

The Ministry of the Deacon

Betty Voskuil

*As One
Who Serves*



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Introduction

A recent survey of Reformed Church in America deacons was very revealing. Few deacons (6 percent) felt “very prepared” for their duties; 55 percent felt “prepared”; and a large portion (39 percent) responded that they were “not very prepared.” When asked to rank in order of importance sixteen actions they might perform as deacons, the five items ranked highest all pertained to ministries of management and maintenance within their local congregations while the five actions ranked lowest dealt with ministries of mercy, service, and outreach.

This booklet is intended to help deacons become better prepared for their responsibilities within their local congregations as leaders in ministries of mercy, service, and outreach. We hope this booklet will also help prompt a transformation in the image of a deacon from one who only collects, counts, and maintains to one who also leads the congregation to joyfully serve the Lord in a variety of ways.

Betty Voskuil

Betty Voskuil served the RCA as coordinator for diaconal ministries and hunger education.

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The story is stark in its simplicity but far-reaching in its implications for the ministry of deacons.

During supper Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel.



After he had washed their feet, put on his robe, and returned to the table, Jesus said to them:

“Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you should also do as I have done to you” (John 13:12-15).

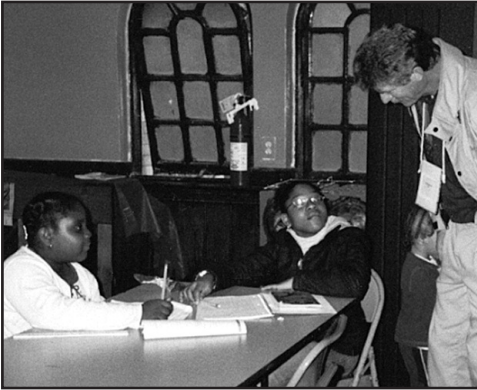
The Greek word for deacon (*diakonos*) means servant, and in particular, waiter. It is used thirty times in the New Testament in a variety of ways, always in connection with serving, service, or servanthood.¹

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Jesus provided the ultimate role model for servanthood. Throughout his ministry, he reminded his followers in word and deed that he was among them as one who serves.

When a dispute arose as to which one of them was to be regarded as greatest, Jesus said:

“The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? It is not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:26-27).



The Reformed Church in America calls out particular people to hold the offices of deacon, elder, minister of

Word and sacrament, and professor of theology. But it is important to remember that the ministry of God’s people is shared by all Christians, and the ministries of those who hold office arise out of this common ministry in order to serve it. (See the Preamble for the *Book of Church Order*, pp. 1-2.)

Deacons are called by the church to be leaders in ministries of service. The church recognizes that deacons have been given special “gifts” to prepare all God’s people for the work of Christian service in order to build up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12, TEV). The *Book of Church Order* and the *Liturgy* provide more specifics as to what the role of the deacon should be.

Deacons are called by God for the ministry of mercy, service, and outreach. They shall serve those in distress and need and shall minister to the sick, poor, hurt, and helpless. The *Book of Church Order* directs deacons to aid the victims of the world’s abuse and

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to express the social concerns of the church. The focus of their service is both in the church and in the world.²

The *Liturgy* sets forth additional criteria for deacons. They are to show compassion and to manifest the love and care of Christ. Deacons are asked to gather and distribute the offerings of the congregation, giving personal attention to the distressed. In addition, deacons are to assist the congregation at services of worship.³

With the elders, deacons are responsible for all congregational concerns such as providing for the support of the minister of Word and sacrament and exercising careful stewardship of all funds, goods, and properties of the congregation.⁴

Although present-day deacons usually don't wash people's feet in the same sense that Jesus did, they serve those in need, minister to the suffering, and reach out to people in ways that are tangible. Deacons should lead congregations in ministries of service to the homeless, the hungry, and victims of natural disasters, and in support of the helpless and sick. They may encourage members of the congregation to be involved in ministries to those in prisons, people with AIDS, the elderly, and children. The ministries of service may be done locally by supporting a food pantry, or regionally with work projects and mission trips. Persons may be involved in tutoring and literacy projects or in delivering meals-on-wheels. Or deacons may provide stewardship education and sponsor tithing retreats for their congregations.

Ministries of service, mercy, and outreach may be done nationally and



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internationally by supporting the work of RCA missionaries through Partnership-in-Mission shares or by giving to Reformed Church World Service. Many persons serve by giving their time and talents through the RCA Volunteer Services program. Persons serve as advocates through organizations such as Bread for the World and Interfaith/IMPACT.

The list could go on and on because the possibilities for service, outreach, and mercy are limitless. Indeed, deacons, as leaders in service, play a crucial role in involving the congregation in ministry.

Deacons have been important in the life of the church since New Testament times, but the role of deacon has changed over the years. In the second century, the ministry of the deacon was related most closely with that of the bishop. Through this association, deacons became important liturgical figures in the church. But they also were charged with administering charity and aid to the



poor. This dual role is reflected today in the practice of several other denominations. For Methodists and Anglicans, for example, the office of deacon is a stepping-stone to the position of minister of Word and sacrament or the priesthood. In the Baptist tradition, a deacon often fulfills a role which is similar to that of elder in the Reformed tradition.

After the Reformation, John Calvin, our theological forebearer, took the deacon out of a “place next to the altar” and placed the person holding the office “in the midst of the poor and needy in the world.”⁵ Calvin

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believed that matters of concern for deacons “were not optional in the life of the church, but rather stood at the very heart of its message of righteousness.”⁶ Therefore, Calvin suggested that they should also assist in worship by reading the gospel and praying. He even suggested that they participate in serving the Lords’ Supper.

The Reformed Church in America traces its beginning to 1628 when a consistory was established in Manhattan. During the first

one hundred fifty years of existence, the congregation was subject to the Classis of Amsterdam. In the tradition of the church in the Netherlands, the government initially paid for ordinary expenses, and the deacons



were simply responsible for collecting funds for charity to the poor.⁷ Records from First Church in Albany, for example, reflect this practice. The deacons of the Dutch Reformed Church took care of the needy—who were mostly ill, elderly, widows, or orphans. It was their policy to prevent widespread poverty, which led them to be involved in issues such as health care and education.

But when the church broke from the mother church in the Netherlands and was no longer supported by the government, deacons had to divert their funds from the poor to the maintenance of the congregation. Consequently, says Daniel Meeter in his book *Meeting Each Other: In Doctrine, Liturgy, and Government*, the “diaconate of the Reformed church gradually lost the heart of its original vocation.”⁸

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Over the years, the role of deacon gradually became associated more with maintenance and management of property and facilities than with ministries with the poor and needy. However, some examples of diaconal ministry in practice have inspired others throughout the RCA's history. When Dominie Scholte founded the settlement in Pella, Iowa, in the mid-1800s, Cornelus Den Hartog was given the responsibility of "Overseer of the Poor." Today his great, great, great grandson, Ron Den Hartog, serves as an RCA minister.

Currently there is a resurgence of interest in recapturing and reinvigorating diaconal ministries in the church. Christians from all geographical regions are experiencing the joy of serving others. Here are some examples of ways congregations throughout the RCA are involved in diaconal ministries:

- Members of Community Reformed Church in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and Hope Reformed Church in Vancouver, British Columbia, serve meals monthly for those who are hungry in their communities.
- Browne Street Community Church (RCA) in Queens hosts the Golden Eagles Institute, a college designed especially to serve Taiwanese and Mandarin Chinese senior citizens. The institute provides a sense of community and security for people who immigrated when they were more mature and therefore have a more difficult time adapting to Western culture than do children and youth.
- The youth group of First Reformed Church in Schenectady, New York, has developed a caring for creation project. They visit homes of members of the congregation and, for a modest contribution, "eco-mug" the house. The "eco-mugging" includes an energy audit and results in suggesting several practical energy- and resource-saving measures. The money earned in the project is donated to Habitat for Humanity.

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- For several years the congregations of Christ Community Church in Carmichael, California, and Hope Community Church in Sacramento, California, have joined together for volunteer work trips to Dulce and Mescalero, New Mexico.
- When the Winnebago Children’s Home was closed in Nebraska, leaders for Winnebago Reformed Church needed to find a way to provide quality day care for the children of the community. They decided to start a day care center in the basement of the church. Over thirty children now attend the center each day.
- Glen Rock Reformed Church in New Jersey has a “seat of compassion” in the church library—a writing desk supplied with stationery, stamps, names and addresses of elected officials, and information on current public policy issues. Members are given the opportunity to speak out as advocates on behalf of those who are suffering from injustice in society.
- Because of high violence and lack of opportunity in the community, the Church of the Good News in Chicago has made a commitment to reach out to the youth of the neighborhood. The congregation sponsors a number of youth groups as well as a community music center which offers quality music education for children and adults.
- In 1991 deacons from Third Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, organized a team of volunteers to work in Project Home Again, a local ministry sponsored by the Good Samaritan Center. The volunteers agreed to work one year with a local family that was jobless, churchless, spoke no English, and had serious medical and legal problems. After providing rent for a couple of months, the team helped the family set goals which consisted of finding a home, employment, medical care, and legal assistance. Recently Third Church celebrated with the family as they moved into their

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own home, which they are purchasing through a low-income housing program.

- Christ Community Church in Welland, Ontario, is involved in a ministry to women who have experienced emotional, physical, and mental abuse. In addition to having a social worker on staff, the congregation has recently purchased a home near the church to house the are-wide ministry.
- Community Reformed Church of Oakland, California, has taken the lead in addressing neighborhood concerns such as hunger, traffic, recreation facilities, health care, and education. The congregation has established food pantries and feeding centers; is working with personnel from the police, parks, recreation, and education departments; and is providing some health services and counseling.
- As new immigrants have moved into the neighborhood, members of Christo De La Roca (Church of Christ—the Rock) have reached out to assist them in adjusting to their new life in a strange country. People from the congregation help newcomers contact schools and find jobs and, in general, offer a helping hand whenever they need it.

Serving others in the name of Jesus can take many forms. Those who serve display a variety of characteristics. They may be young or old, poor or rich, rural or urban. They may come with diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. Congregations involved in diaconal ministries may be small or large, newly established or old and mature. But regardless of all of these differences and variables, those who serve are bound together with other Christians who have truly discovered the profound joy that comes with serving others. They also realize that as they serve others, they are serving Jesus Christ. In the end, that is what being a deacon is all about.

Endnotes

¹ James Monroe Barnett, *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order*, rev. ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), p. 19.

² *Book of Church Order* (New York, NY: Reformed Church Press, 2005), Chapter 1, Part I, Art. 1, Sec. 10; Chapter 1, Part I, Art. 6, Sec. 2.

³ *Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America* (New York, NY: Reformed Church Press, 2005); “Order for the Ordination and Installation of Elders and Deacons,” p. 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵ Eugene Heideman, *Reformed Bishops and Catholic Elders* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1970), p. 139. (out of print)

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁷ Daniel Meeter, *Meeting Each Other: In Doctrine, Liturgy, and Government* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), p. 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

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Resources

The following resources are available from Faith Alive Christian Resources, (800) 333-8300, www.FaithAliveResources.org, or sales@FaithAliveResources.org.

Consistory Training DVD. This DVD contains three programs for church leaders: *As One Who Serves* is a 9-minute video focusing on the office of deacon to show several examples of diaconal ministries of mercy, service, and outreach; *What's a Deacon to Do?* is a 13-minute video presenting Reformed Church in America deacons reviewing the six areas of diaconal concern; and *What's an Elder to Be?* focuses on the responsibilities of elders and the practical means by which elders can best carry out those responsibilities.

Faithful Consistories: Office, Ministry, and Mission in the Reformed Church in America, by Paul R. Fries

This report “concerns the Reformed understanding of the offices and their assembly in the congregation, that is, of elders, deacons, ministers of Word and sacrament, and their gathering as consistory.” The leader’s guide provides two formats, one for presentation in a single session, such as during a retreat, and a second consisting of nine 30-minute sessions, suitable for consistory meetings and adult study groups. Also available online at www.rca.org.

Branches on the Vine: A Consistory Orientation Workshop

This three-hour workshop is designed specifically to be used in a local church setting and led by the church pastor, other staff members, or any experienced consistory member. The purpose is to orient and train new consistory members and to remind returning consistory members of their unique roles as deacons, elders, and congregational leaders. The kit includes a leader’s guide, a participant booklet, the *Ministry of the Deacon* and *Ministry of the Elder* booklets, the *Consistory Training DVD*, and a copy of both the *Are You Looking for a Church Home?* and the *A Three-Minute Tour of the Reformed Church in America* brochures.

The Ministry of the Deacon: As One Who Serves, by Betty Voskuil

This booklet prepares deacons for their responsibilities as leaders in ministries of mercy, service, and outreach. The author helps prompt a transformation of the image of a deacon from one who collects, counts, and maintains to one who also leads the congregation to joyfully serve the Lord in a variety of ways. Available in English, Spanish, Korean, and Chinese.

“As One Who Serves” Bookmark

Designed especially for deacons and elders.

Deacon’s Notebook: As One Who Serves

This loose-leaf notebook contains information on stewardship, education, special individual and family concerns, disaster response, hunger advocacy, environmental issues, mission involvement, and other diaconal concerns.

Servant Leaders: A Practical Guide for Deacons, by Ben Vandezande

In four sessions, Vandezande offers practical ideas for deacons.

Developing a Workplan in Your Diaconate, by Ben Vandezande

This workbook helps leaders of deacons guide the diaconate in developing a written workplan that results in a clear sense of mission.

Constitutional Theology: Notes on the Book of Church Order of the Reformed Church in America, by Allan J. Janssen

This commentary explains the roles of elders and deacons and of classes and synods, and details procedures necessary in the life of the church.

Meeting Each Other: In Doctrine, Liturgy, and Government, by Daniel Meeter

This book points to that which can hold us together and nourish us as a church: doctrine, liturgy, and government.

Deacons’ Accounts, 1652-1674: First Dutch Reformed Church of Beverwijk/Albany, translated and edited by Janny Venema

Receipts from the poor boxes in churches and in taverns, together with equally meticulous accounting of disbursements to the poor and needy, reflect the concern of the church for people.

The Compassionate Congregation: A Handbook for People Who Care (Second Edition), by Karen Mulder and Ginger Jurries

This guidebook offers stories, advice, websites, helpful hints, and more from those who have faced crises in their lives. Also includes four session outlines for small groups who want to become better caregivers.

Pastoral Search Handbook

This handbook guides your congregation step-by-step through the entire pastoral search process. Also available at www.rca.org.

The Ministry of the Elder: Guiding and Nurturing God's People, by Robert White

Clarifying the role of an elder, this booklet discusses the responsibilities of spiritual oversight, discipline and discipling, gatekeeping, and visitation. Available in English, Spanish, and Korean.

What's an Elder to Be?

This 17-minute DVD focuses on the responsibilities of elders and the practical means by which elders can best carry out those responsibilities.

Book of Church Order

This resource includes the government, the disciplinary and judicial procedures, the bylaws and special rules of order of the General Synod, and the formularies of the Reformed Church in America. Available in English, Spanish, Korean, and Chinese/Taiwanese.

Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America

In addition to the most recent editions of the RCA's liturgies, this volume includes a treasury of prayers and the Directory for Worship.

Consistory Center (<http://consistory.rca.org>)

This online resource center is especially designed for pastors, elders, and deacons.

The Presbyterian Deacon: An Essential Guide, by Earl S. Johnson Jr.

Johnson explores the role of deacon and its office as a ministry of sympathy, witness, and service.

Companions on the Way

Led by elders, supported by pastors, and adaptable for each congregation, this process provides the church with an organized, faithful, and hospitable way of welcoming and supporting people who have a limited Christian background, preparing them for profession of faith at baptism and for a life of Christian discipleship. It can also be adapted for people who have been baptized and who wish to make profession or reaffirmation of faith, and for parents who are bringing their children for baptism.