

Principles of Diaconal Ministry

(Excerpted from the Operating Manual of the Committee on Diaconal Ministries of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, rev. 13b, February 2016, pp. 5-8)

1. The Reason for Diaconal Ministry

The heart of God for the poor is the reason for the diaconal ministry of the church. God's special regard for the needy among his people is clearly revealed in:

- His careful provision for and protection of them:
e.g., Leviticus 23:22; 25:35-37; Deuteronomy 15: 7-11; 24: 10-15
- His stern warnings against the neglect or abuse of them:
e.g., Proverbs 11:24; 14:21,31; 21:13; 22:22-23; 28:27
- His calls for covenant renewal in terms of care for them:
e.g., Isaiah 1:16-17; 58:6-10; Ezekiel 18:16; Zechariah 7:9-10
- His casting of the Messiah's ministry in terms of ministry to them:
e.g., Isaiah 11:4; 29:19; 61:1; Luke 4:18; Matthew 5:3
- His many calls to show generosity toward them:
e.g. Job 29:11-16; Psalm 41:1; 112:9; Matthew 5:42; 25:35-40;
Luke 3:11; 6:30-38; 12:33; 14:12-14; Acts 20:35; Romans 12:13, 20;
2 Corinthians 8:1-21; 9:1-13; Ephesians 4:28; 1 Timothy 6:17-18; Titus 3:14;
Hebrews 13:16; James 1:27; 2:15-18; 1 John 3:17-18

And God's general regard for all the needy among his creatures is revealed in:

- His goodness and mercy to all:
e.g., Psalm 145:9; Psalm 36:6
- His provision for both the just and the unjust:
e.g., Matthew 5:45; Luke 6:35-36
- The general benevolence by which he testifies of himself to all men:
e.g., Acts 14:17; Romans 2:4

The church ministers to the poor and needy because of the very character and ways of our God.

2. The Need for Leadership in Diaconal Ministry

Though much of the church's ministry to the poor will be on an individual and spontaneous basis, Acts 6:1-6 makes clear the need for leadership in the mercy ministry of the Church in order to better coordinate and allocate the resources of the church for the good of those in need. The office of deacon in the local church is the primary provision for this need for diaconal leadership, but in a connectional church it is proper that this leadership also be manifested at the regional level (presbytery diaconal committees) and national level (a denominational committee on diaconal ministry) as well.

3. The Subordinate Role of Diaconal Ministry

While ministries of both word and deed are entrusted to the Church, the clear priority in Scripture is on the ministry of the Word of God. Indeed, the institution of the diaconate is expressly related to this priority, inasmuch as deacons serve to preserve the priority of the elders' devotion to the ministry of the word and prayer (Acts 6: 3-4). The forgiveness of sins and a new life in Christ is what men most fundamentally need, and all temporal needs are trivial in comparison. For this reason, the diaconal ministry of the Church must never be separated from the preaching and teaching ministry of the Church, and should always serve to facilitate it. Biblical mercy ministry may never devolve into mere aid or relief work, but rather should always adorn the ministry of the gospel.

4. The Essential Nature of Diaconal Ministry

Though subordinate to the ministry of the Word, mercy ministry is, however, a vital complement to it, and can even be indispensable to it. The gospel is an expression of the holistic love of God: it aims at the ultimate wellbeing of the whole person, both body and soul. The kingdom of Christ will bring an eventual end to all human deprivation, both spiritual and material, for those who put their faith in Christ. The church testifies to this reality when it complements the ministry of the Word with a ministry of mercy, even as our Lord joined a ministry of healing to his ministry of teaching. Indeed, without genuine compassion for the material needs of our brother, our assurances of love for them can ring hollow (James 2: 15-16). The work of diaconal ministry is to lead the Church in such a way as to ensure that its love is not in word or talk only, but in also in deed and in truth (1 John 3:17-18). This is not to displace the ministry of the Word as the primary calling of the Church. It is rather to strengthen it, and to render it more credible and effective.

5. The Church and Diaconal Ministry

The primary focus of diaconal ministry in the Bible is clearly on the covenant community. A special priority is given to providing aid to fellow members of the covenant community in the Old Testament legislation (Deuteronomy 15:11-12). The widows that Paul refers to as being eligible for ongoing diaconal support are members of the church (1 Timothy 5: 3-16), as were the widows in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6: 1-6). And the special offering for the poor that Paul takes among the churches is for the “saints in Jerusalem” (Acts 11:29, Romans 15:26, 2 Corinthians 8: 1-15). This priority of the household of faith is due to the fact that diaconal ministry is a vital component of the communion of the saints: it is a benefit of the unique bond of love that Christ has formed by his saving union with his Church (Westminster Confession 26:1-2). Just as the priority of the ministry of the Word each Lord’s Day is for the assembled people of God, so also the priority for the use of diaconal funds is for the covenant community.

6. The World and Diaconal Ministry

Just as the ministry of the Word is not only for the Church but also for the world, so also is the ministry of mercy for both “saints and strangers on behalf of the church” (FOG XI.1). In the Mosaic law the resources of the covenant community were to be shared with the sojourner and stranger (e.g. Leviticus 19:10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-21; 26:11-13). Likewise, Paul exhorted the church, “as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10). Diaconal ministry adorns the gospel when it provides tangible evidence of the love of God and of his messengers for the lost of this world. Indeed, in certain circumstances of extreme hardship the ministry of the Word can be virtually unintelligible apart from a ministry of deed. A compassionate response to men’s temporal needs can encourage an openness of heart to the gospel’s provision for their deeper eternal needs.

7. The Potential Abuse of Diaconal Ministry

Diaconal ministry is always susceptible to abuse on the part of its recipients, due to the sinfulness of men’s hearts. Jesus acknowledged the tendency of men to seek only the material apart from the spiritual blessings of his own ministry (John 6: 26-27). Diaconal ministry must be conducted, therefore, mindful of the guiding principles of Scriptures, such as the importance of diligent labor by all who are able bodied (2 Thessalonians 3:10-13), and the duty of families to be the primary responders to material need (1 Timothy 5:8). Diaconal ministry must seek to avoid rewarding sinful patterns or creating or perpetuating a state of dependency upon aid. On the other hand, the prospect of abuse must not be allowed to stifle a compassionate response to genuine need. Our Lord was not blind to the potential abuse of generosity when he told his disciples “Freely ye have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8 KJV).