

Something More In Mind:

Diaconal Ministry at Emmanuel Presbyterian Church

Scott Seaton - August 2009 (revised October 2012)

As Emmanuel Presbyterian Church continues to become established as a new church, the elders feel it is time to formally organize our diaconal ministry. We say “formally organize” because the nature of diaconal ministry is service (*diakonia* is the Greek word for “service”), and much is already happening on an informal basis. The last thing we want to do is discourage that grassroots and quiet involvement by suggesting that some formal mechanism is required for people to serve. But to ensure that people do not drop through the cracks, and that members gifted in service are given a platform to effectively lead and serve others, we feel it is time to set apart those whom God may be calling as deacons.

The question before us now is “what sort of organization will we adopt?” In answering this question, we will look to Scriptures as our primary source of guidance, our denomination’s *Book of Church Order* which is part of our ecclesiastical constitution, and the practice of the broader Church, both historic and contemporary. Since this paper is not intended to be an exhaustive treatise, we will necessarily be selective, with a commitment to include the rationale we found particularly persuasive in reaching our practical conclusions.

In seeking to be faithful to the Scriptures and to our conscience, we hope the direction we have adopted will be that of encouragement, namely to encourage acts of service, to encourage our members in the use of their gifts, and to encourage unity within the local and broader church.

In this paper, we’ll consider the

1. The Role of the Deacon
2. Who May Serve As Deacon
3. Emmanuel’s Model

1. The Role of the Deacon

Scripture

The need to organize the serving, or diaconal, ministry of the early church can be found in Acts 6: 1-7:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

At this very early point in the New Testament Church, the official offices of elder and deacon had not been established. The original apostles of Jesus functioned as elders, and as we see above, were becoming overwhelmed by the particular needs of the church. Qualified men were chosen and publicly recognized for diaconal ministry, namely to “serve tables” (*diakoneo*) to meet the need of the daily “distribution” (*diakonia*). While the word “deacon” never appears in this passage, it is clear they are doing diaconal work. Acts 6, then, lays the foundation for a division of labor among the leadership of the church, and perhaps may be the official institution of the office of deacon.

However, it’s not quite so easy to determine the role of the deacon from New Testament usages of this Greek word. *Diakonia* can refer not only to the ministry of meeting physical needs, but also to the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4). The noun *diakonos* is used of the office of *deacon* (1 Timothy 3:8), *minister* (Colossians 1:25), or the more general term of *servant* that applies to all Christians (Mark 10:43 et al.) So while this broad usage may create confusion, it also points to an important principle: the ministry of service is something all Christians are called to, and no office or recognition is required to fully and faithfully serve.

Conclusion: While there is much in the Bible about the role of the elder, there are few specific references as to what a deacon does. This perhaps suggests that diaconal ministry is a broad and fluid call to service, depending on the particular needs of a congregation in a particular context. In their ruling capacity, the elders have latitude to determine the specific roles of the deacons and whom should publicly be set apart to officially serve in that capacity.

Book of Church Order

The PCA’s *Book of Church Order* describes the work of the deacon as follows:

It is the duty of the deacons to minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress. It is their duty also to develop the grace of liberality in the members of the church, to devise effective methods of collecting the gifts of the people, and to distribute these gifts among the objects to which they are contributed. They shall have the care of the property of the congregation, both real and personal, and shall keep in proper repair the church edifice and other buildings belonging to the congregation. In matters of special importance affecting the property of the church, they cannot take final action without the approval of the Session and consent of the congregation. In the discharge of their duties, the deacons are under the supervision and authority of the Session (BCO 9-2).

Conclusion: The role of the deacons is general and broad in that they are called to serve “any who may be in distress.” While developing the “grace of liberality” in all our members, they practically will have to make hard choices in how to distribute finite resources. In this, the session is to provide oversight and supervision, giving shape to the church’s diaconal ministry as was the case in Acts 6. The BCO clearly states that while deacons have significant responsibility, their office is “not one of rule but rather of service” (BCO 7-2). In other words, ecclesiastical authority remains in the hands of the Session, an important principle for the later discussion of who can serve as a deacon.

Church History

Deacons in the early Church continued to organize ministry to the poor, sick and needy. They were actively involved in addressing concerns in and outside the church.

By the Middle Ages however, the office of deacon began to be ignored, with some churches abolishing the office altogether. It wasn’t until the Reformation and the recovery of the authority of Scripture that churches began to re-organize diaconal ministry:

Since the time of the Protest Reformation, deacons have served in various capacities. In Geneva, John Calvin had two classes of deacons: one set to do business administration and the other to do case work for the poor and the sick. In Scotland, the deacons were primarily the financial administrators of the church, based on the spiritual gift of “giving” (Romans 12:8). They functioned essentially as trustees, overseeing the material funds and property of the church. In early America, the deacons were primarily assistants to the elders, basing their work on the gift of “helps” (1 Cor. 12:28). In the Netherlands, the deacons were primarily social workers and caregivers, basing their work on the spiritual gift of “mercy” (Rom. 12:8). In 17th century Amsterdam, the diaconate operated an orphanage, homes for the elderly, eight schools, small cottage industries that provided employment (bakeries, clothing shops), and a direct distribution of food and clothing to 600 families a week. The deacons were divided into committees to oversee each ministry. Deacons in Scotland and America performed similar tasks as well.¹

2. Who May Serve As Deacon

The qualifications of a deacon can be found in Paul’s first letter to Timothy:

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons

¹ Unpublished Paper, *Diaconal Ministry at Intown Community Church*, Atlanta, GA

each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.
(1 Timothy 3:7-13 ESV)

This passage is not a job description that explicitly describes what a deacon must do. Nor is it a list of talents and skills. Instead, it focuses on a candidate's character. This emphasis clearly indicates that Christian character is the most important qualification for office, with flexibility on the specific roles and abilities of deacons.

A few explanatory comments on the qualifications:

Dignified: deacons must have the respect of people in and outside of the church.

Not double-tongued: they must honor their word, meaning and doing what they say.

Not addicted to much wine: not that they can't drink moderately, but always sober.

Not greedy: careful with money, especially since they may help handle church finances.

Hold to mysteries of faith: sincerely believe God's revelation about himself and salvation.

Tested first: both in doctrine and in calling to service.

Husband/father: if married, faithful to his wife and if he has children, a good father.

Women in Diaconal Ministry

What about the phrase "their wives" in v. 11? In the Greek, the word "wives" is *gunaikas*, which can be translated as either "wives" (c.f. ESV, NIV) or "women" (c.f. NASB, ASV). Further, the possessive pronoun "their" does not exist in the Greek text. So does this phrase refer to the wives of deacons or women in diaconal ministry? We would agree with Dr. Philip Ryken, pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia (PCA), that "... by itself, 1 Timothy 3:11 is not sufficient proof that women should serve in the office of deaconess. . . . [yet] if the office of deaconess is not established in 1 Timothy 3, the diaconal ministry of women is certainly present elsewhere in the Bible."² Following is a brief review of the primary Scriptural passages related to the issue, guidelines from the PCA's *Book of Church Order*, and examples from church history.

Scriptures

Just as there is not a wealth of biblical material to discern the role of the deacon, there are similarly only a few passages that indicate whether women can serve as deacons. Two of the main references are Phoebe in Romans 16 and the qualifications of deacon in 1 Timothy 3. For these two passages, it is helpful to quote extensively from *The Church* by Dr. Ed Clowney (former president of Westminster Theological Seminary and professor of practical theology):

Women supported the work of Christ and the apostles; others assisted Paul, and were well known in the church he established. Were they deacons in the apostolic

² Dr Philip Ryken, *Qualifications for Deacons*, a paper from the Reformed Expository Commentary Series on *1 Timothy*.

church? Many who recognize the continuing force of the apostle's instructions about the role of women in the church conclude that he denies the office of deacon to women. Two passages, however, seem to indicate the contrary. The clearest is Romans 16:1-2:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is [also] a servant [*diakonos*] of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also (NKJV).

The terms *diakonia* (service, ministry), and *diakonos* (servant, minister) are used in both broad and specific senses in the New Testament, reflecting the wide use of the verb *diakoneo*. The noun *diakonos* may mean any disciple of Christ as his servant (Jn. 12:26). The verb may describe the ministering of officers of the church in general (where *oikonomos*, steward, is the noun; see 1 Pet. 4:10). *Diakonos* may also refer specifically to ministers of the gospel, with their ministry of the Word particularly in view (Rom 12:7 et al).

Yet it is also used of deacons in distinction from bishops (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8) [note: "bishops" and "elders" are understood by Dr. Clowney and the PCA as synonymous]. C. E. B. Cranfield concludes that the form Paul uses in Romans 16:1 speaks of 'deacon' in the official sense. The present participle of the verb 'to be' is regularly used to identify an office (Jn. 11:49; Acts 18:12; 24:10). The addition of the name of the church in Cenchrea fits this identification: 'Phoebe our sister, being also deacon of the church in Cenchrea . . .' If *diakonos* were being used in the general sense of 'servant' we might have expected 'servant of Christ.'

The reference of *diakonos* to an office is further supported by the fact that Paul goes on to describe how Phoebe fulfilled the office. She was a 'help' to many, including the apostle himself. The Greek term *prostatitis* was sometimes used in the sense of 'patron', someone with the social position and means to protect the defenseless. Perhaps Phoebe's 'business' at Rome included the legal defense of widows or orphans.

The charge Paul gives the Roman church concerning Phoebe does not merely commend a friend to their fellowship. He formally requests recognition for Phoebe, and full support for her activities. How do we define 'office' if not as a function that requires public recognition for its proper exercise? If Paul had not called Phoebe a *diakonos* at all, the fact of his commending her for support by the Roman church in her work indicates that she was entitled to formal recognition in any case.

A second New Testament passage appears to refer to women as deacons:

Women in like manner must be grave, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. (1 Tim 3:11, ASV)

This verse occurs in a passage that gives the requirements of church officers: first bishops (1 Tim. 3:1-7), and then deacons (3:8-10, 12-13). Verse 11

is located in the middle of the passage that describes the deacons. Clearly this is not a description of women in general: the verse describes either women who are deacons or wives of deacons. The NIV settles the question by translating ‘wives’ and inserting a possessive pronoun which is not found in the Greek text, i.e. ‘their wives’. It offers the others possibility in the margin by translating ‘women’ as ‘deaconesses’.

An argument against referring this text to the wives of deacons is the fact that there is no similar description of the wives of bishops in the preceding verses. The absence of the possessive pronoun is also significant. More striking is the use of ‘likewise’ or ‘in the same way’ (*hosautos*), which was used in verse 8 to relate the requirements of deacons to those of bishops. Evidently three parallel sections of qualifications are aligned: for bishop (3:1-7), for deacons ‘likewise’ (3:8-10), and for women ‘in the same way’ (3:11). This mention of deacons’ wives comes before the requirements for male deacons are resumed in the next verses (3:12-13).

Further, the requirements listed for the women in 3:11 are remarkably parallel to the requirements for deacons in general (3:8-10). Paul seems to point out that these requirements apply to women deacons as well as to men, before going on to describe the further requirements for men, and then concluding with a statement of the reward of faithful diaconal ministry.

Since Paul excludes women from authority in the church (1 Tim. 2:11-15), and presents order appropriate to the ‘household of God’ (3:15), he makes no provision for women when he gives the qualifications for the office of bishop. Women are not called to rule in the family or in the family of God. But Paul does make provision for women in the office of deacon, and recognizes Phoebe as active in that office.³

Dr. James Hurley (professor of Marriage and Family Therapy at Reformed Theological Seminary) in his important book *Men and Women in Biblical Perspective* includes a thorough examination of the above texts and reaches a similar conclusion.⁴ Though not all would agree with their conclusions, the Session finds their reasoning persuasive. In particular, we agree that Paul likely was not referring to the ‘wives’ of deacons in 1 Tim. 3:11, as it would seem to be at least as important to include an analogous qualification for the wives of elders. In referring to the qualifications of women in the context of diaconal ministry, we are persuaded that Paul had *something more in mind* for such women.

Some have objected to this understanding by pointing to Paul’s express qualification in 1 Timothy 3:12 that a deacon be the “husband of one wife”—something a woman is obviously unable to be. This qualification to be a “one-womaned man” is similar to one of the qualifications for elders. The point of this verse seems not to be marital status, but faithfulness. Further, few would suggest Paul is requiring a deacon to be married—thereby disqualifying single men, which would include both himself and even Jesus. The

³ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, pp. 231-235.

⁴ James B. Hurley, *Men and Women in Biblical Perspective*, pp. 229-223.

qualification to be the “husband of one wife” is likely in response to the cultural context, where men, not women, had multiple spouses.

Conclusion: No one would argue with the fact that the Bible exhorts all Christians, men and women, to demonstrate mercy and service to others. But the example of Phoebe and the particular reference to women in 1 Timothy 3 suggest that Paul had *something more in mind* here, i.e. some official capacity in which women are serving in diaconal roles. There is debate within our denomination whether women in such roles should be ordained or commissioned as deacons, or appointed as assistants to the deacons. But the biblical evidence clearly points to some way of recognizing and affirming their ministry.

Book of Church Order

In the section pertaining to deacons, the PCA’s *Book of Church Order* expressly limits the ordained office to men: “To the office of deacon, which is spiritual in nature, shall be chosen men of spiritual character . . .” (BCO 9-3; c.f. 7-2).

The same section goes on to make a unique case for a complementary role:

It is often expedient that the Session of a church should select and appoint godly men and women of the congregation to assist the deacons in caring for the sick, the widows, the orphans, the prisoners, and others who may be in any distress or need. (BCO 9-7)

Conclusion: While the PCA restricts the ordained office of deacon to qualified men, the BCO takes the unusual step of describing an appointed role of assistants. There is no ecclesiastical reason it needs to do this—the Session is clearly free to appoint assistants in any capacity it chooses. But the fact that the BCO does so exclusively for diaconal ministry suggests that it has *something more in mind* here.

Church History

The first known reference to women deacons comes shortly after the New Testament was written. In a letter to the Emperor Trajan in AD 112, the Roman governor Pliny refers to women deacons. Deaconesses continued to be recognized through the early centuries of the Church:

In Egypt during the second century they provided nursing mothers who sat in the public squares, often under pagan statues, while other women went up and down the streets to collect the unwanted babies abandoned in night. They brought them, nursed, bathed and raised them. Such ministry was characteristic of women throughout the Christian world, at least by the third century. In his survey of women’s ministry in the early church, J. M. Ross shows that deaconesses served as doorkeepers, visited the sick, helped when women were baptized and cared for orphans. In the fourth century, John Chrysostom described the order of deaconesses to be ‘necessary and honorable in the Church.’”⁵

⁵ Ryken, *op cit*.

As noted, the office of deacons languished until the Reformation of the 16th century. During the Reformation and the recovery of the authority of Scripture, the office of deacon was reinstated. In Geneva, John Calvin had two orders of deacons: “one to serve the church in administering the affairs of the poor; the other, in caring for the poor themselves.”⁶ The first order served as trustees of the physical property of the church and of its finances; this diaconal office was restricted to ordained men. The second order was for works of mercy, in particular directly caring for the poor. Serving in a subordinate role to the administrative deacons, this diaconal role was not ordained and included women. Women deacons played an important role in other countries as well: “In Germany and other northern lands, ‘deaconesses’ and their organizations did much for the wellbeing of the sick, the elder, and the poor.”⁷

More recently, women in virtually every church are involved in diaconal, i.e. serving, ministry. The debate centers on whether to officially recognize their work through an ordained or commissioned role of deacon. The biblically conservative Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America has ordained women deacons since 1888. The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church ordains women deacons as well. Several PCA churches, including many Korean churches, commission women deacons. Prominent pastors who have practiced some form of official recognition for women deacons include B. B. Warfield, John Piper, Jim Boice, Philip Ryken and Tim Keller.

Another biblically conservative denomination, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church has produced an often-referenced paper on women in church office. The Majority report, which limits the ordained office of deacon to men, expressly added the following:

Having denied the ordained status of the "women" (K.J.V. "wives") of this verse, it is all too easy to say no more. That is a shame, because whether these women were wives of elders or deacons or both, it is clear that Paul had "deaconing women" in view. They were recognized as special assistants to the ordained officers of the church. Phoebe is a classic example. Because of this association their spirituality had to be commensurate with the diaconate which they assisted. Furthermore, there are aspects of diaconal ministry which can only properly be executed by women. These focus on (though they are not limited to) personal, private needs unique to women and needs in the area of hospitality. Modern-day diaconates need to employ the gifts of women and even consider publicly recognizing some as officially associated with the diaconate in unordained status. (Majority report of the Committee on Women in Church Office, submitted to the OPC's 55th General Assembly.)

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 4, Chapter 3, Section 9

⁷ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story Of Christianity*, vol. 2, p. 271

Conclusion: The existence of women deacons has ancient and broad precedent, independent from modern Western cultural influences. While there are relatively few examples of ordaining women to the office of deacon, it is clear that the history of the Church has *something more in mind* than the broad call to all Christians to service.

3. Emmanuel's Model

The Session of Emmanuel is committed to shaping our practical ministry in submission to the Scriptures and our ecclesiastical authorities. Thus, taking in all the above streams of thought, Emmanuel will ordain male deacons to an administrative role, who would also oversee unordained male and female deacons who are commissioned for mercy ministry. This model would be similar to the diaconal structure at Calvin's Geneva. Because Emmanuel does not own a building, we expect that only a few ordained deacons will be needed to handle the administrative tasks. The mercy needs in our congregation and community are much larger, and thus we expect a greater number of commissioned deacons serving these needs.

All deacons must be nominated by at least three members of Emmanuel, complete officer training and be examined by the Session per BCO 24-1. Each deacon will be interviewed by the Session to confirm their calling to be a deacon and the capacity in which they would serve. Candidates for ordination will stand for election by the congregation and be installed during a worship service. Unordained deacons will be formally appointed by the session and commissioned during a worship service. All the deacons will be part of what we call the Diaconal Ministry Team.

Ordained administrative deacons will oversee the entire work of the Diaconal Ministry Team, which will include various teams as determined by the deacons. The first teams will initially be called Administration (property and finances), Congregational Care (assistance for those coming to Emmanuel) and Community Care (mercy ministry in the area). Drawing from Paul's instructions to the Church at Rome to "help [Phoebe] in whatever she may need of you" (Rom. 16:2), the mercy ministry teams can be led by either men or women.

The Session will work with the deacons to create guidelines for significant decisions. For example, we want to empower the deacons to be able to meet needs without delaying the process. Yet because we need to be selective in determining ministry partnerships or major acts of benevolence, cumulative annual support over a certain threshold for an individual or ministry will require Sessional approval.

Conclusion

We hope this paper is an encouragement to study the Scriptures and consider counsel from the historic and contemporary Church. Beyond that, we hope this model will lead to a flourishing diaconal ministry at Emmanuel, as our members indeed have *something more in mind* for our congregation and the community we serve.

Questions

1. *Is this decision a reaction to influences of modern Western culture?*

It would be tempting to quickly say “no—the Bible is our only guide.” But it’s an important question, deserving a thoughtful answer. Being faithful to the Scriptures means that Scripture itself must be the preeminent and final authority in biblical interpretation. Thus, while the Bible serves as a lens through which we see the world, we don’t interpret the Scriptures through the lens of culture. At the same time, one isn’t culturally neutral: you can only read the Bible as a person in a given time and space. So how do we know we’re not accommodating to cultural influences in our interpretation?

Part of the answer is to broaden one’s time and space, by listening to godly Christians from other ages and contexts. As to whether we are following modern influences, the references in this paper demonstrate that the Church has a long history of women serving as deacons. Living 400 years before the advent of Western feminism, John Calvin was clearly not influenced by *Cosmopolitan* in his decision to install women as deacons. He was simply trying to faithfully interpret the Scriptures and recover a forgotten practice of the early Church.

Not only is the idea of women deacons not modern, it’s not Western. Churches in the Arab world, predating American Christianity by hundreds of years, live in a cultural context that can hardly be described as influenced by Western feminism. And yet they have a long history of women serving as deacons in the Church. Thus, the perspective of a broader time and space is a helpful check in our biblical interpretation.

Finally, the question cuts both ways: it’s just as easy to be guided by tradition and practice as it is by modern cultural influences. Deciding to do something so as not to accommodate cultural influences is still a decision based on culture. It’s just a negative response rather than a positive embrace. Instead, Scripture must be our primary guide.

2. *Doesn’t using the title “deacon” invite confusion or imply provocation?*

Some may agree with the general conclusions of the paper but object to using the title of “deacon”, as people may infer we are doing something not permitted by our denomination. A related objection is that we may appear to be intentionally provocative. Wouldn’t a different title for the same function avoid the argument altogether?

Indeed it would—but we first have to admit we’re leaving Scripture behind and entering the realm of human wisdom, i.e. “what will others think and how do we navigate those waters?” That’s a valid and important consideration, but still secondary. The Scriptural answer is that the Bible has a word for people who officially represent and extend mercy in the name of the church: *deacon*. It’s worth noting the only named *diakonos* in the

Bible is Phoebe⁸. Further, other terms like *Presbyterian*, *sovereign*, and *election* invite even more confusion—and strong reactions—yet we choose to use them because they have biblical meaning and value. Similarly, we would hope to recover the usage of a word that has a long and important history in the Church, just as Calvin did. At the same time, we believe there are more important issues than nomenclature. In that vein, we sincerely appreciate the feedback from women who have said they are more interested in serving others than in obtaining a title.

Further, if our approach is provocative in any way, we hope that this model provokes peace and unity in the Church. The question of women in diaconal ministry has been vigorously discussed within our denomination in recent years. While the practice of women serving in diaconal, i.e. *serving*, ministry is universally upheld, a consensus remains elusive as to what forms are permissible. Our hope is that the Geneva model offers a practical, complementarian solution that both “sides” could approve: on the one hand, we affirm a two-office church that reserves ordination to qualified men. On the other hand, we affirm that men and women should be given every available platform and encouragement to extend the mercy of Christ.

Finally, godly men and women, who love the Lord and his Word, disagree on this issue. Therefore we should strive for understanding of the different perspectives and humility in our application. But at some point, we have to make a decision, even if we wish we had more data or insight. It is indeed our hope that the Geneva model would serve as an equitable and peaceable solution, and that we may extend love and mercy to others in the name of Christ.

⁸ Ryann Craig, *Phoebe the Diakonos*, paper for Reformed Theological Seminary, 2009