

An Introduction to Deacons Ministry Discussion Guide

Project Origin

This video series was developed by Pastor Darryl G. Klassen with the support of the EMC Board of Leadership and Outreach and the EMC Board of Church Ministries. It is offered for the assistance and encouragement of the Church, including the EMC and beyond.

Biography

Darryl G. Klassen is an ordained EMC minister who has served as the pastor of Crestview Fellowship Church (Winnipeg) and as the senior pastor of Kleefeld EMC in southern Manitoba. He is currently engaged in a ministry of preaching, teaching, and writing from his home in Blumenort, Man. He is married to Sharon and they have two children.

He has earned a BRS (SBC) and a MA-CS and a DMin (both Providence). His Doctor of Ministry dissertation (2015) is entitled *The Calling, Giftedness, and Ministry of Deacons in the Evangelical Mennonite Conference: Developing a Biblical Understanding for Conference Practice*.

Introduction

Since the birth of the Church in the first century, local churches have designated some individuals to be deacons. Over the course of many decades, and with the growing familiarity with the role, we have sometimes assumed we know what we mean by the title and the role of deacon. Unwritten guidelines, common understanding, and, honestly, downright guesswork, have sometimes led to a misunderstanding of deacons' ministry. Many duties have been added to the deacons' list of expectations primarily for lack of a defined job description.

This video series and discussion guide are designed to assist church leaders to return to more biblical descriptions of deacons' work. Our hope is that this series will provide a solid biblical foundation for the work you do in the church.

The majority of churches in our global community find the basis for deacons' ministry in the Acts 6:1-7 passage. While this will be the starting point for our study, the word "deacon" is not found in this text at all. Nor are the "Seven" in that text called "deacons." And yet it is a foundational text for deacons' ministry in many Christian traditions.

In the Anabaptist tradition, we are a Christ-centred movement. In Christ we find our example for life, ministry, and service. So, a more apt text is the one where Christ spoke of his role in the world as a servant: "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45).

The word “servant” in the Greek is where we get the root of our word “deacon.” Jesus taught that all who would follow after him should learn to be servants in this world. His intention was not that some special individuals be set aside to serve others. Rather, Jesus called all of us to serve and make ourselves available to those in need according to the model that Christ himself set.

With the calling of deacons in our churches today, then, we are not setting up some individuals to do all the work while the rest of us sit and watch or wait to be served. Deacons are called to be leaders and examples to set the tone that the congregation will follow in reaching out to those in need and offering a mercy ministry.

It is the hope of those involved in designing, producing, and distributing this video series that new deacons will be equipped, empowered, and encouraged by this material. And if you are a veteran in deacons’ ministry, we also hope that you will be affirmed in the work that you have done faithfully for the sake of Christ’s kingdom.

Video 1 – The Role of a Deacon (length: 17:03)

Read Acts 6:1-7 in preparation for the video presentation and for reference when answering the questions.

When the video has been viewed, please discuss some of the following questions:

1. When you were called to deacons’ ministry in your church, what responsibilities were assigned in your new role?
2. What kind of training did you receive when called to be a deacon?
3. In what ways do you envision helping your church to grow through deacons’ ministry?
4. Deacons are called upon to assist in maintaining unity in the community of faith. How does your ministerial group/team plan or promote the unity of the church?
5. If your church has a vision statement, how can deacons help reach that vision?
6. Deacons’ ministry has also been called “mercy ministry” because the essence of this type of service is relief. In what ways do deacons in your church provide relief or comfort for the poor, sick, elderly, and needy?
7. Discuss as a ministerial team stories of where you have helped the needy in your church.
8. Pastors are called to preach the Word and to lead the overall movement of the congregation. The physical concerns of the congregants are various and numerous. What would a strategy of mercy ministry look like that could assist the pastor in his work while also fulfilling the goals of the deacons’ ministry in the congregation?

9. The gospel of Jesus Christ is more than words spoken from a pulpit. In 1 John 3:16-18 we read that the gospel is expressed in deeds as well as in words. What are some practical ways you show the gospel to others through acts of service?

10. A caveat:

Deacons are not necessarily professional counselors, doctors, lawyers, or accountants. Avoid offering advice in these areas. Refer them to professionals. Do not be ashamed to admit that a congregant's problem is over your head.

- a) Be prepared to refer an individual or a married couple in crisis to a professional counselor (ask your leadership body to formulate a list of reputable and Christian counselors in the area).
- b) Do not try to diagnose an individual's illness. If they mention a health concern, encourage them to seek medical help. Do not tell them stories about people who had similar problems.
- c) If the crisis is a financial one, encourage them to seek out knowledgeable, certified stewardship counselors in the church or community who can help people with managing money or paying off debts. You are not responsible for solving this problem. If the crisis is of a temporal nature, the church may want to use its benevolence fund to provide some relief (i.e., groceries, gas, one month's rent).
- d) If a question is asked of a legal nature, or a person or a couple is in a legal crisis, refer them to a lawyer.

11. R.B.C. Howell once wrote that the work of the deacon is still relevant for today: "Deacons may, and should be, assistants to pastors and elders in the care of the church—as to watch over the walk and conversation of the members of the church, and to observe that they keep their places in it; and to exhort, admonish, and reprove, as they find it necessary;...to report the state of the church to the elder or pastor, and to reconcile differences between one member and another, and to prepare matters to be laid before the church at church meetings, when needed," (R.B.C. Howell, *The Deaconship: Its Nature, Qualifications, Relations, and Duties*, Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1946, p. 67).

- a) How does a job description like Howell's assist the vision for deacons' ministry?
- b) What would you change in the description?

Video 2 – Qualifications of Deacons (length: 20:30)

Paul's letter to Timothy provides excellent insight into the first century church structure for leadership. The first seven verses of 1 Timothy 3 address the matter of choosing elders (sometimes called "pastors") and what qualifications the congregation should look for in these persons. Then, Paul addresses the requirements of deacons as the congregation considers men and women for this role.

Read 1 Timothy 3:1-13 to get a full picture of the leadership of the church and to prepare for the video session.

When the video has been watched, discuss some of the following questions:

1. Were the qualifications of deacons announced when elections took place in your congregation? What was the church looking for when you were elected?
2. If a list of qualifications for deacons was to be written today, what would you add to the list found in 1 Timothy 3?
3. What were you doing in the church before you were called to be a deacon? In what ways were you serving with your gifts? What do you think the church saw in you when you were called to be a deacon?
4. How important is it to have a good reputation among church members?
5. How does a deacon need to be more careful sharing information learned from persons? Discuss the kind of issues to be kept confidential when someone shares with you. Discuss the kind of issues to be shared with the ministerial team for the sake of the individual and the health of the church body. When a person begins to share sensitive information, how will you inform them that certain information may need to be passed on to others in leadership?
6. Discuss the importance of self-control as a servant-leader in your church. What areas of self-indulgence harm the ministry of the deacons and leaders of the church?
7. Attitudes concerning money:
 - a) Read Deuteronomy 15:1-11. What principles do you read about generosity and giving in this text?
 - b) Read 1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19. What is your attitude toward money and wealth?
8. Paul wrote that deacons need to have a firm grasp of the mystery of the gospel. What is your regular practice of studying the Bible?
9. If you are married, what role does your spouse play in deacons' ministry? If unmarried, in what ways can you minister to those who are married? How can you model inclusiveness between marrieds and singles in your church?
10. Some deacons feel disqualified from serving because their children have left the faith or never did follow Christ. On the other hand, being the parents of adult unbelieving children may help you to relate to others in the same situation. Discuss.
11. What effect does being a deacon have on your workplace relationships? Do your coworkers respect your faith and your role in your church?
12. Paul has set the bar fairly high for deacons in 1 Timothy 3. How might we respond to a fellow deacon who struggles with this standard?

Video 3 – Visitation (length: 15:27)

1. Visitation ought to be a core duty in the ministry of deacons in any church. What is the purpose of visitation?
2. What are some of the obstacles to visitation in your current context?
3. How would you invite yourself over to a congregant's home for a visit?
4. What ought to happen in a typical deacon visit to a congregant?
5. How long should a visit be?
6. How does visiting a shut-in or a hospitalized member change your approach to visitation?
7. Prayer is to be a vital element in your visitation with congregants. Few people refuse an offer to pray with them. Ask them what they feel you could bring before the Lord for them. Keep in mind those items that you have talked about in your conversation and pray about these things too. This will demonstrate that you have been listening.
8. Reporting your visits to the pastor will help the pastor to know who has received care and attention. If there are deeper spiritual concerns or impending surgeries, you will want to inform the pastor as soon as possible for follow-up visits.
9. The intentions of a deacon in visiting could be summarized in six ways:
 - a) to help people become reconciled to God and fellow believers
 - b) to encourage
 - c) to alleviate loneliness
 - d) to warn those in danger of drifting from the faith in practice or thought
 - e) to be a source of information about the church
 - f) to visit, listen to, and help people in crisis

Video 4 – Listening Skills (length: 17:38)

This video features a discussion with Tom Peters, a licensed Christian counselor. We asked Tom to comment on questions related to good listening skills.

1. What did you learn from Tom's description of listening to others?
2. What are some poor listening skills?
3. Name a few key elements of effective listening.
4. What is active listening?

5. What did you learn about body language from the video?
6. Read James 1:19-20. What are some tips you could share about actually hearing another person talk?

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