my neighbor brings the diaconate into the heart of the church. Diaconate is therefore not a derivative of our faith. Faith without diaconate is not faith but diaconate without faith is humanitarian help. The Samaritan knows what he has to do and acts accordingly, in contrast to the priest and the Levite. The Samaritan gives help to someone who is looking down on him – he knows that.

It turns out that faith needs our deed to be faith and equally the reverse is true: our deeds need our faith – read 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 is, according to the Jewish standard, not a faithful church member, but he shows his faith by his deed ... while the leaders, who know better, do not behave as one! Jesus (according to Mt 25 and Lk 10) explains in this way that not our religious and theological knowledge determines who my neighbor is, but my actions and deeds towards the needy. That implies that with the diaconate the great commandment is at stake: 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 none other commandment greater than these.

There is a lot at stake in these two Bible passages! And that also includes the diaconate of the church... Do you agree also?

5 We all are deacons

To fulfill the great commandment, we should take care for each other and the needy and/or neighbor because of our relationship with our God and Savior! This is not an invention of men but the adherence to the Scripture.

Following the above, the very **first task** of the deacon is preparing church members to care for and help one another and the needy/neighbor as Jesus Christ told us in John 13:14-15: Go and you do likewise! 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.*

As He gives us that calling: we as pastors and elders and church members alike should consider ourselves deacons, without being called by that name. As we at the same time are being called missionaries! This is not new for you – therefore I will quickly draw the **first conclusion**: we all are deacons; we all have to behave like deacons: taking care of, serving, helping one another and the needy, irrespective of who he or she is!

That is the first biblical line we have to accept if we want to talk with each other about diaconate in our churches.

And indeed as a result of the above, I do believe that we should distinct between our diaconal calling and the office of our deacons.

Only when we have designated what our common (diaconal) calling is, will we be able to talk about the office of deacons.

And as we acknowledge His Kingship we'll do what He tells us – of course!

Lots of chapters in the New Testament reveal this calling as ours.

Of course, you may point at Galatians 6:10 and point out that Paul wrote: *do good unto all men.... especially unto them who are of the household of faith.*

He wrote these words to the church of Galatia because the problems in the congregation were huge: quarreling, fighting amongst each other. And 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 community of saints we ought to learn to do good in order to do good outside unto all men and women, the whole world!

6 The Kingdom and the church

The Sermon on the Mount may perhaps be called the civic integration course for the Kingdom of God. And it is also a powerful foundation for the diaconal work of each and every the church and worth to be given some attention in this lecture about diaconate.

The great words 'justice' and 'mercy' are, not only basic words for the diaconate, but these words are used in the framework of the Kingdom of God. And that requires a little explanation – I think even here.

In the church we believe that through the life and work of the Lord Jesus, God has shown that He indeed has all power, he is the King! The king who sympathizes with the congregation, who allows it to reign with Him and even to take charge with Him, a king who engages His people and makes them responsible – but sets out the lines Himself and makes all the decisions because He has a well-defined goal in mind and attends to it.

That goal is: this world will become His world again, totally, fully!

The Bible tells us that although the world belongs to Him it has been driven away from Him and no longer wishes to accept his leadership, his guidance. Through His Son He shows that this world is still His world. He makes sure that it is once again clear for everyone that it really is. It is and remains His world!

We also see that when we look at Jesus and his people in the Church, who take mercy and justice seriously in their lives and try to show it in everything they do - at least that is the intention ...! That is why we say: God's kingdom is already there, but that it is still to come in all is glory and we are called to show biblical mercy and justice as the signs of it!

7 Mercy & justice

God asks us to show mercy and justice in our lives. He has touched us and we believe that He is good for us. That is why we ask Him in return 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 noticing the other person's need, which moves you - both inwardly and outwardly. Like Jesus! We read that deep suffering touches Him (Mt 9,36). That is mercy: your heart,

your inner being is touched by what you see and that can be seen in what you do next. It is a way of life. It says something about how you live. How you view life. How you look at someone else with what God gives you. Mercy is not interested in reward at all.

Righteousness means (to summarize it): pure, sincere life as our Lord intends it to be. Therefore it is also about your attitude, about how you live in rapport with God, with your neighbor(s), with creation, with yourself. In each of these four areas God asks you to live pure and sincere, because He has given everything - even His own Son - to give you that life.

This irrevocably leads to worship and praise. From that moment onwards we want to live a different life, our hearts want to be full of Him and we speak as He wants us to speak and we do what we 'have' to do: serve Him with deeds of mercy & justice.

A Christian community is visible because it is subservient to each other, but also to its environment. A Christian community shows mercy and justice to the people and the world in which they live.

But now seeing how important it is to be aware of the biblical context of diaconate, let's move on to the deacons themselves.

8 The credibility

We all know – because we're no strangers in Jerusalem – that Acts 6 is very important. There the deacon has been called into office. Problems arose in the young church and a structure was created to ensure that people who are neglected will be taken care of. It seems to be a 'cultural problem': the Greek were forgotten (i.e. people who are 'different' are not simply accepted and/or sometimes deferred or they were overlooked as this happens quite often when a congregation grows). The Greek-speaking widows are helped by the appointment of the seven who are to engage themselves also with the Holy Communion and most probably with the administration.

The deacons coordinate and stimulate care for each other and at the same time serve the tables (the daily ministrations, or the daily distribution of food)! But, we should not immediately conclude that Stephen and his colleagues did the same things as our deacons nowadays! Nevertheless the core of their mandate is again made very clear: encourage the church members to take care of each other, our neighbors, the needy and the world around us and show them by being an example, being salt and light to the world!

At the same time we should be careful with the implication of Acts 6! The tasks of a deacon as mentioned here are in many churches no longer carried out. Or should I say somewhat neglected? Not only because Stephen and Philip are more evangelists than deacons in our perspective, but also because most deacons nowadays are not caring for neglected people. Perhaps the neglected of their own church, but the neglected around us or the society we are part of? I think they rarely do that!! Nevertheless, that was real reason for their appointment: the Greek-speaking widows were neglected... Thus: a minority should also be helped by us!

You may oppose me by saying: the definition of the deacon as reflected in your church order doesn't reflect that task! And of course you may be right – literally speaking.

But according to Scripture I think you should reconsider such a reaction: it's also startling to see that in Acts 5 (Ananias and Sapphira) the issue is not the message as such but the mutual care, with no strings attached. From a diaconal point of view the credibility of the message of the church is at stake when we do not keep our words and our deeds together in faith and in this world!! I do believe that there is no need to say more about that unity of diaconate and testimony, word and deed.

9 The church and diaconate

Someone said: the church is a saving angel in the sense that the church has always looked after people in need. In 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.

And even nowadays: most of the time charity started and starts in the church!

The diacony helps the congregation to give meaning to its diaconate. It explains and makes clear what the diaconal key words mean: mercy, justice, service, sacrifice and hospitality. Because these words explain what the hands and the feet of the church, of our faith are!

In the case of diaconate, it is closely connected with social, material or physical need. We might think of financial problems and debts, loneliness, imprisonment and illness, but also the needs of refugees and people with disabilities

As church we have the responsibility to discover in our own society what the diaconal needs are and think about our possibilities to help...

Historically, the lack of clarity about the role of the deacons in the congregation also arises. Since Calvin, the office of deacon has never really been clear. The decision-making in our churches about the equality of the offices has since 1965 led to the deacons longing for a good, contextual interpretation of their task.

We see that history gives diaconate very little attention. It looks as if the office of deacon is not that 'popular' and many deacons have some sort of inferiority complex. Many deacons feel they are second-class office-bearers. They form a "minority" to the majority of the elders. They are just partly part of the church council. Their position at broader ecclesiastical meetings is still too small in comparison to other office bearers in the churches.

10 The tasks of the deacon

Nevertheless the deacon gives direction to the congregation in equipping to 'service' As the elder gives guidance in a pastoral sense, the deacon does so in diaconal terms. Together they give direction to the congregation. In the congregation the deacon can mainly be seen as a conductor. In doing so, he performs that service in the middle of the congregation that called him to this task. Although deacons are often only busy as doers, it is their core task to make church members aware of, stimulate them and show them how they can experience their faith as is requested of them, both with regard to the world at hand and far away. The deacon equips and shows how it works and the congregation carries out.

As our government in the Netherlands is now withdrawing their social care the deacon has a wonderful opportunity to show the congregation once again to take on tasks that were taken over from the church by the government in the past. This 'shift' from doer to instructor **does** require good guidance, in particular because the emphasis of his work put more pressure on him to engage in personal conversations, home visits and alike.

In this way, there are four task fields for the deacon

- a. to **equip** the congregation to live effectively from the faith in God's grace in Christ Jesus - it is mainly about sanctification;
- b. to **promote** that the diaconate in the worship service is given the place it deserves - especially the liturgy or worship
- c. to **encourage, stimulate and equip** the congregation to be actively involved in each other and in particular those who are in trouble near and far away - this mainly concerns mutual community;
- d. to **lead and stimulate** the congregation to work on our calling to build and preserve the earth - it is primarily about stewardship;

Providing information, stimulating and equipping (where necessary and desired) that is what it is all about in his work so that the church is a church in the community.

This means that the deacon needs to create an awareness in all church members in four areas:

- a. being diaconal belongs to the **core business** of a true Christian who believes in the resurrected Savior;
- b. the diaconal practice of the **entire congregation** is the basis for the official diaconate;
- c. the official diaconate is meant **to support and stimulate** the diaconate of the congregation;
- d. every believer has the responsibility to live a life in which word and deed **are in balance**.

After all, members of the congregation should by definition be missionary and diaconal in spirit - both basic tones are characteristic of being members of Christ's congregation. The congregation as a whole, i.e. including office bearers and pastors, is relevant to the community in which it lives (people and the world) and does so from an enthusiasm, an involvement, a care, a responsibility because it realizes that everything

it has is bestowed by God. At the same time the congregation also realizes that God's plans with 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

For the growth of the congregation it is necessary that the deacon also understands that the church has a diaconal character. All the efforts of the deacon may therefore be aimed at strengthening the diaconal level and the diaconal shape of the church. Time and again history tells us that the content of the diaconate is different in every time. It adapts to, or responds to the circumstances. This means that the proper nature of the diaconal office should not be sought in the way in which the diaconate manifests itself. The position of the office should, as it were, be looked for a step earlier, namely the moment at which the deacon can make the 'translation' of God's Word into the time and the situation he lives in with his congregation. The proclamation of God's Word is thus immediately followed by application, and/or equipment. The deacon articulates what the consequences are of that proclamation and teaches and stimulates the congregation how to 'serve' in the light of that proclamation. And 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.

At that moment it becomes quite clear that his actions and the actions of the congregation are a living and clear diaconal testimony, i.e. the missionary dimension of their diaconate comes into being... In itself the diaconate does not have a missionary intention but when it functions properly in the congregation it gives testimony to the love of Christ that drives us...!

That congregation must therefore be aware of its own ways of life and of the Source from which this lifestyle takes shape. Every church member should therefore behave responsibly towards God, his fellow man and everything else that God has created and with which he or she comes into contact.

Think of the image of a flower: fed from the earth, through the roots it slowly grows from bud to flower. True to Christ, a person blossoms with all facets that are his/her own and thus takes his/her place, in congregation and the community to the honor of His Creator. For God's dealings with this world continue: saving and judging, building and breaking, whereby he engages us as His "servants" who are also His children.

The point is that the congregation becomes aware of its own place in society and looks for a good interpretation of it that matches both the reality of the congregation and its surroundings. In all of this, a clear policy and good equipment play a role in the most divergent way (eg. through courses, conversation/study clubs, preaching and home visits) in which especially the young people should get a place.

12 To take into consideration...

The congregation should again experience the diaconate and notice what it brings about in the case of everyone who goes to work on behalf of his Savior for the benefit of the far and near neighbor - especially if that neighbor has no helper.

Being more precise: the presence of the church in society as such is a diaconal presence: to be of service within the perspective of God's saving love in Christ, cf. Joh. 3:17 and Mark 10: 45. We must shine our light before men "that they may see your good works and glorify your Father, cf. Matth. 5:16, to the 'people' who are our neighbors: doing good for all, our fellow members, but also including neighbors, foreigners and distant relatives (Galatians 6:10).

That brings us to a number of diaconal attention points which should be identified:

- real sympathy with each other gives content to 'looking at each other' and warmth to the diaconate;
- supporting people who really need it;
- enabling people; working together with young and old, etc .;
- deploy someone where he or she fits in;
- pray with and for each other;
- forming a real community that is connected through common values and ideals;

- pursuing a lifestyle that is in line with what we have learned about our Savior, although it may be costly;
- do justice and show loyalty in our society, near and far;
- realize that we have received everything and are therefore allowed to share with those who have less in society;
- showing God's love in Christ for us by doing "good things" in imitation of Christ and spontaneous admiration for God. Then you want nothing **but** to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God, Micah 6: 8.

Do good with **head** and hands, by giving attention, care and food; anonymous or as volunteer, as caring Christians, or officially (from the office) as a designated person (deacon, pastoral or diaconal worker).

At the same time, we must also bear in mind that diaconal actions are a testimony to God's saving love. Also all those action that are done through informal care, volunteer work and by initiating and motivating organized help in society, here or abroad.

In doing so, it is essential to ask the question again and again: in what we do has Jesus Christ been proclaimed and heard in the lives of the those we work with?

For example:

- a diaconal community should be a welcoming congregation;
- real hospitality and openness is fundamental to her being;
- it is more a lifestyle than a program of activities;
- it is also more than inviting people for coffee;
- in 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

The aforementioned matters strongly influence our view on a possible profile of the deacon. In the practice of our ecclesiastical life the deacon is mainly seen as a 'doer'. But I would argue that the executive side should not be of much greater value than the policy-making and equipping aspect. We should not put too much emphasis on the executive side of his office. The spiritual source and origin of the office easily disappears into the background and even out of sight. Acts 6 tells us that this should not happen.

Moreover, it remains unclear what the do-er-position of the deacon is in relation to the diaconate. After all, diaconate is task and assignment for the entire congregation. Deacons cannot and should not take over this task.

In daily church life the office of deacon is so highly specialized that it is largely limited to only executive tasks. Unfortunately, this is also clear from the practice that many young deacons return as elders after a first term of office as a deacon. That indicates, among other things, that there is too little attention for the real specification of the office of the deacon. Specific gifts for the deacon office are recognized only to a very limited extent.

From the previous sections we see a number of roles, or profiles for the deacon become clear. We use a variety of verbs for it. It goes without saying that not every deacon has to fit into every role or answer to every profile. It is good if a mix of these roles can be found in the diaconry. It is also possible to say more about the above with regard to the office of the deacon, the place of the deacon in the congregation and in relation to the other office bearers.

14 the roles of deacons

The role of the deacon as 'instructor' and 'predecessor' I see as particularly versatile, it is almost impossible to display that in a profile. I therefore prefer to the use verbs to better characterize his role as one who

- **prays** - the deacon prays and intercedes for those who do not have a helper;
- **gives attention** - the deacon gives sincere attention by being present where there is need;
- **cooperates** - the deacon promotes and / or facilitates cooperation where necessary in times of need and disaster on a personal and communal level;

- **builds bridges** - the deacon is like a mediator, a bridge builder; he is someone who knows how to build contacts and knows how to connect groups;
- **helps** - the deacon will roll up his sleeves; he helps where no one else helps; he looks for solutions with clients, offers a listening ear, helps to hold on, carry each others burden.
- **initiates** - the deacon likes to be a pioneer; he likes to develop initiatives to see diaconal need and is someone who can motivate others to contribute.
- **signalizes** - the deacon signals abuses, identifies causes and problems with those responsible; he is an advocate and voice amplifier.

Because the deacon mainly has an eye for the situation in which the congregation is located, (the weight of) its role may differ per congregation. In any case, the interpretation is flexible and relatively quick to change. It is certainly not the intention that every deacon should be able to act in every role. It is important, however, that in the entirety of the diaconry the above roles can be found in one way or another among the deacons on duty.

15 The deacon and the elder

The Biblical records have shown that diaconate is something of the church as a whole and that every Christian takes part in it. The deacon may work with all the brothers and sisters of his congregation within that large field of 'diaconate'. He has the task to organize and stimulate the diaconate. The diaconate precedes the deacon. It has its starting point at the Lord's Supper, derived from Christ's sacrifice.

A Christian teaches himself to give service to others in imitation and on behalf of His Savior. In doing so he acknowledges the diaconal lesson given by OT and NT. Again and again we see in history that the content of the diaconate adapts from time to time, responding to the changing circumstances. The Scripture itself already gives note to this, as we saw. This means that the real nature of the office should not be sought in the way in which the diaconate manifests itself in our times.

The office of deacon gets his meaning from the way its manifests itself in this world in commission and imitation of Christ. The congregation has been called into this world by its Savior and has appointed the deacon for this purpose: he has to equip the congregation for its live in the world...

To say it more directly: the proclamation of God's Word has to be followed by, translated into, applied to this equipment and at that moment becomes diaconate: used in our everyday lives.

Therefore it is true and meaningful to say: the deacon articulates the consequences of the proclamation. He teaches the congregation that we all are to 'serve'. Then he shows, coordinates and stimulates the diaconal tasks in the congregation (which thus arise in response to the proclamation, as the work of the Spirit). In this approach, the office of deacon finds the spiritual source (again) in the exercise of the office.

So the deacon is not just a 'do-er'! He will be looking for doers in the congregation and will work with them, as an example, and coordinate the diaconal activities of these doers. The deacon rather emphasizes the direction in which the diaconate should focus. Again and again (after all: in changing circumstances the diaconate changes) listening to the Word, the congregation is equipped to diaconate: "... equip the saints for service ...". In this role, the deacon leads the congregation.

As the elder gives guidance in a pastoral sense, the deacon does so in diaconal terms. Thus both offices, together with the pastor, should form the church council. And together they lead the congregation from their own perspective learned from our Lord!

As we all know, in our congregational practice the distinction between pastorate and diaconate is often an artificial one. In any case, these official areas are constantly merging. That is why consultation between the relevant office bearers is necessary and self-evident, unlinking both offices is undesirable. The development of faith is accompanied by the development of diaconal attitudes. A diaconal life requires faith.

The deacon as a member of the church council as such leads the congregation.

In my eyes we should get away from the inequality and dissimilarity between deacons and elders in our churches. I think the relationship between them could be articulated 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 executive, so more 'listening to the Word' or 'practically teaching from the Word', in order to go and 'do what I told you'! But, equipping can only be done if the instructor himself gives the good example. Nevertheless the official diaconate must not stick to being an example, or even worse: to do the work for the congregation.

The financial or material support of the deacons, as we have known them for centuries, belongs to the task of the entire congregation. After all, 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 the diaconate is also a form of proclamation. A 'missionary church' is not possible without 'diaconate'. When we live together in the church as Christ intended His church, we do not have to organize that diaconate any longer and the congregation (once again) 'becomes favored by the whole people'. It is therefore also striking that in most churches the confirmation form for the office bearers is relatively quiet about the 'own specifications' of the deacons office. Seen from the position of the deacon, it seems that in this form the practice that was customary at the time of drafting was standard and norm even today, although the circumstances have changed dramatically.

I think I rest here with my input for today and for the questions of the GA of 2017.

Thank you

Gé Drayer, April/May 2018; Ugchelen – the Netherlands