

My First Year as a Deacon

By Deacon Scott Pearce

Church of the Covenant OPC, Hackettstown, New Jersey

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Eye Opening Conversations and Considerations

In October 2015, I accepted an offer to be a deacon intern at Church of the Covenant (Hackettstown, NJ) where I, my wife, and our four young children are members. The internship concluded with my theological exam, a congregational vote, and my ordination/installation as a deacon in November 2016. My relationship with this particular congregation is unique because not only was I baptized into this church as an infant 35 years ago, I have spent my entire life as the son of the senior pastor. Because of who my parents are, and how I was raised, I can check off a lot of the same kinds of boxes that the apostle Paul does in Philippians 3. Baptized on the eighth day (give or take a few weeks!), catechized in the standards, Sunday schooled, Christian schooled, etc. I entered the deacon internship as someone seemingly OPC of the OPC.

But it wasn't very long into my deacon internship before I started to see elements of the diaconate that I had never noticed before. The behind-the-scenes deacon meetings and deacon work were full of eye-opening conversations and considerations for me as an intern and as a new deacon. As the son of a pastor, I had grown up in a family very familiar with session and pastoral matters. Entering the diaconate was a chance for me to intimately know and more fully love Christ's church and her many facets of ministry and worship. Below are a few of my reflections after "a year on the job." With each reflection item, I have also included ways in which I suggest you could pray for (and/or offer to help) your deacon.

There Are Lots of Light Bulbs to Change

Think of your church building—all the rooms, all the hallways, all the lamps, all the chandeliers, and all the outdoor lights. Have you ever thought about who changes those light bulbs? I certainly hadn't before my deacon internship, and for good reason. When the floodlight near the main door goes out on a Tuesday evening, the church secretary doesn't email the whole congregation—she emails the deacons. When the doorbell batteries die, the deacons get an email. The same thing goes for items like loose doorknobs, rickety attic ladders, the clogged drain in the janitor's closet, the propane tanks for the church picnics, and those little white candles for the candlelight service.

Before I became a deacon, my wife and I had attended a few of the Work Days that the deacons organize twice a year. We always left those Saturday morning work sessions feeling encouraged at the "many hands" making "light work" of a whole list of maintenance and cleaning projects. We loved (and still do) to see church members of all ages pitching in to care for our church facility—washing windows, painting over scuff marks, scrubbing down nursery toys, etc.—following a list of tasks organized by the deacons. I thought that I had a good idea of what was involved in caring for the church building, but that understanding has grown exponentially since I was added to the deacon email distribution list.

I have been amazed at how much hands-on activity is under the oversight of the deacons. It certainly is an office that deals extensively with tangible, physical needs. There is a lot that falls under the umbrella of "serving tables" (Acts 6). Have you offered physical, tangible help to your deacons recently? I'm convicted to realize how much more "deacon work" I could have done before I became a deacon. One certainly doesn't have to be ordained to change a light bulb.

Unseen by Anyone Except the Lord

Some of the most encouraging moments in my months as a deacon have come when a church member has offered—unsolicited—to meet a need. Things as simple as offering to help take down the Lord’s Supper table or as extensive as repainting a Sunday school classroom brighten a deacon’s heart and outlook.

One Saturday afternoon, I had to swing by the church for something and noticed my former youth group leader’s truck in the parking lot. I didn’t see him at first, but I heard the sound of a weed wacker going full blast in the drainage basin next to the parking lot. When I approached him to ask him what he was doing, this sweaty saint told me that once a year he comes by on a Saturday and cuts down all the weeds in the drainage basin. I was so impressed and so heartened by his service that I almost gave him a huge hug then and there—covered in grass clippings and gasoline fumes as he was.

We deacons are blessed with several other dedicated church members who decorate for church luncheons, decorate the auditorium for every season, repaint the lines in the parking lot, and repaint bathrooms and classrooms—unseen by anyone except the Lord. Our deacons would love to see more members contribute in similar, tangible ways (even small ones). It can start with something as simple as changing a light bulb!

The Number of Scam Solicitations from Strangers Is Surprising

Dr. David Apple was the keynote speaker at the national OPC Diaconal Summit in 2017 in Wheaton, Illinois. Dr. Apple is the Director of Mercy Ministries at Tenth Presbyterian Church, a large PCA congregation in center city Philadelphia. He shared many stories related to his role as a professional deacon at an urban church in the center of one of the largest cities in the country. He recounted successes and failures his church has had in various programs of mercy ministry including homeless outreach, support groups, and financial counseling.

Sprinkled throughout Dr. Apple’s stories were many of his maxims and rules for how to handle emergency or cold call requests for financial assistance. His examples mostly described walk-up requests from strangers visiting their downtown church building. I listened, but I hardly thought that his big city situations would translate to our little hamlet congregation. After all, Tenth Presbyterian Church is located in a city of 1.5 million people, and our building is located on a country road that is an offshoot of a country road.

Still, now that I have become privy to how many solicitations for emergency financial assistance our church office receives annually, I am surprised at the frequency with which they occur—even way out in the country as we are. On the phone or in person, the soliciting stranger usually states how they heard about our church, what their emergency is, and what they need us to do about it. The request is always urgent, and there is often some dire consequence that we are told will transpire if we don’t act.

In his book *Not Just a Soup Kitchen*, Dr. Apple estimated that at least 95 percent of the people asking for help at their doors in Philadelphia were con artists who didn’t need the “help” they were requesting, but instead wanted quick cash (p. 180). In my limited experience, it doesn’t seem like our solicitations from strangers have a better batting average.

Pray for your deacons in these situations. Pray for your church secretary and your pastor who are probably the first point(s) of contact when these requests are first levied. Pray that all church officers/staff who interact with those requesting help would have the wisdom of Solomon. Pray that their hearts would not grow calloused over time and that their outlook toward the lost would not be tinged with cynicism. And pray, perhaps above all, that those legitimately seeking help would find their needs met in the warm embrace of Christ's church.

There Is No Comprehensive Deacon Manual with Step-By-Step Instructions For Every Scenario

We all experienced this phenomenon to some degree when we moved out of our parents' house for the first time, when we started a new business or career path, or when we became parents ourselves for the first time. We entered those new roles with confidence in our foundation of guiding principles, but then at times we found ourselves slightly unsure of how exactly to apply them in specific situations when the rubber met the road. Surely, no man enters the office of deacon uninformed or unaware of what general tasks and needs the Lord is calling him to. But it is also true that no man accepts that calling knowing exactly what challenges even the next month will bring.

In my first year as a deacon, our diaconate was faced with a variety of new situations, and it surprised me at first to hear my fellow deacons—all much more seasoned than me—say things like, "I don't think we've ever had a situation just like this one," or "I don't think I've ever had to deal with [Issue X] before." Some of them were heavy situations with urgency, and some were routine but unique in some aspect. It encouraged me to hear my brothers talking in such a way. For one, it made me feel like less of a "new guy," but it also revealed to me that my fellow deacons were examining each case intimately and with personal care. There was no attitude of wanting to rubber stamp an issue or go through the motions in a cursory manner. I have been proud to serve alongside men who approach each widow, each offering, each food pantry visit, and each jobless congregant with love and attention.

Pray for your deacons *because* there is no deacon manual, per se. Pray for them because sometimes they don't know exactly what course of action to take. Pray especially for your deacons that have served many years in office—pray that they would be able to approach routine situations with the same care and attention as in years past.

There Is a Diversity of Gifts and Strengths in a Church's Diaconate

I first considered this subject with my father several years ago, as it related to elders of the church. Over our breakfast platters at a New Jersey diner one Saturday morning, he pointed out to me that while every elder must meet the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, not every elder is gifted in exactly the same way, nor to the same degree. Some men are strong in roles of administration and organization. Others are academic and can engage in lofty doctrinal debates. Others are pastoral and are exceptional in personal counseling situations.

The same diversity of gifts and strengths is likely found in almost any collection of men in any organization, and the diaconate is no exception. Some deacons are exceptionally handy, while others might not be able to change a tire. Some deacons can whip up a group of enthusiastic volunteers with an impassioned appeal, while others serve silently and lead primarily by example. All deacons must rule their households well and be trustworthy, but not all deacons have the time or the ability to serve as Treasurer of the church's finances. All deacons must be hospitable, but that hospitality might manifest itself differently.

One of the ways that the Lord confirmed my inward call to the diaconate was in attending deacon meetings during my year-long internship. With a seat at their table, I was able to see the strengths and gifts of each man on display during the monthly meetings. I saw their varying gifts and strengths complementing each other and producing a whole that was superior to what a diaconate of five identical deacons might look like. As the year went by, and my interaction at meetings grew, I was able to picture myself serving with these brothers and adding strengths and gifts to the whole.

The calling to the office of deacon is a high one, and should not be treated frivolously. But I would encourage men who are considering the office to not necessarily feel disqualified because they aren't a master mechanic or don't have a PhD in QuickBooks. All deacons must love Christ's church and care for the physical needs of the flock. But not every deacon will look or serve or lead exactly the same.

Pray for your existing diaconate, and give thanks for its diversity of gifts and strengths. Pray that the Lord would raise up more men to serve as deacons and that your diaconate (and your body) would be strengthened by new men accepting the call to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with those that have been called before.

I have been pleased to serve alongside my fellow deacons at Church of the Covenant for a year. I have learned and have grown both by following their diverse examples and listening to their explicit instruction. Their wisdom in word and deed has been distilled in ways as varying as their gifts and strengths. I have also reaped the benefits of being part of a congregation that has well-established diaconal policies and practices that are decades old—so, by extension, I am learning from deacons of years past even as I serve in the present. I am grateful for this first “year on the job” that the Lord has granted me, and I look forward to as many more as He wills.