

15th General Assembly, 1987, Appendix T, pp. 506-514 & Historical Survey.

## BIBLICAL GUIDELINES FOR MERCY MINISTRY IN THE PCA

### A. To what ministry of mercy does Christ call his church?

#### 1. To a ministry that flows from the compassion of Christ

a. Christ's compassion is perceptive, directed toward the needy.

Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, and comforted the sorrowing and afflicted. He gave an illustrative list of such human needs, including also shelter and personal caring for the prisoner (Mt. 25:35,36).

b. Christ's compassion is active, expressed in deed as well as word.

Jesus was "mighty in deed and word" (Lk. 24:19). His compassion was communicated by his hands as well as his lips: he healed the leper with a touch, put his fingers on the eyes of the blind and in the ears of the deaf, broke the bread with his hands. The Shepherd's great deed of compassionate love was giving his life for his sheep.

c. Christ's compassion is gracious, directed toward the undeserving.

Jesus ministered to publicans and sinners (Lk. 15:1,2). He defended his ministry by saying that he came to call, not the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Mk. 2:17; Mt. 9:13; Lk. 5:32). He came to seek and to save that which was lost (Lk. 19:10). Christ died for the ungodly (Rom. 5:6).

d. Christ's example and precept call us to compassionate ministry.

##### (1) The claim of his free grace

Christ teaches us to love our enemies, for God loved us when we were enemies. Not only does God in his common grace send his rain on the just and unjust (Mt. 5:45); he demonstrated his own love to us in that while we were yet enemies Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8, 10). We are not to ask, "How many must I love?" ("Who is my neighbor"), but "How may I show the love of Christ?" ("To whom am I a neighbor?" Lk. 10:25-37).

##### (2) The example of his ministry

"The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister..." (Mt. 20:28). The compassion of Christ fills his ministry, but is nowhere more evident than on the cross. He ministers not merely in healing the sick and washing the disciples' feet, but in giving his life a ransom for many. Having loved his own in the world, he loved them to the end (Jn. 13:1). Christ fills his church with manifold gifts of the Spirit to minister his compassion in word and deed (I Pet. 4:11).

##### (3) The bond of his body

Jesus binds his body, the church, not only to one another, but to himself. That union appears in the ministry of mercy. The service that we bring to the least of his brethren is service to Christ himself (Mt. 25:40).

##### (4) The thrust of his mission

Jesus sent out his disciples to heal the sick and to proclaim the kingdom of God (Lk. 10:9). As the church fulfills the Great Commission it continues to show Christ's compassion in a needy world. The ministry of the Apostle Paul on the island of Malta demonstrates the concern of the apostle to show the mercy of Christ as he bore witness in a missionary situation (Acts 28:8,9).

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### e. Christ's Spirit conveys his compassion

At the heart of the ministry of compassion is the love of Christ. The gifts of the Spirit equip us for ministry, but our motivation springs from the love of God poured out in our hearts, as we are drawn to love him who first loved us (Rom. 5:5; 1 Jn. 4:19).

#### 2. To a ministry defined by the kingdom/gospel of Christ

##### a. A ministry of hope

###### (1) Deeds of mercy point to the gospel promise

Jesus' miracles were signs of the kingdom, pledges of the time of the restoration of all things. Our deeds of mercy in Christ's name do not have the authenticating power of his miracles, but they do point in hope to the consummation triumph of God's saving mercy.

###### (2) Deeds of mercy provide a foretaste of God's goodness

Our deeds of mercy have a double implication: they point forward to the promise of the new heavens and earth; they also show the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise in the pouring out of the love of Christ through the Spirit. Visiting the prisoner is an example of this: we minister hope to the prisoner, for we proclaim the liberty to the captives that Christ will bring (Lk. 4:18). While the final day of Christ's jubilee is yet to come, it is already present in the saving power of Christ's Spirit.

##### b. A ministry in Christ's name

###### (1) Christ's church must confess his name

"There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Peter's proclamation of the saving power of Christ's name follows his healing in the name of Jesus. In response to Peter's apostolic confession of his name, Jesus spoke the foundational words of the church's charter (Mt. 16:18). To fail to confess Christ's name before men is to deny him (Mt. 10:32,33). In its ministry of mercy, as in all its life and ministry, the church must name the name of Christ (Mk. 9:37-41; cf. Mt. 10:42).

###### (2) The ministry of mercy is an offering of praise

The sacrificial system of the Old Testament is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. In thankful praise, we bring to him the offering of ourselves and all that we have (Rom. 12:1,2). We have the privilege of stewardship, using for his glory our time and possessions. The risen body of Christ is not with us so that we might anoint his feet, but we have the poor with us, to serve in his name (Jn. 12:8). Paul shows how the offering for the poor saints in Jerusalem abounds to the praise of God (2 Cor. 9:12-15). The ministry of the Philippian church to the apostle's needs is "a sweet smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God" (Phil. 4:18). The author of Hebrews describes the sacrifice of praise of the New Covenant: first, the fruit of our lips, then, "to do good and to share" (Heb. 13:15,16).

##### c. A ministry that calls to repentance and faith

###### (1) The focus of the kingdom cannot be blurred

John the Baptist prepared the way for the coming of Jesus by preaching repentance because the kingdom was at hand. Jesus called his disciples to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, trusting in the Father to provide for our needs (Mt. 6:33). In all its life, the church must hold to the priority of the kingdom (Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 7:29,30). The caring ministry of the church is in the context of kingdom manifestation and witness.

(2) The demand of the kingdom cannot be ignored.

Jesus called to repentance and faith those whom he healed ("Your sins are forgiven" Mk. 2:5; "Sin no more" Jn. 5:14). The witness implicit in the ministry of mercy must be acknowledged. Mercy flows to the undeserving, but not indefinitely to the unaccepting and rejecting. The coals of fire heaped on the head of an enemy should move him to shame and sorrow, but the overtures of gracious love may be rejected. God's common grace and his saving mercy must be distinguished, and even his common grace may be withdrawn in judgment: drought interrupts the rain falling on the just and the unjust. The disciples are to shake off the dust of their feet as a testimony against those who will not receive their message (Mt. 10:14). Jesus worked few miracles in Nazareth because of their unbelief (Mt. 13:58).

(3) The blessing of the kingdom must be represented

The witness of deeds of mercy is to the love of God, not to the goodness of the benevolent. We seek to show by deed as by word the blessing of the gospel promise (Matt.5:16).

d. A ministry of Christian fellowship

(1) A mutual ministry of sharing is required by the nature of Christian fellowship

"Saints, by profession, are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus." (*WCF XXVI:2*)

(2) Ordered in the structure of fellowship

Christ has ordered the fellowship of his church to provide for mutual ministry through the stewardship of his gifts in the bond of love (1 Pet. 4:10-11). Christians minister to Christ and to one another.

(3) Expressive of the welcome to fellowship

"Abound in love on toward another, and toward all men" (1 Thes. 3:12; 5:15). "While we have opportunity, let us work that which is good toward all men, especially toward them that are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). (*Malista*, "especially" sometimes defines a class more particularly rather than singling out a sub-class. It may then be translated, "that is," as in 1 Tim. 4:10; 5:8, and probably Acts 26:3. See T. C. Skeat, "'Especially the Parchments': a Note on 2 Timothy IV. 13" *Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 30, April, 1979, pp.173-177. In view of the Thessalonians passages, however, the translation, "especially" seems better for Gal. 6:10). "Doing good" refers to deeds of benevolence (2 Cor. 9:8; Acts 9:36; Rom. 2:5-10; 2 Thes. 3:13). Benevolence toward those outside the covenant is evident in the O.T. charge to care for "strangers" Lev. 19:18,34) and in the apostolic ministry (Acts 3:1-10; 14:8-10; 16:16-18; 19:11-13; 28:8-10; cf. Mk. 7:24-30).

e. A ministry in spiritual power

(1) Our weapons are spiritual, not temporal

Although material benefits are offered in diaconal service (food, clothing, medicines, shelter, care), force is not appropriate, nor are material inducements offered to secure acquiescence ("rice-Christians"). The church cannot deliver the oppressed by using force against the oppressor (Lk. 7:19-23; Jn. 18:36; 2 Cor. 10:4).

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### (2) Our objectives are spiritual, not temporal

Since we are called to minister in the period between the first and second coming of Christ, we recognize that "the form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:31). When we possess, we live as stewards, as not possessing (1 Cor. 7:30). We do not build bigger barns for ourselves to store up wealth, nor do we give to others so as to redistribute wealth in the interest of developing an ideal world order. The kingdom of God does not consist in material possessions; rather, these are to be used in the service of the spiritual objectives of the kingdom. In contrast to the inverted priorities of the Gentiles, we seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Salvation in Christ cannot be subordinated to, or simply coordinated with, the cultural mandate. The New Testament church is not promised technical efficiency or cultural triumphs. Yet human stewardship of the earth and its resources remains a divine injunction for all humanity. To be renewed in the image of Christ is more than to be restored in the image of Adam. It is to inherit dominion in the new creation and to be called through sacrificial suffering to manifest the love of Christ that purchased such an inheritance.

### 3. To a ministry equipped by the Spirit of Christ

#### a. A ministry of the Spirit, not simply of resources

##### (1) Christ's ministry in the power of the Spirit

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus declared that he was filled with the Spirit to accomplish the saving, healing and restoring work of the Lord's Anointed (Lk. 4:16-19; Isa. 61:1,2).

##### (2) Paul's description of gifts of the Spirit for the ministry of mercy

Paul joins the functions of Christians in the church with the gifts of the Spirit that qualify them for service. Among the gifts listed in his sample catalogues are those for showing mercy by relieving the poor and distressed (1 Cor. 12: 28,29; Rom. 12:8; 2 Cor. 9:8ff.)

##### (3) Relief for the poor is accompanied by personal ministry (Acts 11:30; 20:4,24)

Note the price in suffering that Paul was willing to pay in order to convey the gifts of the Gentile churches to Jerusalem as his personal ministry (Acts 20:22-24).

#### b. Varieties of gifts and ministries

- (1) Comforting the distressed (Rom. 12:8)
- (2) Supporting the weak (1 Thes. 5:14)
- (3) Relieving poverty (Rom. 12:8,13; 2 Cor. 9:8-15)
- (4) Healing the sick (1 Cor. 12:30)
- (5) Exorcising demons (Acts 16:18)
- (6) Supporting and administering benevolence

The program of benevolence in the church requires administrative supervision as well as humble service. The seven were appointed to administer the distribution of food in the apostolic church (Acts 6:2,3); representatives of the Greek-speaking community were chosen for this task since it was the widows of this community who were being neglected (Acts 20:4); note the assistance that Paul asks of the Roman church for the ministry of Phoebe (Rom. 16:1,2).

#### Resulting Guidelines:

1. The ministry of mercy is a necessary part of the calling of Christ's church.

The miracles of Christ, as signs of the kingdom, show us that the ministry of the church must be in deeds of mercy as well as in proclamation of the gospel. The ministry of Christ's disciples and of the apostolic church confirm this.

2. The church's ministry of mercy cannot be limited to Christians.  
Our compassion is modeled on the compassion of Christ and the love of God, directed to us when we were enemies.
3. The church's ministry of mercy must be conducted in Christ's name.  
It is a spiritual ministry, not an impersonal provision of resources. It is performed without public fanfare, but with the loving acknowledgement of Christ's lordship and to the praise of his name.
4. The church's ministry of mercy must be conducted in spiritual wisdom, recognizing both priorities of ministry and urgency of need.
  - a. Ministry to the immediate church family is given first priority.  
As a man must first care for his own household, so the church as a family must first see that immediate needs are met. Beyond the local church, the bond of the Christian brotherhood calls for compassionate help to all who are in Christ.
  - b. The urgency of need may establish temporary priority.  
Jesus delivered the daughter of the Syrophenician woman at a time when the priority of his ministry was to the lost sheep of Israel (Mk. 7:24-30).
  - c. Priorities may be established in mission strategy.  
The priority established in caring for the immediate household of faith must not be made an excuse for refusing any exercise of the ministry of mercy as part of the missionary task of the church. Particular targets of benevolence may be chosen in developing mission strategy.
5. The church's ministry of mercy cannot ignore the demand of Christ's kingdom.  
Christian benevolence is necessarily linked with gospel summons. The discipline that accompanies the word cannot be absent from the witness of deeds. To signify the reality of Christ's compassion the strategy of Christian witness may call for periods of benevolent service among resistant peoples (or persons). Yet, as is the case with gospel proclamation, such periods are not to be indefinitely prolonged.
6. The churches' ministry of mercy is benevolent and charitable, not political or Utopian.  
The church does not seek to reconstruct social structures through political pressure; rather, it bears witness to the ultimate new order that will come with Christ. The witness of the church as salt and light in the world is advanced by the testimony of benevolence, but the witness of the church is gospel witness. That witness seeks to make disciples, and to offer a sample of the new order in the church. Where the church deems it expedient to cooperate with other agencies in providing resources for relief of distress it must jealously guard the distinctiveness of witness in Christ's name.
7. The church's ministry of mercy is a voluntary expression of gratitude for God's mercies.  
Even though the giving of time, service, and resources is an expression of gratitude that God requires, it is nevertheless God's will that it be freely and

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- cheerfully given. Such gifts are expressions of a life that is in every part a stewardship of the blessings of God (2 Cor. 9:5-7).
8. Within the church as the family and household of God, the needs of the poor and the distressed are to be met from the resources God has provided.

These resources are to be freely given by those whom God has made stewards of grace and of goods. Giving is in the context of worship and nurture. It seeks the restoration of the needy, and is a loving ministry, not a mere dole. It is also in the context of spiritual discipline, a discipline that curbs the exploitation of benevolence. The obligation of provision for the needs of the people of God is part of the new commandment of love reflecting the love of God in Christ.

9. The church is not charged with the support of the poor of the world.

A distinction is necessary between the responsibility that the church bears for the relief and support of needy people of God and the opportunity that the church has to show the compassion of Christ to those in need who are outside the covenant. Even within the church the ministry of mercy is to be sustained by voluntary benevolence. Ministry toward those without is to be exercised in wisdom, wisdom that perceives God-given opportunities for benevolence. These opportunities are providentially provided; the ministry that seizes them in faith will glorify God by manifesting his compassion and saving love.

10. The church's ministry of mercy is primarily carried on through the exercise of spiritual gifts.

It cannot be measured simply by financial expenditure or "case-load." The manner in which the ministry is carried out is essential to its nature. Those with spiritual gifts for showing mercy are responsible for exercising them, even as those with material means are responsible for their stewardship. Opportunities for the ministry of mercy must be sought in prayer, challenges and pleas must be prayerfully considered. The church's ministry of mercy is part of its spiritual warfare. (II Cor. 10:3-5).

- B. How is the ministry of mercy ordered in Christ's church?

1. In the structure of the general and special office
- a. The office of all believers

Every Christian is bound to manifest the compassion of Christ in the love that he shows to others in Christ's name. Every Christian is a priest (I Pet 2:9) offering up deeds of mercy and service as a pleasing sacrifice (Heb.13:15-16). All of us will have the reality of our faith judged by our mercy (Matt25:35-36; James 2:12-13). Therefore, the work of benevolence is not primarily a work discharged by special officers on behalf of the church. It is primarily the loving action of the members of the church. This is the more evident when it is recognized that benevolence is a stewardship of grace, not simply of goods. The ministry of mercy is carried out by Christians individually; it is carried out by Christian households, particularly in showing hospitality. It is also carried out by groups of Christians acting corporately. The necessity of parachurch groups being formed for the ministry of mercy is an irregularity that arises from the complications of denominational division rather than from any problem with the association of Christians to discharge the calling of the general office. Christians who are members of different denominations may and do

unite in associations to carry out the ministry of mercy. In the unity of an undivided church, groups of Christians formed for ministries of mercy would properly be under the ruling office of the church, and would either cooperate with the deacons of the church or be supervised by them.

b. The distinctiveness of the special office

Christians are qualified for ministry by gifts of the Holy Spirit. Some gifts require formal public recognition for their proper functioning. Such gifts constitute office in God's calling and in the church's recognition. Therefore, office does not inherently entail disciplining authority, but rather the right to act for the congregation in the name of Christ in the exercise of one's gifts. The gifts that qualify for teaching, for rule, for service in the church of Christ differ in degree, but not in kind, between the general and the special office.

2. Through the office of the deacon

a. Distinctiveness: the ministry of mercy

Is the deacon an assistant to the elder, a manager of church property and finances, or is the deacon called to a special function of showing mercy? In the history of the church the task of the deacon has been seen in terms of each of these roles, and these emphases have influenced the understanding of the diaconate in Reformed and Presbyterian churches. (See Appendix A.)

It is clear from I Timothy 3:8-13 and Philippians 1:1 that deacons were officers of the apostolic church along with bishops or elders. (The remaining passage where the noun *diakonos* may refer to such an office is Romans 16:1). Although the Apostle gives qualifications for the office in I Timothy and sets it beside the office of the bishop in his address to the Philippians, he does not in these passages describe its function. The term *diakonos* in its general use means "servant." In the context of Christian ministry it is used of the service given to Paul by his traveling companions (Acts 19:22). The thought of the deacon as a serving assistant may appear to be reinforced by the account in Acts 6. When the Greek-speaking widows were being neglected in the daily serving of food (*diakonia*), the apostles who had been in charge of this service sought for seven others to whom it could be committed. They did not wish to leave the service (*diakonia*) of the Word for the *diakonia* of tables (Acts 6:2,4).

Often this passage is regarded as the institution of the office of the deacon, and diaconal duties are read out from it. But to call the Seven "Deacons" poses some difficulties. The word *diakonos* is not used, though the ministry given to the Seven is called *diakonia*. Besides their *diakonia*, they are also involved in teaching, disputing, preaching and evangelism (Acts 7 - Stephen; Acts 8 - Philip). Also, there is no mention of their continued work of welfare. For example, in Acts 11:30 the gifts to the poor in Jerusalem are sent to the elders. In short, the seven, full of wisdom and of the Holy Spirit, seem to have been overqualified for "serving tables" (Stephen and Philip, at least, also ministered the Word). It may be that the seven carried responsibilities that later became those of evangelists, pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons. On the one hand, they may be viewed as apostolic assistants. On the other hand, they, like the apostles before them, may have carried general responsibility for leadership tasks that were later divided among others, specifically the elders and deacons. This was the first division of official functions in the apostolic church.

What can we learn from Acts 6? First, that diaconal ministry was an organized ministry of the church, distinct from the ministry of the Word, and second, that diaconal ministry can be given to officers who specialize in its coordination and work.

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How do we know, then, what the essence of diaconal ministry is? In favor of regarding diaconal ministry as focusing on works of mercy is the constant use of the verb to describe such ministry, often in connection with serving food (Mt. 4:11; 8:15; 25:44; 27:55; Mk. 1:13,31; 15:41; Lk. 4:39; 8:3; 10:40; 12:37; 17:8; 22:26,27; Jn. 12:2; Acts 6:2; Rom. 15:25; 2 Tim. 1:18; Philem. 13; Heb. 6:10). When the verb is widened to include the ministry of other gifts, this original force may still be felt (I Pet. 4:10,11). In a similar way the noun *diakonia* often refers to ministry to physical needs (Lk. 10:40; Acts 11:29; 12:25; I Cor. 16:15; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:1,12,13). This is particularly the case when service to the saints is spoken of. When Paul writes of his ministering to the saints (*diakoneo, diakonia*), he has the ministry of mercy in view (Rom. 15:25,31; 2 Cor. 8:4,19,20; 9:1,12,13). When, on the other hand, he thinks of his apostolic ministry of the Word, he describes it as a ministry to God rather than a ministry to the saints (2 Cor. 6:4). Paul does, indeed, speak of his apostolic service as being rendered to the church (2 Cor. 11:8). Yet a difference remains between the use of *diakonia* terminology in its more literal sense (ministry to the saints in their physical needs), and the use of *diakonia* in a more figurative sense (to describe the spiritual ministry of the Word).

Further, in distinguishing gifts of the Spirit, Paul mentions gifts for ministering mercy, and does so in passages where office is in view (Rom. 12:8,13; I Cor. 12:28,29). Then the term for "helps" in I Cor. 12:28 appears as a verb to describe "helping the weak" with the income from labor (Acts 20:35). It should be noted, too, that Paul asks the church at Rome to assist Phoebe in what is clearly her ministry of mercy, a ministry in which she was a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchreae, having helped many, including the Apostle himself (Rom. 16:1,2). The term *diakonos* is here directly joined with the concept of ministering to physical needs.

The use of the *diakonia* terminology in close connection with the ministry to the saints leads us to conclude that the *deacon* is so called, not because he is the servant of the bishop or elder, but because he is the servant of the saints, ministering to their needs. The deacon is not an assistant bishop, but one called to minister to the saints by showing mercy and relieving their needs. There is, therefore, a focus to the ministry of deacons.

### b. Leadership in the ministry of mercy

Diaconal gifts are recognized in the New Testament, and diaconal ministry is included in church office. This implies that deacons serve and represent the whole congregation as they provide for the needs of some from the resources of many. In Jerusalem arrangements were made for equitable distribution of food on a daily basis to impoverished widows. In a famine situation, funds for food were provided from outside the community. Under the leadership of the Apostle Paul, representatives of the Greek churches accompanied their gifts to the poor saints in Jerusalem. Diaconal ministry requires especially the graces of liberality (devoted singleness of purpose) and cheerfulness (Rom. 12:8). The forms of this ministry include the provision of gifts for the poor, caring for the sick and afflicted, visiting the prisoner, and affording hospitality to strangers; in short, offering help, counsel and friendship to those in need and distress.

In view of the responsibility of the teaching office to equip the saints for ministry (Eph. 4:11-16), it would appear that the same principle should apply to diaconal leadership. While deacons do not have the shepherding and disciplining authority of elders, they do take the lead in the ministry of mercy. They have a respected role to fulfill (I Tim. 3:13). Acts 6:3 indicates that diaconal ministers should be full of spiritual wisdom, which is always the qualification for spiritual leadership (I

Kings 3:7-11; cf. II Sam.14:17). As leaders, deacons should not only minister in the name of the church, but should encourage the church by their example to fulfill the ministry of mercy to which the Lord calls all.

c. Goals of the ministry of mercy

(1) In relation to the ministry of worship

Paul describes the giving of the Gentile churches to the poor saints at Jerusalem as a service to God, and receives gifts from the Philippians as sacrifices offered to God (2 Cor. 9:11-15; Phil 4:18). Deacons and other church officers must keep the doxological aspect of benevolence before the hearts of the congregation. The receiving of gifts for diaconal purposes in the setting of the worship service helps the church to realize that these offerings are for the praise of God.

(2) In relation to the ministry of nurture

Demonstrating brotherly love and caring for those in need is a mark of growth in grace (I Pet. 1:22; 4:8-10). It manifests our love for Christ, and proves out in obedience the will of God for us. The blessings of God's kingdom, do renew the whole man, spiritually, physically, socially (Deut.7:12-16). It is within the covenant that we receive the benefits of both the ministry of the Word and of deed.

(3) In relation to the ministry of witness

Deeds of mercy, accompanying the gospel words of mercy cause men to "see your good works and glorify your father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). *Diakonia* is not just a means to the end of evangelism, nor is diaconal ministry a work independent from evangelism. Rather, both word and deed are means to the end of the spread of the kingdom. Diaconal ministry cannot be done without evangelism, for it would then cease to truly be kingdom endeavor. Like the elders, deacons should encourage the giving of the church to world mission; they have a particular responsibility to evaluate opportunities for works of mercy to accompany words of grace.

d. Scope of the office of deacon

The office of deacon focuses on meeting human need. Yet while the focus of mercy is to be preserved, the kinds of service the deacon may render are varied indeed. Within spiritual norms, the broad mandate of Scripture for the work of deacons opens the door to the development of forms of service to care for the varied needs of men and women in many times and places. Since deacons are called to comfort distress as well as to provide for physical needs, spiritual counselling is one form of diaconal ministry. It is consistent with the diaconal care of the sick to add physical means to our prayers. The Lord may bless our pouring in oil and wine and binding up wounds. Christian medical missions and services may be developed out of diaconal concern. The financial abilities required to manage funds given for the poor may be of service to the church in other ways. Then financial counselling and agricultural instruction can be as expressive of the care of deacons as the provision of seed in an area that has exhausted its supply through famine. No narrow boundaries can be put in the injunction to do good in Christ's name.

The limits of so varied a ministry are not easy to determine. Of course, the work of the deacons will be limited by the resources, spiritual and financial, of those who engage in it. It will also be limited by the opportunity in God's providence for a spiritual form of benevolence to be exercised. In view of these limits, spiritual wisdom is needed to determine priorities and to seize opportunities (Acts 6:3). Limits appear when the assistance becomes merely temporal rather than essentially spiritual, or when spiritual aims are sought by means of coercion. This may occur through the growth of a

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diaconal project in size and influence, even apart from any corruption of its principles. Secular governments have taken over mission hospitals and educational institutions. This has often been unjustly done, and to the detriment of Christian witness. Yet there has sometimes been another factor: the institutionalizing of Christian benevolence to the point where its operation was perceived in terms of secular power.

Wisdom is also needed to determine when the objects of the ministry of mercy can best be achieved through para-church organizations or through cooperation with secular agencies. Since the work of the church must always be in Christ's name, and since the clear witness of the gospel must not be muffled, there are evident limits to the use of such channels or allies.

3. In the pattern of church office

a. Ministry of the Word and of mercy

The ministry of the Word on the part of the teaching elder is linked with the service of the deacon in many ways. The teaching too, is a *diakonos* who must not only advocate but exemplify the ministry of mercy. Paul charged the Ephesians elders with this responsibility and pointed to his own example (Acts 20:33-35). The teaching elder must instruct the congregation in the ministry of mercy that all share, and show from Scripture the importance of the special work of the deacon. Further, he must labor with the deacons to equip and train them. He must also guide them to join with him in equipping the saints for their ministry of mercy.

The deacon, on the other hand, must support the pastor, and show particular concern for the personal and family needs of those who labor in the Word and in teaching. Deacons must avoid usurping the role of the elder by using the leverage of financial administration. Yet they should serve the church by showing genuine concern for the needs of undershepherds as well as sheep of the flock.

b. Ministry of order and of mercy

The office of the deacon is not one of rule, but of sympathy and of service (*BCO* 7:-2). While deacons have the authority to administer their own services and the benevolent funds committed to them, they are not called to participate in the disciplinary government of the church. The distinction between the "overseers" who govern and the "servants" who minister (Phil. 1:1) does not demean the calling of the deacon but it does indicate a marked difference in function. The session of the church has authority over all the work of the deacons as over other matters concerning the spiritual government of the house of God.

At the same time, the session should exercise its supervision in a manner that respects the responsibility of the diaconate in the conduct of its work. Deacons differ in endowment of abilities, not in spiritual maturity. We do not see in I Timothy 3:8ff. an unseasoned man who "has good potential to be an elder". Rather, Paul tells us that a deacon must already be tested (I Tim.3: 10). The elders, therefore, should regularly solicit the advice and response of the diaconate in matters affecting their own shepherding of the flock. To this end, joint meetings of the session and the diaconate should be regularly scheduled.

c. Diaconal ministry and broader assemblies

Presbyterians recognize that the church of Christ comes to expression at more than one level: in the house church and the city church as well as in the church throughout a province or country. It is appropriate that deacons as well as elders should benefit from mutual counsel and encouragement in seeking to fulfill their ministries.

As the local diaconate is under the authority of the session, so, too, are broader conferences of deacons under the authority of presbyteries or general assemblies.

**Resulting Guidelines:**

1. The work of benevolence in Christ's name is the calling of every member of his church. In their own households, in their local household of faith and as members of different church fellowships, Christians may and do associate to carry out the ministry of mercy.
2. The Scriptures define the office of deacon and provide guidelines for the qualifications and functions of deacons. The wide variety of forms of diaconal ministry indicated in the Bible is adaptable to every place and every age.
3. While the church entrusts to deacons the management of various temporal affairs and may call upon them to provide administrative support to pastors and elders, the primary responsibility and purpose of the office is the ministry of mercy.
4. The leadership of deacons in the church furnishes example and encouragement to the whole church in ministering help, counsel, and friendship to the poor, the afflicted, and others in need and distress. In this helping role deacons gain "good standing and great assurance in the faith" (I Tim. 3:13).
5. The work of the deacons assists the ministry of the church in worshiping God, nurturing the saints and witnessing to the world. Deacons and other church officers must keep before the congregation the praise of God as the ultimate aim of benevolence; they must encourage growth in demonstrating brotherly love and in showing to the world by deed as by word the love of Christ.
6. Deacons serve the church in witnessing to the gospel of the kingdom through deeds of mercy which accompany the proclamation of the Word. Witness in word and deed go together. On the one hand, to show mercy in Christ's name is to open a door for the gospel. On the other hand, wherever the gospel is offered to the nations, deeds of mercy support its message of God's grace.
7. The primary responsibility of deacons is to minister to the needs of the household of faith in their own and other churches. They also have the privilege of ministering mercy to others in need as the Lord opens opportunities to serve them in Christ's name.
8. Because the expression of mercy on behalf of Christ's church is a spiritual service, diaconal assistance must not be limited to material provision. Further these spiritual goals must not be sought by means of coercive actions or inducements. Deacons must manage the relation of their ministry to the services of the state and other social agencies so this principle is maintained.
9. The teaching elder should instruct the church regarding the duty and privilege of diaconal ministry. Pastors should not only train and equip deacons for the discharge of their calling; they should also labor with other elders and the deacons in equipping the saints for their work of mercy ministry.
10. The office of the deacon is not one of rule, but of sympathy and service (*BCO* 7:2). Deacons do not exercise disciplinary authority over the membership, but they are authorized to administer the areas of service committed to them. Deacons do not differ from elders so much in degree of Christian maturity as in differentiation of gifts and calling. The diaconate is not a proving ground for the eldership, but a distinct office requiring mature wisdom and gifts for service. In

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the areas of responsibility delegated to them, deacons function under the authority of the elders, who must encourage them in initiative and faithfulness, giving honor to their office.

11. In accordance with *BCO* 9:6, deacons may confer and cooperate with diaconates of other churches when this is desirable for the proper performance of their tasks.

Respectfully submitted,  
TE Fred Marsh, Chairman                    TE Ed Clowney, Secretary  
RE Hadley Mitchell                        TE Tim Keller  
Deacon Frank Harder                      TE Jimmy Lyons  
TE Jim Hatch

*Adopted as the Biblical Guideline for Mercy Ministry in the PCA*

### Appendix A

#### A Historical Survey of the Diaconate

[This survey is based on a much longer documented article produced by the Study Committee and available to commissioners.]

The longer study is found in Box 357, File 13 at the PCA Historical Center, and can be [ordered from the Historical Center](#) for \$14.00, post paid.

#### THE EARLY CHURCH

It can be seen from the earliest writings, such as the "Didache" (A.D.120), that each congregation had multiple elders/bishops and deacons, all elected by the people. Deacons were ministers of mercy to the poor and widows. They were clearly patterned after "the Seven" of Acts 6, even to the point that many churches appointed only seven. Early deacons visited to find needs and meet them (see Pseudo-Clement). They cared for the widows and supervised the "agape" fellowship meals. In addition, Justin Martyr tells us they were helpers with the Eucharist and other worship meals, since they took the gifts to the poor. Deacons were also assistants to the elders and especially the bishops. As time wore on, the deacons' main purpose becomes to serve the bishops as secretaries and helpers. In brief, the function of "helps", which was always a purpose of the deacon, eventually came to eclipse all others. As the diaconal office became deformed by the mid-3rd century, deacons became nothing more than liturgical assistants.

#### THE REFORMATION

Luther envisioned a diaconate in each town carrying on distribution to the city's poor as its main focus (see The Babylonian Captivity of the Church). For various reasons, however, the Lutherans did not carry this out and the diaconate disappeared from the Lutheran scene.

John Calvin was the most clear in explaining the theological connection between almsgiving and worship. He placed almsgiving in the liturgy after the sermon and as part of the Supper liturgy. He stated categorically: "Thus we ought always to

provide that no meeting of the church should take place without the word, prayers, partaking of the supper, and almsgiving." *Institutes*, IV. 17. 44.

The Catholic exegetes taught that deacons were primarily helpers who assisted the priest in his work of teaching and worship. Calvin, however, was quite careful to say in his exegesis of I Tim.3:8ff. that the deacon is a representative of the church, not of the pastor. Therefore, the diaconate has an integrity all its own. They are not mere "domestic servants". For example, the diaconate should not ordinarily be a stepping stone or trial arena for junior elders. They do not merely carry out orders, but they are a holy office in which they look for needs and make decisions. Deacons are subordinate to Elders, but they are not the immediate subordinates of the elders, in a chain of command. Calvin allows that deacons are "Levites" and do give assistance to the elders and pastors, but he insists on the primacy of mercy and on the distinctiveness of the office (*Institutes* IV. 19. 32)

Calvin established two orders of deacons. First there were those who administered alms for the poor ("procurators"). They were to receive, dispense, and hold funds, possessions, rents and pensions for the poor. The second order ("hospitallers") consisted of deacons who actually ministered to the sick and to the poor. Their chief work was the administration of a "hospital" in which there were not only those too sick to work, but also the aged, widows and orphans, and "other poor creatures".

#### LATER DEVELOPMENTS

Scotland. The First Book of Discipline (Heading VI.) established deacons as the chief financial officers of the church. They supported the pastor, the schools, and the poor within their parishes. Their functions are administrative and financial. Deacons were to care for the poor in their parishes. On the one hand, the Second Book of Discipline mentions the diaconal ministry as being directed to the saints, yet later it speaks of aiding the poor and the strangers within a parish (See Chapters VIII. and IX.) This indicates that the church's whole neighborhood was envisioned as a ministry area for the deacons.

Deacons were not admitted to church councils and were completely under the authority of the Session. Mercy was one of their duties along with general administration.

The Netherlands. The Dutch churches spoke more emphatically that mercy was the prime purpose of the diaconate. At the Synod of Dort (1574) deacons were charged to cooperate with the civil magistrates and others who were seeking to help the poor in their communities. Article 25 of the Church Order of Dort (1618-19) tells deacons to distribute alms not only among the members of the church, but also to the poor among "inhabitants and strangers". The deacons of the 17th century Reformed churches in many cases formed the central social service agency of the city, supporting orphanages, homes for the elderly, schools, several clothing manufacturing shops and bakeries for distribution to the poor.

Deacons in the Dutch churches definitely wielded more authority and oversight over the congregation than deacons in the Presbyterian churches. They sat on the Church Council or consistory with the elders. Thus, deacons took part in the nomination procedure of both elders and had a regulative voice together with the elders in electing a

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pastor. No pastor could leave a field without consent of the consistory, which included deacons.

England. Many of the Puritans saw Presbyterianism as the truest Scriptural church order. In The Second Parte of a Register, deacons are described as those whose office "consisteth only in the oversight of the poor". Deacons were to be elected in every church. The Westminster Assembly, though it discussed the elder and powers of presbytery for months, spent only one day on the diaconate, and provided only the briefest of statements. "The Scripture doth hold out deacons as distinct officers in the church, whose office is perpetual. To whose office it belongs not to preach the word or administer the sacraments, but to take special care in distributing to the necessities of the poor." (The Form of Presbyterial Church Government)

### THE AMERICAN REFORMED CHURCHES

Presbyterian. The first American General Assembly pronouncement regarding the duties of deacons was that of the 1833 Assembly which stated that the deacons of a congregation primarily were to care for the poor of their own church. Secondly, the "temporalities of the church" (care of general care, maintenance of property, etc.) could be committed to them. This latter pronouncement was balanced by a 1752 Assembly statement allowing for trustees who could handle "temporalities" instead of deacons. In this, the Americans followed, not the Dutch churches (which made mercy the exclusive purpose of the diaconate) but the Scottish Books of Discipline, which gave deacons all financial affairs of the church. Giving deacons the trusteeship, however, was definitely an addition to the statement of the Westminster Assembly. Under the influence of Thornwell, the Southern Presbyterian Church, trustees were discouraged and the "trusteeship" duties of deacons became mandatory.

As for the scope of the diaconate, we have seen that the earlier American understanding was for deacons to care for the poor of their congregation only, not of the neighborhood in general (e.g. Samuel Miller's "Essay" on the Office of Ruling Elder). This was not the unanimous position of the Old School Presbyterians, however (e.g. Thomas Smyth of South Carolina). By the 1871 General Assembly, however, deacons were charged to give charity to non-Christians "as will aid in ... opening the door for more direct spiritual ministrations."

As for the authority of the diaconate, American presbyterians forbade deacons to sit on any church courts. The 1715 Assembly stated that deacons had "no juridical power". However, in the area of work among the poor, deacons had surprising policy making power. The 1857 Old School General Assembly answered in the negative the question "Has a Church session any original or direct control over the management and distribution of the fund collected and in the hands of the Deacons for the benefit of the poor of the Church?" Instead, they pronounced that the Session "may advise respecting use of the funds". In addition, it was left up to local congregations whether Deacons could officiate the Sacraments.

In the final analysis, it cannot be said that the diaconate has flourished in American Presbyterianism at all. All the General Assembly pronouncements and guidance on the subject from 1706-1873 fill only a page and a half. Very little unity of mind existed on the function and scope of the office. At no point during the 19th century did the majority of Presbyterian churches have deacons.

Reformed. The Dutch Reformed churches in America maintained from their fatherland a clearer concept of the deacon as a primarily a minister of mercy. Unlike the Presbyterian Forms of Church Government, their Church Order Article on the Ministry of Deacons does not include the duties of Trusteeship at all. And though in some Reformed churches deacons assume the duties of trustees, the prevailing force of all Church pronouncements was to define diaconal ministry as mercy ministry.

As stated above, the Dutch Reformed churches have been much more inclined to encourage the ministry of deacons in their communities as well as their congregation. R.B.Kuiper of the Christian Reformed Church wrote: "Does it follow that deacons should never extend aid to needy persons outside the fold of the church? The answer must be negative. Did not the merciful Christ heal the daughter of a Syrophenician woman and thus permit a Greek to eat the crumbs that fell from the table of God's covenant people (Mark 7:24-30)?"