



Essential Servants: Reflections on the Caring Ministries of Deacons

by Fred Swartz



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All meditations in this resource were written by Fred Swartz,
who served from 1983-2008 as a deacon advocate
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INTRODUCTION

"I don't know what I would do without the deacons in my church," noted one pastor in the Church of the Brethren. "They are so helpful in identifying and serving the needs of the people of our congregation. Our work, mine and the deacons', is definitely a valuable collaboration. Our support of each other helps the church serve and move forward in its mission."

A similar testimony is heard in many Church of the Brethren congregations today, as deacons in the denomination celebrate 25 years of a renewed emphasis upon deacons as primary caregivers in the church. Since 1983, denominational polity recognizes deacons to be called out persons in the church whose obedience to Christ and commitment to His Church find expression in helping others discover the divine grace and love given us by God through the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

Yet, the role of deacons in the congregation is still being explored and learned. There is so much potential for their ministry, and there is so much potential for the task to be overwhelming! The *Deacon Manual for Caring Ministries*, published in 2002 and available from Brethren Press, emphasizes that each deacon group, indeed each deacon, needs to decide how much he or she can do efficiently and comfortably. It is expected, also, that deacons will progressively learn what being a deacon means and come to realize that neither he nor she nor the congregation will ever achieve perfection.

It helps, however, to have a group in which to discuss the meaning of the deacon task and to share support for each other. That is the function of the deacon group in the congregation. It suggests that deacons should meet together, perhaps as often as once a month, to reach some common understandings about what it means to be a deacon, as well as to discuss ways the deacons can serve the church and its individual members.

The purpose of this resource is to provide springboards for mission discussions, and perhaps training, to take place in each meeting of the deacon board. The reflections originally were printed as editorial commentaries for the Church of the Brethren deacon newsletter, *The Caregiver*, and later as a section for deacons in *Caregiving*, a magazine of the caring ministries of the denomination.

There are 19 meditations in this booklet, each with a theme for deacon work, and each with several questions to stimulate discussion. It is envisioned that deacon groups could use one meditation per meeting,

utilizing 30-45 minutes for the exercise. They do not have to be taken in the order they appear in the booklet. You may wish to choose on the basis of subjects relevant to what is going on in the congregation, or needs identified by the deacons themselves. The table of contents is designed to identify the basic subject of each meditation. There also is an index containing topics addressed in the meditations.

DEACONS: ESSENTIAL SERVANTS

The late Don Durnbaugh, in 1996, provided the Church of the Brethren deacon ministry an important pamphlet entitled, *Deacons in Historical Perspective*. Information about deacons in the early days of our denomination is sketchy, at best. Durnbaugh has taken what we do know and composed a helpful summary.

I want to affirm the first point of his conclusion (pg. 13): "During the course of the Brethren Movement, the office of deacon has been seen as essential to the life of the congregation." Durnbaugh is looking at our history as a whole. He recognizes that there were periods when deacons were less popular, or assumed responsibilities or authority not appropriate for their calling. But in their absence, the church realized the contributions deacons can make to the Body of Christ and have restored their importance in the life of the congregation.

Taking the heritage of our Anabaptist roots as well as New Testament references to deacons, the first description of deacons among the Brethren suggested that they: "keep oversight of the poor widows and their children, to render them such assistance as may be necessary....assist in making a general visit among all the families or members in their respective congregations, at least once a year...(and) to read the Scriptures, to pray, and even exhort, if it may appear necessary, at their regular meetings of worship" (Philip Boyle, "History of the German Baptist Brethren, or Brethren," in John Winebrenner, *History of All Religious Denominations in the United States*, 2nd ed., 91-94.) To this description, Durnbaugh adds that the early Brethren saw deacons as leaders in spiritual life as well as caretakers of members' physical and material needs.

Since 1983, deacons in the Church of the Brethren have been regarded as essential caregivers in the congregation, assisting the pastor in a ministry to the whole person of every member. Many congregations have adopted some form of care whereby every member is assigned to a deacon or a team of deacons so that he or she (or families, as it were) would receive regular, personal contacts from the church. Where this program has been carried out faithfully by the deacons, expressions of appreciation, increased participation in the church and its special services, and increased care of one another within the church membership has been noted. Pastors have expressed gratitude for the assistance of deacons, helping them extend pastoral care to more persons in the church.

The Church of the Brethren has seen new vitality and enthusiasm for the role and value of deacons over the past 25 years. At the denominational level, the Caring Ministries of the Church of the Brethren has also recognized the essential ministry of deacons and has provided training materials and workshops to assist deacons in their work. The church can rejoice in the restoration of this biblical and valuable calling, and every congregation should honor and encourage its deacons.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) What does your deacon group think about Don Durnbaugh's statement that, "During the course of the Brethren Movement, the office of deacon has been seen as essential to the life of the congregation"? In what way or ways do you see deacons as essential to the life of your church?
- 2) How faithful to the task of keeping in touch with every member of the congregation is your deacon ministry? Do you see this as important? Are there stories to tell that would illustrate appreciation of the congregation for the deacon ministry?
- 3) Is your deacon group familiar with the aids it can receive from the denominational office of deacon ministry? Could one or two persons in your group be assigned to investigate what is available?
- 4) What can your deacon group do to increase the congregation's awareness of the caregiving program?

MEMBERS' WELL-BEING: AT THE HEART OF DEACON CALLING

The health and well-being of every member of the congregation are the heart and soul of deacon caregiving. The 1997 Church of the Brethren statement on Deacon Ministry has this important calling among the appropriate functions of a local church deacon body:

"Deacons will give general oversight to the health and healing ministries of the congregation. They will give special attention to promoting healthy lifestyle choices, healthy relationships, and healthy attitudes, and will reach out with the compassion of Christ to persons experiencing pain and suffering."

The vision for deacons, adopted by Annual Conference as a part of the 1997 paper, states: "Deacons are called to be dedicated caregivers who use their spiritual gifts in a shared ministry of concern for the total well-being of God's people...." It is a tremendous assignment, a hard assignment, a critical assignment! Deacons are to be good stewards of life: their own and that of others. "Healthy lifestyle choices, healthy relationships, and healthy attitudes" puts some meaning, if not some "teeth," into the mission of saving souls!

Jesus set the standard. He demonstrated in his ministry that he believed and understood the relationship between physical health, mental health, and spiritual health. The salvation he offered included but went beyond spiritual well-being. His love for the whole person motivated him to help each person become whole. In the healing narratives of the Gospels, there is a relationship between the person's faith and belief and his or her physical being. Deacons would do well to study together some of the recorded incidents in which Jesus performed a healing, and talk about the relationship of faith to health. As part of the discussion, the group could consider the value of the anointing service to members of the congregation. How is the anointing offered? Do people, especially the younger members, need more information about this traditional and important ordinance of the church?

Beyond the scriptural study of wholeness, what can deacons do to help people be the whole persons they are created to be? For openers, I would suggest that deacons evaluate the health of the people of their respective congregations. This could be done via the use of a carefully-crafted survey, or simply from the knowledge members of the deacon group have about the members. This information might be readily available if the deacon body

has some method of keeping in regular contact with the church's members, for example, a shepherding program. If not, then the survey might work, or certain key interviews (pastor, members of large families in the church, longtime church members who are faithful attendees and workers) could be conducted.

After gathering information about the health of the congregation, deacons can decide what would help improve the congregation's well-being. Resources for this are available from the Caring Ministries of the Church of the Brethren, who, along with Brethren Benefit Trust, has launched a major emphasis upon healthy lifestyles and physical fitness. Such resources include suggestions on how to initiate in the congregation periodic physical and mental health evaluation days (blood pressure checks, psychological consultation, etc.). They also emphasize the balance each of us should achieve in exercise, diet, healthy thoughts, and service to others.

Finally, deacons themselves can model whole-health lifestyles. This may take some defining within your deacon group. For example, does wholeness of health include:

- Time balanced among family, occupation, church, community service?
- Time for a daily exercise program and a careful diet?
- Working at forgiveness and reconciliation?
- Belonging to a prayer support group?
- Regular participation in the worship services of the church?
- Having a spiritual director?
- Regular health examinations from a physician?
- An evaluation tool for measuring spiritual and mental disposition?
- Accountability to each other in the care of oneself?

Deacons are among the most confident and hopeful people when it comes to facing physical or spiritual crises. They have serenity, a hope, a victorious spirit that reflects a deep faith and trust in God. How is your deacon group doing at "promoting healthy lifestyle choices, healthy relationships, and healthy attitudes"? How is your deacon group doing at building up the well-being of every church member? Certainly this is a timely task for all deacon groups!

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Begin your discussion of this topic by looking at some of Jesus' healings and note all of the elements that are a part of these incidents. Some say Luke was a physician, which accounts for the

- many reports of Jesus' healing in his Gospel. Some suggested passages: Luke 5:17-26; Luke 7:1-10; Luke 8:40-48; Luke 18:43.
- 2) Is anointing used often in your congregation? Do church members understand the meaning of the anointing? Is there need for some education about its relationship to wholeness of life?
 - 3) Does your deacon group know how many persons/families of the congregation are dealing with health issues or problems? Is the church speaking to those issues? How could your ministry be improved?
 - 4) Discuss the observation that deacons themselves should model healthy lifestyles. What does "wholeness of health" include? Is the list above exhaustive, or are there other things you would add? Does your deacon group contain the "most confident and hopeful people" in the congregation, as is implied above?

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DEACONS' MISSION IN ONE WORD: FRIENDSHIP

It was an electric moment when Jesus said to the disciples, "No longer do I call you servants...but now I call you (my) friends" (John 15:15). Jesus explains that a servant just does what is asked or required of him, but a friend is allowed into the inner chamber of another's life, where trust, care, and mutual sharing are evident. A friend becomes more than one who provides a service; a friend is a companion, a confidant, a soul-mate.

When the mission of deacons was redefined by Annual Conference in 1997, a vision statement was adopted. It reads:

Deacons are called to be dedicated caregivers who use their spiritual gifts in a shared ministry of concern for the total well-being of God's people.

Deacons are to be Christ-like, welcoming, nurturing, reconciling, sensitive to the presence of God's Spirit in their lives and in the lives of others, and witnessing for Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord within and beyond the Body of Christ, the church.

The glory and genius of calling deacons is to have a corps of people in the congregation who are especially alert to helping every person in the church find the love and hope of Jesus Christ. No academic degree is needed to qualify, no background of unusual high and holy ministry. All that is asked is that you love people as Jesus loved us.

Jesus gives us a clue as to what Christian friendship means, and it may well be the concept that simply defines the deacon's God-given call. There have been many expressions of gratitude, in my experience, for the way deacons have been "friends" to members of a congregation. The key is that a deacon or deacons went out of their way to become not just a supplier of care, but also one who listened, consoled, empathized, and rejoiced with another. It is possible to be a personal friend to another without letting it become a dependent relationship. It is a delicate balance, but a balance that is maintained by a sense on the part of the caregiver that the care is given in the name of Jesus. A friend of Jesus is one who walks with Him in every experience of life...not one who tries to do it on his or her own.

One of the highest compliments a pastor or a deacon can receive is to have a church member to whom you have ministered say, "She (he) is my friend." It means you have cared deeply enough to earn that person's highest respect. It means you have taken time, not only to provide for that person's

need, but also to share in their personal and spiritual thoughts and feelings. It means that they have someone who accepts them for who they are.

True friendships in this fast and suspicious world do not come easily. The church is still a potential haven for those who have no other friends to turn to. It is the mission of deacons to insure that *friendship* is accessible within the church family and that everybody within the Body has a Jesus-friend.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) List attributes of the nature of friendship as you think Jesus meant it. Does your list add substance to your sense of friendship in your own relationships?
- 2) Discuss the paragraph that states, "The glory and genius of calling deacons is to have a corps of people who are especially alert to helping every person in the church find the love and hope of Jesus...All that is asked is that you love people as Jesus loved us." Does that define for you why and how you call deacons in your congregation? If not, what would it take to change the perception and qualifications for deacons in your church?
- 3) Do you agree that "Christian friendship" defines the deacon call to caregiving? What is special or unique about Christian friendship?
- 4) Can you identify people or groups in your congregation who need a friend? What can your deacon group do about it?

PASTOR AND DEACONS ARE A CARE TEAM

In congregations in which someone is designated “pastor,” either employed or “free,” there must be a close relationship between pastor and deacons for the latter to be effective caregivers. In fact, both pastor and deacons must see themselves as team members, sharing mutual responsibility for meeting the needs of the “flock.”

Jonathan C. Hunter, in the Brethren/Mennonite deacon resource, *Called to Caregiving*, says the “pastor (must recognize) the deacons as an integral part of the ‘pastoral ministry’ and willingly share pastoral responsibility with them....” In turn, the deacon is to look to the pastor for direction, training, and support. “The pastor and deacons thus become a source of spiritual strength and renewal for the entire congregation. They learn new skills for caring with each other, and then live out those relationships with the larger body of Christ” (pp. 55-57).

In First and Second Timothy, Paul states the qualifications of deacons alongside those for bishops or pastors, with very little distinction between the two. Both pastors and deacons are to be equipped for modeling Christ’s love and hope in the congregation. It is clear they are to share the function of caregiving and work together as a team. There is no need for defensiveness or suspicion on the part of either, for their actions should be focused on providing maximum help to others and not upon saving self or individual territory.

Any pastor who believes he or she can provide all the pastoral care a congregation needs (regardless of the size of the church) is sadly deceived. Instead, the pastor should be most grateful for a core of committed laypersons to assist with extending the love and enabling strength of the church’s faith to others. Likewise, any deacon group that thinks it can function apart from the one who has been chosen to *coordinate* pastoral care in the congregation can cause a good bit of confusion and bitter disunity. The deacons need the wisdom and support of the pastor to provide a shepherding program that is balanced and effective.

Where there is not this sense of teamwork between pastor and deacons, deacons are encouraged to take the initiative to strengthen the relationship. Invite the pastor to conduct training sessions for deacons; insist on the pastor giving “lists” of persons whom the deacons could visit and counsel upon making a visit; ask the pastor to preach a sermon periodically on the deacons’ caregiving function; be certain that the *pastor* receives care from the deacons, too. If you run into resistance from the pastor to establish this

team concept, contact your district executive for help in how to convey to the pastor the importance of teamwork.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Discuss the relationship between your deacon group and the pastor. Is there a sense of being a team to provide pastoral care to the congregation? Does the congregation sense this teamwork, or do they expect the pastor to do all the "pastoral" care?
- 2) The article above suggests that the pastor is the leader of the team, providing "direction, training, and support" for the deacons. Does this describe your congregation? Do deacons and pastor(s) meet together regularly? Does the pastor involve deacons in visitations with him, anointings, and other caring ministries? If not, has the pastor been *invited* by the deacons to do so?
- 3) In what ways do your deacons insure that the pastor(s) receives "pastoral" care? For example, in one congregation the deacons made a commitment to pray for their pastors daily, reminding themselves with a card they could post on their bathroom mirrors.
- 4) Do you have a good system of communication between deacons and pastor(s) so that each is informed of special needs of congregational members, followed by mutual reports of significant contacts with the congregation?

SHOULD DEACONS “DO” THEOLOGY?

Wouldn't an affirmative answer to that question scare a lot of people away from the call to be a deacon in the local church? But wait, let's at least talk a little about it. Theology isn't the ivory-towered erudite pastime of idle scholars that many people think it is. Theology, put simply, is the study of God and God's relationship to this life and world. I should hope that in that sense *all* of us are theologians, working at deepening our knowledge and understanding of our faith.

I don't know of any persons who are asked to interpret our faith more than ministers and deacons. The questions may not come in the form of a verbal inquiry, but may more often be seen in the face and posture of those who feel victimized by a disappointment or tragedy and are fighting the shadows of doubt and despair. I suspect, through my own experience, that every caregiver, be it deacon or minister, feels inadequate in that situation. Ours is a faith of hope and comfort, but as the Psalmist well illustrated with his laments, assurance is not just handed to us as a pill that will “fix” everything in a matter of minutes. The Psalmist had to be reminded of and returned to his faith before he could surrender his troubles to the healing grace of God.

The outright verbal inquiries of caregivers are even more difficult. How do you respond to a person who says to you, “I don't think God loves me anymore,” or, “Why did this happen to me?” or, “Is God punishing me for something?” or, “If God is so good, why did He let this happen?” or, “I just don't have any faith anymore”? Some might say that deacons have no business responding to those questions *at all*! Rather, it is our mission just to listen and respond with something like, “I understand how difficult this is for you.”

Perhaps there are circumstances in which we do need to take a very passive role as caregivers and serve as an outlet for the afflicted person's feelings. There will be other times when you will have the sense that if you do not say *something* in response to the person's depression or questions, you may lose their confidence as a helpful friend. So what do we do?

First and foremost, it behooves us, as caregivers, to have some convictions of our own about God and God's response to our life involvements. For example, I can say and have said to people that I do not believe that God initiates and inflicts suffering to revenge something in our lives God did not like. My experience with God is that God is love and supplies us out of that context with grace sufficient to meet our needs. You may not agree with those statements, and that is alright. The point is that *you* have some

convictions about God's nature that are derived by your study of the scriptures and your own personal knowledge of God. Then you will be *equipped* to offer to troubled persons a response, either verbal or non-verbal, that originates from personal assurance.

My suggestion would be that a portion of deacons' meetings be devoted to Bible study and *theological* discussion that focuses on the nature of God, including the sending of God's Son, to help sharpen your knowledge and understanding. I believe that caregiving, especially Christian caregiving, is inadequate without a theological base. Yes, deacons can do theology.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Does the idea of having to talk about theology scare you? What do you think about the definition that theology is "the study of God and God's relation to this life and world." Does that make "theology" a bit easier to handle?
- 2) Do you think deacons should have some response to the person who despairs in his/her faith, or are deacons called just to listen only? Is the point that we should have assurance in our own faith and that this assurance will come through in an appropriate response?
- 3) It would be interesting to take a poll of your deacon group to see if they agree with the author of the above article who says that his conviction is that God is always loving. Are there some who see God as a strict disciplinarian?
- 4) Would your deacon group benefit from devoting a portion of each deacon meeting to "Bible study and *theological* discussion that focuses on the nature of God"? How important is it for deacons to be forming these convictions as a resource for caregiving?

WHAT DO DEACONS BELIEVE?

Foundational beliefs are the faith principles that underlie the ministry and caring of the church. For example, we pray and request others to pray because we believe that prayer can make a difference in something that is important to us. We may not all believe that prayers are answered in the same way, but we all pray because we believe prayer is an effective way to cope with a situation that is beyond our human capacity to change. Prayer also is a meaningful way to express our feelings of praise and thanksgiving.

Our denomination operates under the assumption that there are certain foundational beliefs that have shaped and continue to shape our Brethren caring and serving. Among them are the affirmation that we have no creed except the New Testament, the belief that the life that has a single focus on following Jesus is the most satisfying, the commitment to peace in all our relationships, the ideal of service and rehabilitation in disasters, the honoring of integrity in word and deed.

The same should be true in the congregation. There are certain beliefs that have guided the church since its beginning. There may be other beliefs that have evolved during subsequent years but are embraced by all who participate in the congregation's life. Furthermore, each congregation may be unique in the tenets that are common to its heritage and nature.

How often does your deacon group take some time to talk about faith? Most deacon groups I have been familiar with use their precious little time to plan for Love Feast, go over shut-in lists, talk about the mechanics of the anointing service, et cetera. Rarely do we have a serious discussion of the congregation's spiritual character, or an affirmation of the characteristics of our faith.

Perhaps your deacon group could begin to identify some of the foundational beliefs that shape who you are as a congregation. Here are a few questions to start that discussion:

- How seriously does your congregation take the Bible, and more specifically the New Testament, as *the* guidebook for faith and action?
- Is Christ's sacrificial love the model for your caring and love to each other? Are the gifts you give, including monetary offerings, a genuine expression of gratitude to God for the life you enjoy?
- What part do the teachings of Jesus about peace and reconciliation play in your relationship at church and in the world?
- Is God *real* to the members of the church?

- Is obedience to God a conscious factor in what the members do and say?
- Is Christ alive for the members of your church?
- Do they believe in the Holy Spirit who supplies power for creative living?
- What does it mean to them when you ask them to “pray for” someone?

If you spend a session or more in assessing the foundational beliefs of the congregation, what will you do with your conclusions? Don't let them stay in your deacon minutes! Use the church newsletter, or “minutes for mission” on Sunday morning, or other appropriate ways to share your insights with the congregation. Plan a special congregational evening, using small groups, pastors, deacons and other insightful persons, to compile a list of those beliefs the congregation can agree are the guiding faith principles of your church. And don't be surprised, but rather, *expect* to see some renewal resulting from your efforts!

For Further Reflection

- 1) Perhaps before answering the questions in the text above, members of the deacon group might make a list of the Christian beliefs that have shaped who they are and in which they believe today. Are there special persons who have helped to shape each person's foundational beliefs?
- 2) Does your congregation have a mission statement? If so, it may be well to examine the statement and identify the important elements. Are they practical, or measurable? Can you identify ways in which the congregation is carrying out its mission intentionally? If your congregation does not have a mission statement, consider the value of having such, or list some ways you think the congregation carries out, or could carry out, Jesus' commission to the church.
- 3) Do you think it is important enough for a congregation to affirm its foundational beliefs to have a congregation meeting as described above?

HOW MUCH SHOULD DEACONS GIVE?

I thought that headline would get your attention! Especially so in the fall, when congregations are seeking stewardship commitments. It was my experience as a pastor that deacons were among the strongest supporters of the mission of the congregation, including the financial undergirding. It was my observation that deacons were always willing to respond to a call to care for someone's need. It is also true that deacons are among the hardest workers in the local church, often fulfilling organizational roles in addition to that of deacon. And I have known some deacons who became very weary of it all.

So, is there a limit as to how much we should expect a deacon to do? For example, should we expect a deacon to take a member of the congregation 20 miles each way to get cancer treatments, two times a week for six months? Should we expect a deacon couple to keep up with 12 families in their deacon shepherding assignment? Is it fair for a deacon to have someone become dependent on them for grocery buying, a weekly lunch consultation, and frequent anytime phone "listening" sessions?

The answer to the above questions is definitely "no," but how can we control it so that burn-out doesn't happen? The onus is first on the church. Have we called enough deacons to handle the caregiving load in the congregation? Do we have some prescribed limits or expectations of what is a realistic role for a deacon in our church (for example, should a deacon also be chair of a major task group or ministry team)? Do we have a well-defined sense of the function of deacons for our church? Are we cultivating and nurturing new leaders for the church?

Secondly, it is each deacon's responsibility to know and to maintain his or her limits. You *do* have permission to refer a person to someone else's care when that person reaches the point where he or she is excessively dependent on you and making unrealistic demands on your time and resources. You *do* have permission to say "no" to additional requests for service in the church when you feel you have all you can handle now. You *do* have permission to ask for help with a person's needs when they exceed your own time and energy, such as sharing the trips to take persons for medical treatments, or asking another deacon to go along with you to visit an overbearing shut-in.

Remember that Jesus took time away from the crowds, even away from the disciples, when the preaching, teaching, and healing tasks began to weigh down his human strength. I believe in extending an indefinite call to

deacons, but I also believe in giving deacons the option of taking a year or two sabbatical every so often to refresh their caregiving energies. Again, it is the responsibility of the church to offer that possibility, and it is the responsibility of the deacon to take the opportunity if he or she feels it is needed. Remember, deacons are human too!

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Is it clear what is expected of a deacon in your congregation? How do you as a deacon think about your task? Is it overwhelming? Do you have permission to say "no" to requests that stretch you beyond your limits of time and energy?
- 2) Do you have opportunity or possibilities for making referrals to other deacons or to professional caregivers when you feel the needs of a person exceed your time and resources? Is this something you might discuss with your pastor?
- 3) Discuss the idea of providing for deacons to have a year or two sabbatical to refresh their caregiving energies, then resuming their service as deacons.
- 4) What is being done to encourage and cultivate persons for the position of deacon in your church? If the answer is 'nothing', think of some ways to do it.

THE JOY OF DEACONING

It's a real joy to be your deacon," a newly appointed deacon shepherd said to her pastor. "You have served me in so many ways; hopefully now I can give some of that care back to you." This deacon took her call very seriously, and yet with joyous anticipation of making a difference in the life of someone who knew caregiving very well. It is true: caregivers need loving care themselves! In being a deacon or pastor, nearly always "the measure you give will be the measure you get back, heaped up and overflowing!"

I asked a deacon recently what it is about being a deacon that brings her the greatest joy. Without hesitation she replied, "The relationships! Getting to know people better, interacting with them differently than in a casual setting...standing with them in the trying moments of their lives." She went on to give examples of how blessed she and her husband had been through the expressions of gratitude "and hugs" they have received from those they have served as deacons. She also observed that their ministrations as deacons had not been that creative or difficult or demanding. "It's a matter of keeping in touch with people and letting them know you and Christ and the church care about them."

Would that every deacon felt that positive and assured in their call to the deacon ministry of caregiving. In some congregations, deacons have not yet assumed the caregiving function but are still fixed on the single focus of preparing for the ordinances: love feast and baptism. Other groups have added to the deacons' responsibilities arranging for relief to families struck by tragedy and transporting persons to the hospital for long-term treatments. All are worthy and needed ministries, but they can become burdensome if there is not a setting in which a strong relationship can develop between the giver and the receiver.

In other instances where there is a concerted effort to match deacons with parishoners in a shepherding role, the task can become burdensome, in spite of the enduring relationships, if the deacon or deacon shepherds are assigned too many persons for their care. Then the task becomes more frustration than joy, having to "keep up" with all of the "sheep." Pastors are often in the same boat, having too many people to serve, until burn-out quickly sets in. Those pastors need deacons to help serve the pastoral needs of the congregation.

Deacon caregiving is a lot like grandparenting...you are free to give as much care as you can or like, but you are not the primary caregiver. That privilege belongs to family, to the pastor, and of course, ultimately to Christ. This freedom enables you to enter into the **joy** of the task, to take some risks in sharing of yourself, to see yourself as not the solver of others' problems, but rather a servant of Christ in helping to lead persons to his or her healing and comforting grace. And thus to **enjoy** the call to "deaconing."

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Have each person in your deacon group respond to these questions: "Do you like being a deacon? And if so, what is your greatest joy as a deacon?" Then ask for concerns of those for whom "deaconing" is not so pleasant or exciting. How can the role of deacon be made more attractive and fulfilling in your congregation?
- 2) Does your church give opportunity for deacons to do more than prepare for Love Feast and baptisms? If the deacons could devise a way to be in constant touch with all of the members of the church, do you think it would contribute to the unity and enthusiasm of the congregation?
- 3) How do you react to the statement: "Deacon caregiving is a lot like grandparenting...you are free to give as much care as you can or like, but you are not the primary caregiver. That privilege belongs to family, to the pastor, and of course, ultimately to Christ." Is this helpful in terms of freeing you from feeling that you have to have the solution to everybody's problems?
- 4) Study Luke 10:1-12, 17-20, the story of Jesus appointing seventy ambassadors to precede him in the towns he intended to visit. The 70 returned "with joy" the scripture says. What can we learn from this story?

DEACONS: AMBASSADORS IN CHANGE

I was a very young pastor when a man in another congregation made a very significant confession to me concerning change. He also happened to be a deacon. His comment was, "I do not readily welcome changes in the church, but I'll tell you one thing, if change is to take place I'm going to be right in the middle of it." He was a very wise and ambitious deacon, and well-respected, even by those who may not agree with him.

When I asked him what he meant, he said that he took his participation in the Body of Christ seriously enough to believe that he was a part that needed to function actively in order for the Body to be whole, just as Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 12:12-31). If there were decisions to be made that may institute change in the way the church went about its activity for Christ, his ideas and his vote were critical toward making the change beneficial to the whole body, that it would enhance rather than divide the church. He said further that often he heard other church members making the accusation that their congregation was run by a small clique. He said that he always replied, "I don't believe for a minute that this church is controlled by a clique...but if it is, I'm going to be a member of the clique!"

Now granted my friend may have been a smidgeon aggressive in his approach to how the church is managed, and my knowledge of him was that he had a healthy ego. But I appreciated his commitment to taking his fair share of the action and not waiting until a decision was made with which he did not agree and then criticize those who instituted the change. If every member of the church took such an involved approach to their church membership there would be far fewer conflicts, for sure.

Deacons are in a unique place to serve as agents (although I prefer the biblical term, "ambassadors") of change. In the first place, deacons are in touch with the feelings and needs of all of the members of the church. At least, that is the basis of the caregiving function: to know every member personally and keep in touch with them regularly. Deacons are good listeners. Your function is to "hear" what people are saying and to process that data to bring Christ closer to the people and their needs.

Secondly, deacons maintain the kind of relationship with members of the church in which members can share freely their concerns as well as their joys about the church. Those concerns can be translated for the pastor, the deacon board, the church board, or others in leadership positions who can adjust the church's response in such a way as to be more relevant to the people it serves.

Third, deacons have the whole church community at heart without the commission to administer specific programs, and thus the deacon body can be a forum in which to discuss needed or desired changes in the church. That discussion theoretically should proceed in an unbiased and open way, with fairness given to all ideas and arguments. And if a change comes from an attempt to involve all of the members in the discussion, then deacons can be the very catalysts (ambassadors) to help all members of the congregation accept the change.

A good example of how deacons can be ambassadors for change occurs when pastoral leadership of the congregation is in transition. Not only can deacons assume part of the pastoral care role during such transition, they also can help the congregation accept changes it may need to make or accept as the pastoral style also changes with a new shepherd. Furthermore, wise is the pastor, new or otherwise, who works with the deacons to introduce new ideas or changes!

The reason I like the word "ambassador" is that it describes the recovered vision for deacons, the biblical vision, of deacons as reconcilers and facilitators for unity. Several decades ago, deacons were ill-conceived as the *gatekeepers* of the congregation, and no decisions could be made or persons permitted to pass through the church doors without permission from the deacons. The "new" deacons have a much more Christ-like role and are involved in the Body in order to make the church a relevant and peaceful place for everyone.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Can you cite any changes that have occurred in the way your church goes about its program, worship, or service to people? If so, how did that change occur? Were there some who did not like the change? Does change come easily for your congregation?
- 2) What do you think about the man who said that if any change was to be made in his church, or any group "accused" of being a clique, he was going to make sure he was a part of it? He meant that he was committed to an active role at the very heart of the church. Should deacons have that kind of commitment, too?
- 3) If change is needed, or it is forced upon you such as a pastoral change, are the deacons prepared to step in and help the change go smoothly?
- 4) How can deacons be facilitators to help the church be about its true mission without being *gatekeepers*, i.e. the group that needs to give permission?

REVIVING THE VISIT

I was making a pastoral call on one of the octogenarians in our congregation when suddenly she began talking about how lonely the days get when she is at home by herself. First she gently chided me for not coming to see her more often, but then she asked this question, "Why don't the deacons visit anymore?" While I sat a little stunned, she added, "I guess you're too young (sic!) to remember, but the deacons used to visit all the time."

Perhaps I am too young (at 60!) but I don't recall the deacons in my boyhood church doing much visiting, other than rather general calls to those who were sick. We certainly did not have the Annual Visit; I would have remembered that. Nor have the deacons in the two congregations where I have been a pastor been very active in visitation. In fact, I have been rather passive in *expecting* deacons to visit, knowing how busy they are and how shy some are about visitation.

So, our dear sister's question haunts me, "Why don't the deacons visit anymore?" Is it time to turn that around? After all, one whole chapter in the *Church of the Brethren Deacon Manual* is entitled, "The Ministry of Visitation and Presence." The editors must have considered it a fairly essential function of deacon ministry to devote that much space to it.

I hope that the full significance of this chapter does not go overlooked because it begins with a look at the Annual Visit. I think the best material of the chapter is in the section subtitled "Visitation in Homes," where some rationale is given for what I would call "general" visitation. To quote, "The purpose of a deacon visit, except when responding to a special crisis, is to keep persons in touch with the church. Although individuals may expect and receive visits from the pastor, special meaning is added when members of the church visit" (pg. 150). The section points out some "dos" and "don'ts" about visiting, but the whole tenor of the section is on the natural and practical aspect of one member of the church simply dropping in to say "hello" to another. It doesn't seem all that hard...and if dropping by a lonely elderly person's home, even once a month, helps the person feel that someone cares, then it certainly is worth the deacon's effort.

I suggest that your deacon group review the *Deacon Manual* chapter on "The Ministry of Visitation and Presence." Talk about who in your congregation should have regular visits in addition to those made by the pastor. Ask the pastor for her or his ideas. As part of the meeting, the group could view the videos the national deacon office has on deacon ministry. End the meeting with some commitments to specific visits by the deacons, then agree to

share reports of those visits at the next meeting. Support one another with encouraging comments when others express reservations about “making a good visit.” To facilitate the process, consider setting a specific Sunday, afternoon or evening, when deacon visits will be made. If that date is shared with the congregation, the surprise element would be eliminated. A good “sending” devotional might include Luke 10:1-12; 17-20.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Does anyone in your group remember being the recipient of a visit from a deacon? What was the content of the visit? How did it make you and your family feel?
- 2) Do you think visiting in homes is a realistic expectation in our time? What are the values of visiting in one another’s homes? Should we as Christians take the time to exchange visits in our homes?
- 3) How would you feel about bringing back the Annual Visit (as described in the *Deacon Manual*, pg. 147) for your congregation? Do you still have every-member stewardship visits in the fall?
- 4) Are there people in your congregation whose situation may be the same as the lonely octogenarian described in the article? Do you need some sort of schedule of visits to them?
- 5) What plan do you have for visitation to the hospitalized and sick?

TOTAL CARE

Caring for the sick is probably the most fundamental calling of the church. In Jesus' ministry, healing and giving attention to those who bore the burden of some kind of physical or mental disability is the most obvious of his acts of grace. Further, his concern was not limited to those who were ill; he also was attentive to the needs of the caregiver or parent and comforted them as well.

So, in one sense it seems like we are being repetitive in talking about ministry to the sick. Surely the church and its deacon groups know how to care for the sick in their fellowships...we've been doing it for centuries!

Yes, but we have recently entered a *new* century, the 21st, and some changes in the social climate are challenging our comfortable forms of ministry. Here are some thoughts your deacon group and pastor(s) may find helpful to consider in one of your upcoming meetings.

The disappearance of the family doctor makes health care more stressful. Not so long ago, the family doctor was like a member of the family. He (and it was more likely than not a male doctor) not only ministered to *all* the members of the family, he knew the family's history back through at least a couple of generations. You felt comfortable going to him for care because he *knew* you. And furthermore, he was "on call" 24-7; if you needed a doctor, he was *always* there. To use a phrase I heard more than once in the "old days," he was "like an old shoe." *Today* with HMOs and specialization and clinics, there is no guarantee that you will see a doctor you have even *heard of*, much less know. And if you are hospitalized, you are examined and treated by a bevy of unfamiliar attendants.

Here's one place the church, especially through the pastors and deacons, can literally "hold the hand" of its members. Those faces *are* familiar and they can take the place of the old family doctor in whom people had trust and confidence because he was a constant in their lives and families. Today, more than ever, the church needs to be very close to those who are experiencing need for medical care, to provide the comfort and support they need as they surrender their lives to a sea of unfamiliar faces.

The economic demands of today's lifestyle often make home care a complicated issue. The retirement age is being pushed back in this century, meaning that more persons are finding it necessary to be gainfully employed into the senior years. Per-household occupancy is much lower than even a half-century ago. So when a person comes home from the hospital to

recuperate, or is confined to bed at home for a week or longer, the wear and tear on the caregiver is critical. Deacons can organize food and relief companionship during those days, to help the caregiver or caregivers maintain their own health and obligations. Prayer chains or fellowships can include intercession for the *caregivers* as well as the ill members of the family. And deacons can be prepared to provide compassionate *listening* to those whose responsibility it is to provide intensive care to a loved one.

Today's concern for the privacy of an individual places the church in an awkward position. In the assisted living facility where my mother lives, there is a prominent sign in the elevator reminding *everyone* that there is to be no discussion of any resident in the common areas of the facility. The "privacy rights" that are being enforced in today's world are somewhat in contention with the sense of shared community within the church. It raises questions like, "Can we tell over the prayer chain what Susie is in the hospital for?" "Can the church share with its members the need for contributions to help a family meet its medical costs?" "Do church members have to remember to tell the hospital upon admission that members of the church are welcome to visit?" Perhaps deacons, as well as pastors, should seek some training in the matter of being sensitive in today's world to how to respect the dignity and privacy of members and yet keep the caring intimacy of the church fellowship.

The bottom line is that the church shows that it cares. I know of no time in the life of an individual that is more alone than in disabling moments. Examine the newsletters and bulletins of churches and you will find frequent thank you notes from people who found the visits, cards, prayers, and telephone calls of church members so meaningful during their time of illness or grief. Such notes outnumber 100-1 other kinds of greetings from individuals to the church family. It takes no superior skills to express your support and hope to a person who is disheartened. It does take tact and love and sometimes patience, and much listening. It is a very important part of the healing process, which no other institution or physician is prepared to give in the special fashion of the church. It is a primary mission of the Body of Christ in the world today.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Discuss how communities have changed since the days when people lived in small towns where everyone was kin to everyone else. What kinds of challenges does our more urban, privacy-oriented life present for the church's ministry to those with illness or hospitalization?
- 2) Invite a professional in your community who could speak to your deacon group about the implications of the HIPAA Act. How does that

- affect announcements we make in church about the nature of members' illnesses, the information we share over the prayer chain, the conversations we have with one another about members' illnesses?
- 3) Are there persons in your church who do not have family or other close caregivers to help them during times of recovery or rehabilitation? Does the church have a plan for helping such people, or is it done as the need arises? If the latter, are there some people who are excluded from the church's care because they are not as well-known or not as active in the church as others?
 - 4) Do you agree that people still find support through visits, cards, prayers, and other expressions of well-wishing? Does your deacon group have a plan to insure that those in the congregation who are known to be ill or coping with other health issues receive cards and notes from members of the congregation?

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“THANK YOUS” MAY BE TOO FINAL

“The church has never been good about honoring its heroes and heroines,” someone once said to me. The comment provoked a pause for me when it was spoken and has stuck with me ever since. The wise man was astute: we in the church do not do a very creditable job of remembering those who labored, and in many instances sacrificed, for the faith and the congregations we have today. Oh yes, we said our “thank yous” when they retired, or when their terms were up, or during their memorial services. But usually there is a span of years between active service and death that we put our leaders “out to pasture,” so to speak.

Some churches, when they realize they are coming up on a landmark anniversary of the congregation, e.g. a centennial, will then decide that they should establish a pictorial display of those who have served as pastors through the years. And that is a nice and enduring tribute. But what about the moderators and church board chairs who have presided over and attended many meetings through the years? What about Sunday School teachers and musicians who serve week after week, year after year? Maybe two or three persons thanked them in those years; maybe they were asked to stand and be recognized during one Sunday morning worship service each year while they were actively serving...but are they soon forgotten when their service ends?

The church survives by virtue of its volunteer leaders. As Paul said to the Corinthians, “Now you are the body of Christ and *individually* members of it” (1 Cor. 12:17) and to *each* is given a special gift that the body cannot wholly function without. I doubt that the average person in the pew has any concept of the number of volunteer hours that are given to the programs and life of the congregation.

What can deacons do? Begin by assessing how well your church is recognizing its leaders, both present and past. Maintain a big bulletin board in a prominent place in the church on which are at least the names, and if possible the pictures (cut from the pictorial directory?) of those who are among the regular servants of the congregation (deacons included!). Try to recapture in a permanent record book that will be placed in the foyer or some such public place, the names of all the *living* church leaders who held leadership positions in the past. Publish those names in the church newsletter, along with appropriate words of recognition. When deacons make visits to past leaders, their service should be mentioned with words of appreciation. Write notes (or emails) to those currently serving as leaders, recognizing with appreciation their contributions, efforts, and sacrifices.

Does this seem like a task that someone besides deacons ought to do in the church? Well, maybe. But chances are it is falling between the cracks. In addition, the deacon vision says that deacons should have a concern for the total well-being of every member of the church!

Questions for Discussion

- 1) The apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "...in everything, give thanks (I. Thess. 5:18). He knew the value of the attitude of gratitude! How often are the church leaders in your congregation thanked for their service, and how is that gratitude expressed?
- 2) The article above expresses concern that the contributions of past leaders are soon forgotten in the life of the church? Does this apply to your congregation? What do you do to insure that they are not simply "put out to pasture" following their active service?
- 3) Is it a practical suggestion for you to develop a bulletin board containing the pictures of those who currently are serving as congregational leaders (including deacons!)? Are there other ways to recognize these persons visibly and more often?
- 4) Could the deacons initiate a plan, either within the deacon group or involving the congregation, that would regularly send notes of appreciation to those serving ongoing roles in the church (Sunday School teachers, musicians, board and commission chairs, youth and children's advisors, etc.)?

THE ROLE OF DEACONS IN A TIME OF CONGREGATIONAL CRISIS

Congregational life at the Bay Hill Church of the Brethren was deeply disrupted upon the unexpected news that their pastor was arrested for check writing fraud, apparently a practice that had spanned the last five of the ten years he had been pastor and involved transgressions against several of the wealthier families of the congregation. The congregation was stunned, hurt, depressed, and in total disarray.

Members of the First Shepherd Church of the Brethren awakened one Friday morning to learn that their beloved 90-year old church building had burned to the ground the night before, a result of an electrical short in the furnace room. The day care center was to use the fellowship hall and educational wing on Friday and Love Feast was scheduled for Sunday. By noon on Friday a large group of people had gathered at the site, many of them visibly grieving.

The Love All Church of the Brethren in Comeall, Texas was the site of a joint demonstration of advocates for individual choices in sexual lifestyles, many carrying signs that indicted the church for not being open to all persons. Leaders of the demonstration stated to the media that the demonstration was meant to apply to the entire community, but the media made it appear as though the demonstration was solely aimed at the church. In the ensuing weeks, members of the church began taking definite sides on the issues, others threatened to leave and in actual fact decreased participation and support of the church.

The above stories and church names are fictitious, or at least certainly meant to be, and any similarities to existing congregations is purely coincidental. But they do represent *real life* possibilities, and the history of many congregations has contained a variety of situations of major crisis proportion. What roles do the *deacons* play in a time of congregational crisis? How can deacons be prepared in the event they have to assume those roles?

First, let's review the caregiving function of deacons. Deacons are concerned with the whole being of the church and each member, meaning that deacons maintain a constant overview of the congregation's health. In that role they are looked to as the most stable and positive group in the church. This would suggest that in a time of crisis the deacons would be the "settling" body, i.e. those who do not let panic overcome their rational behavior, those who are equipped and prompt to offer comfort, those who reassure the congregation that with prayer and persistence the crisis can be overcome. Deacons also are the group to whom we look to maintain unity in the congregation. Thus, deacons would be key persons to talk with

members who are disillusioned in a time of crisis and those who are despairing. Deacons would be a natural group to issue a "statement of hope" or other reassuring words to the congregation. Deacons would assure that information shared with the congregation about the crisis contains only material that is factual and true.

Secondly, how do deacons prepare for fulfilling their role in a time of crisis? The first move most certainly is to have a meeting *before any possible crisis occurs* in which your deacon group talks about what to do in a crisis. We too often assume that it will never happen to us! And thus, our preparation is always *post-crisis*, which then becomes *crisis response* rather than preparation. Several things should be discussed in that preparation meeting:

- Is there a plan for an immediate meeting of pastor, district executive, moderator, church board chair, and deacon chair when a crisis happens?
- Who will be the spokesperson for the church in a time of crisis to insure that information is reliable and true?
- Would the deacons be willing to assemble in a quickly called meeting as soon as possible after the crisis breaks?
- Is there organization established within the deacons (i.e. who will "take charge") to provide for the following, as necessary: immediate shelter, food, clothing and other needs for crisis victims; a design for counseling with or "standing with" members who are most upset by the crisis; the issuance of a statement from the deacons; provision for both a prayer chain and a "service" of corporate prayer; a plan for being in touch with all of the families of the congregation; deacons willing and designated to coordinate worship services and other pastoral programs of the church if necessary?

When a crisis occurs, if the structure is in place, deacons will be ready to spring into action. If the crisis is not the result of a health issue or unethical action of the pastor, then the deacons will want to work closely with the pastor in caring for the concerns of the congregation. It also should be clear that criticisms or discontent with the congregational program(s) should be addressed by the church board chair or program leadership. Deacons can supplement that statement with their words of reassurance and hope, and/or *forgiveness*, if appropriate. Deacons also can meet frequently during the post-crisis recovery time to provide witness to a unified and resolute membership.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) This article calls for the congregation to have in place a policy for dealing with a crisis should one develop within congregational life. Does your congregation have such a design? If not, would it be appropriate for the deacons to initiate a crisis response policy, perhaps using the suggestions above as a starter?
- 2) One common response to thinking about a crisis response policy is that it surely will not happen to *our* congregation. Yet, no one ever counts on having a crisis. That's why it is better to be prepared than to have to react in the heat of the moment. Discuss this point in your group and see if there is agreement with it.
- 3) The article suggests that deacons could be the most effective agents of stability for a congregation dealing with a crisis. Does your group have a sense that it could provide reassurance and hope at such a time? Would you lead out in helping to facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation? Is there need for deacons to have some training in mediation and reconciliation before such a crisis might occur in your church?
- 4) Reading again the three fictitious examples at the beginning of the article, what would you envision the role of the deacons to be in each case?

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CAREGIVER OR CARETAKER?

It's kind of interesting that the first line of the Church of the Brethren deacon vision statement begins, "Deacons are called to be dedicated *caregivers*..." (italics mine). My computer's spell check does not accept the word "caregiving," even though it is a bona fide word in my Webster's dictionary. A "caregiver," according to Webster, is "a person who provides direct care," and it adds parenthetically (*as to children or the chronically ill*). With a great deal of emphasis today upon our being "Stewards of the Earth," I wondered what the difference might be between a "caregiver" and a "caretaker." The dictionary defines caretaker as "one who gives physical or emotional care and support." That sounds a lot like "caregiver." There is also another definition for *caretaker*: "one that takes care of the house or land of an owner who may be absent." So now we have: a *caregiver* who can also be called a *caretaker* but who could be concerned with the care of either people or land...or maybe *both*!

Then it is not too far fetched to suggest, as I am about to do, that a *dedicated caregiver* is not only concerned about people's health and well-being, but he/she is also concerned about the environment in which those people have to live! So doesn't it make sense that deacons should be concerned about making our planet a safer place on which to live and how we can preserve its valuable resources for life?

What can deacons do? For openers, it might be enlightening to take an inventory of whether the church itself is a very good steward of God's creation. Does the church recycle its waste paper, bulletins, etc.? Are there receptacles for plastic bottles and aluminum cans, and are they clearly marked? Is Styrofoam still being used for Love Feast and church suppers? Are there musty areas in the church? Are entrances free from hazards? Is there attractive landscaping around the church facilities? Do children have a safe and grassy area to run or play outside of the church? Now note that I suggest the deacons do the inventory, not necessarily correcting what needs to be attended to. There are probably program units in the church organization to do those things, but they need an expressed concern such as the deacons' to get them motivated.

Beyond the church premises, deacons could first examine the environmental conditions and resource preservation habits of their own household. Then they may, as a group, brainstorm about issues of the environment in their community or town that may affect the health and future of the members of their congregation, as well as members of other churches. Is there an excessive amount of smoke being emitted from a local factory? Are the

wildlife and water quality of local streams in danger from toxic runoff? Deacons may be more specific about the needs of their own church. Are there members of the congregation who maybe need help securing a purifier for their drinking water, or elderly folk who cannot keep up the trimming of weeds or shrubbery around their home? Are there folk who do not have a recycling service to their home and they cannot get out themselves to take recyclables to a drop off place? Is there need for deacons to organize more carpooling to church meetings or other activities to preserve fuel? Could some church members use firewood instead of fuel if they had some help getting it?

The list of possibilities for exercising this caretaking part of caregiving is far from exhausted. Again, I am not suggesting that deacons become a new Environmental Commission in the congregation. Rather, deacons can act as those whose caregiving involves looking at the whole life of the whole person, which includes the stewardship of the environment, and then share those concerns with the proper program units in church and community.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Has anyone taken an inventory of the recycling practices (or lack of) in your church? How well does your congregation score on the questions in the third paragraph above?
- 2) Do you agree that concern for the environment is a part of giving care to the members of your congregation and community?
- 3) Can you identify persons in your church who may need assistance in recycling or lawn care or purifying their drinking water? How can the deacons help with this ministry?
- 4) Are there other issues regarding the preservation and conservation of the natural resources of your community besides those listed above?
- 5) With which program group in the church will you share your concerns, and how?

CHARITY SHOULD HELP THE WHOLE PERSON

I remember all too well the young man, a stranger, who came to my church study one day in Harrisburg, PA and asked if I would give him money for lunch. I always made it a point not to bring cash with me when I kept my pastoral hours at church and so I was honest when I told him that I had no money with me, but since it was almost lunchtime I offered to share with him the packed lunch I had brought from home. Without warning, the young man flew into a verbal rage, accusing me of being a hypocrite, as well as other names I dare not, nor do I wish to put in print. Judging from his reaction, I would assume that he wanted money for something other than lunch for he was so unhappy with me for even suggesting that I give him food! He even stated vehemently that I was in no wise worthy of being a minister since I did not know how to help poor people!

I doubt that there is one reader of this column who has not been approached by someone for a hand-out of money, or who has not felt that anything but money would solve or at least temporarily relieve someone's need. Both beggar and donor alike think in those terms: money is a quick fix; as soon as I get it or give it I will be free from the pain of the moment. But for someone who is "down and out," money is so often nothing more than a tourniquet to stop the bleeding *temporarily*. For example, I have arranged for people's back rent to be paid, only to have them return in a couple of months saying they were behind in the rent *again* and could I help them save their apartment? What I should have done in the first place was to help them get to a financial counselor and stuck with them until they were in a position to manage their money more efficiently. I also remember the couple who took the supposed "back rent money" and couldn't resist using it to buy a 42-inch large-screen television set. Again, I had not followed through to make certain the gift helped them transform their buying habits.

So, should we eliminate money altogether from our caregiving ministry? Of course not. Jesus would have us *sell all our possessions and give to the poor* if we are able, as he told the rich young ruler. But observe Jesus' own method of helping people: he had a concern for their whole being. He saw those in need as having a larger problem than the material side of life; they needed spiritual and practical guidance to regain the human potential God had created in them. I think this is sufficient reason to have some method of screening those who come to you for handouts, especially those with whom you have no existing relationship or history. The amount of time and energy we spend one-on-one with individuals in need is worth more than you could ever afford to give them in dollars and cents! Not even Jesus himself could help *everyone* who begged of him to solve their problems. He

selected, if you will, those who showed signs of being willing to turn their lives around, to seek whatever it takes to live on a higher plane. For them he was willing to set everything else aside for the time it took to help them make the turn.

If your deacon group has an emergency fund to help people with crises, have the patience and the personnel to use it wisely so that people are really helped with the basis causes of their predicament. Some emergencies are readily apparent, such as when the house of a family in the congregation burns down, or there are uninsured medical bills associated with a church member's illness or recovery from an accident. But there will be many more calls for monetary help from persons, both within and without the congregation, who need counseling and guidance in life-skills before *more money* will be beneficial to them. Compassion is still more of a gift than money, although those looking for a quick handout would be the last to agree. If you have not discussed this subject in your deacon meetings for the past two or three years, I urge you to make a training session out of it. Consider what your capacity is for helping restore wholeness to individuals. What structure can you put in place to help individuals get financial counseling or life management skills? What resources are in your community to help people get counseling?

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Does your deacon group or your congregation have guidelines or a process for dealing with persons who come by the church for a handout? Do the guidelines simply set a limit on how much money can be given to any one person, or are there also some ways built in to get the person more lasting help in money management or responsibility?
- 2) What is the philosophy of your group about giving handouts? Does the Bible give us any help in this regard?
- 3) Is there any network in your community for screening those who come for a handout, or at least for keeping records that may help toward giving in to repeated beggars?
- 4) Do you think what Jesus said about taking care of the poor means that we should give indiscriminately to anyone who asks us for money? Do you think that was Jesus' tactic, or did he spend time with the person first?
- 5) Should the church help all its members have access to training in financial management, or is that meddling too much in people's private lives?

DEACONS CHALLENGED TO IDENTIFY “FAMILY”

A community organization for which I have been a volunteer for more than 20 years has as its working premise that “the family is the cornerstone of the community”. Recently a new volunteer asked the organization’s director how the group defined “family”. The questioner is employed by a service that caters to a certain age group of society and he explained that his experience suggests that the current era calls for “new definitions” of “family”. “The old basic reference of mother, father, and two kids is no longer inclusive of what ‘family’ is in our society,” he stated.

The church has discovered the man’s statement to be true in its efforts to minister to everyone in the congregation. There are still some “basic” family units, i.e. parents and natural children living under one roof, but also there are many other family configurations represented, such as single adults, single parents and children, blended families, two location families (e.g. parents separated and children dividing their week between the two), families with multiple generations under one roof, and probably other situations that don’t immediately come to mind. How does the church speak to “family health” when there are so many applications of family to address? And should the deacons be concerned with this challenge?

The latter question is easier to answer. Deacons are concerned with the whole life and care of church members, and whatever family connections those members have is definitely a part of the “wholeness” of the individual. Perhaps, then, the first task of deacon caregiving is to identify the various instances of “family” in the congregation and what may be the primary needs of those groups that the church can address. Then, the deacon body can determine if there are other committees, task forces, or programs that are already addressing those needs. A note of commendation and encouragement to the groups doing so would certainly be appropriate and no doubt appreciated.

But where the deacons discover needs related to family health that are not being addressed, they may want to discuss how the church could assist. For example, suppose it is evident that there are struggles with parenting and child discipline among the congregation’s families. Can the church provide some guidance by arranging for a series of parenting classes, perhaps using professional persons in the community who have education and expertise in child psychology, family dynamics, et cetera? Can the church speak to social issues that challenge all family units today, such as financial planning and management; violence and suggestive content of music, television and movies; balancing time for work, recreation, and family; differences in

sexual orientation; creative relationships among members of dysfunctional families; controlling diet and exercise for healthy bodies (including children!)? I'm certain this list is not exhaustive; your group may identify other issues of family health, perhaps some unique to your own congregation or area.

Identifying the needs does not mean that the deacons necessarily must create programs to meet them. Where possible, the deacons should refer the issues to committees, staff persons, or other sources of action in the congregation. If those avenues are not open, then the deacons should consider whether they have the resources and foresight to develop an answer.

Another critical area in all human relationships in our age is *communication*, and it is a primary key to healthy family life. Good communication hinges on trust. Another critical ingredient is respect, which definitely aids listening and understanding. These are qualities deacons can model and promote in their contacts and programming in the congregation. Workshops and discussions on communication are always timely topics for both deacon meetings and congregational education.

"Family" has broad implications for congregational caregiving. In addition to familial relationships, the entire congregation is a very special and unique family who exists by caring love and respect for each other. Perhaps we can apply an appropriate cliché for consideration, "As the congregation goes, so goes the individual families in the church."

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Discuss the concepts of "family" that exist in your congregation. For example, does it take a father, mother, and two children to make a family, or is a single young adult also a family? In your congregation's concept of family, are there some people who are being excluded from church activities or services?
- 2) What are the social issues (see paragraph above) that affect the persons in your congregation? How can they be addressed by the church?
- 3) What kinds of struggles are families in your church having? Are there some that are not being helpfully addressed by the church? Are there prejudices in the church that are making acceptance hard for some families dealing with crises?
- 4) Has your church ever had a seminar on communication for its members? Could the deacons initiate such a program or event?

DON'T DROP THE REINS ON THE ELDERLY

Get used to it. We're going to have even more church members who have reached the "golden years" than we do now. Predictions are that there will be 53 million Americans older than 65 by 2020; 6.5 million of them over 85. Today, there are 35 million elders, 4.5 million of whom are over 85. Our culture views this fact as a liability, a burden put on society. It still is not "acceptable" to tell your age, once you get past 40, and the majority of commercials feature ways to make you look and feel "younger." Even if there are older folk in the ads, they seem to have an unusual degree of bounce and allure. Examine, for instance, the covers of recent AARP magazines that feature former Hollywood actresses who can afford to buy the creams and spa treatments and face lifts that keep them "glamorous."

Does the church have anything to say about aging? When we turn to scripture, we find great reverence for those who have experienced life into a golden age. The patriarchs, for example, were not only looked to for leadership, but also for wisdom and guidance. The revered teachers of Jesus' day were the elder scribes and rabbis. Ananias, whom God called to help Paul understand his conversion (Acts 9) and Cornelius, whom God asked to help Peter understand God's love for the Gentiles, were both elders in the fledgling church. We have the testimony of both Old and New Testaments that it takes both the vision of the young and the dreams of the old for the kingdom of God to be achieved (Joel 2:28, Acts 2:17). In the reference in Acts, it is Peter himself quoting from Joel in his Pentecost sermon.

It used to be that Brethren congregations recognized the office of "elder." To be fair, some churches still do. But the majority of our congregations, as well as the denomination, have dropped the office of elder from our organizational structure. There were some good reasons for this, especially where the "elders" of the congregation became set in their human ways and held the churches back from both expansion of membership and outreach. An unfortunate part of this change was an attitude, or at least an atmosphere, in which the older members of the church were no longer considered *able* to lead in the church. (A parallel trend has occurred in the corporate world, as well.) Nominating committees tend to view the ailments, the perceived early bedtimes, and the perceived waning of energy of older people as deterrents to their willingness to serve. Older church members think it "polite" to say, "Let the younger folk do the work now," or "I'm too old to make any long term commitments." Consequently, churches are beginning to lose the wisdom *and dreams* of their older members.

What can deacons do about it? Ironically, the deacon groups in our churches still consist of a majority of older members. In part this honors the wisdom and "saintliness" of the faithful elderly, and that is commendable. But it also perpetuates the idea that deacons are passive and not aggressive in their care for the congregation and it ignores the contributions (the vision) that younger folk can give to the deacon ministry in the congregation. Furthermore, it is so easy for a group dominated by older deacons to fall into the same funk that suggests that the older folk in the congregation need to be pampered rather than be active leaders.

So here's what deacons can do to recover the important role of elderhood:

- Look upon the elderly as *active* members of the congregation. Find ways to get their opinion on major decisions of the church. Better yet, make sure they are involved in the decision making. Make a provision for shut-ins to give their opinion, if not to submit an absentee vote (which may need a change in the congregation's bylaws). Promote consideration of the elderly for organizational positions...let *them* say "no," rather than assume you know their answer. Use older members as worship leaders, presenters of the congregation's heritage, church school teachers, youth and children's leaders (!), and in other creative positions.
- Find something more creative to recognize the congregation's elderly than have an annual "Senior Citizens Luncheon." The latter may be part of a variety of things, but just that event alone says, "Gee, we have to *do something* for the elderly. Let's give them a dinner." In some churches, I guess that's better than nothing...but what a shame that we treat the elderly as a *residual* group in the church!
- Visit, visit, visit...the elderly. And visit with a purpose...that of learning from them, from their experience, their wisdom, their dreams. Don't assume that your visit is only to comfort or to show courtesy. Make them feel that they are still valued members of the church, who can provide a mentoring role, as well as actual service as they are able. Develop in your deacon group a list of ways the elderly can contribute their gifts, talents, and constructive wisdom to the church. Have that list handy when you visit or when you have opportunity to encourage an older member to continue his or her discipleship for the Lord.
- Lead the way. If indeed your deacon group has a number of members over 65, you can decide to be examples of active involvement in the church. You can model by carrying out the deacon functions as outlined in the *Deacon Manual for Caring Ministries* (pp. 14-54). And you can be the catalysts for inspiring other elders in the congregation (both women and men!) to continue active leadership roles.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) What percentage of your congregation is in the 65 and older group? What percentage of those are serving in some leadership capacity? Are there others who should be considered for leadership? How might they be called to that role? Do you like the suggestion of making a list of the gifts and wisdom of the older members of the church?
- 2) What is the age make-up of your deacon group? Is there opportunity to invite some younger members to be deacons?
- 3) Is it possible to have a home video made that would collect the wisdom and memories of the church of some of the oldest members? How might that video be used, especially to pass on your heritage to youth and older children?
- 4) Does your deacon group have a plan whereby the shut-ins and others confined closely to home are visited regularly by someone from the church? What do you think about the idea of providing for them to help make congregational decisions by absentee vote?

Essential Servants: Reflections on the Caring Ministries of Deacons
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DON'T OVERLOOK THE OBVIOUS

I am writing these words while at beautiful Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, during the Fourth National Older Adult Conference (NOAC) of the Church of the Brethren. The enthusiasm for life among this bunch of over-50 conference participants is contagious! Why, 60 people even signed up to go white water rafting as one of the optional activities during the week!

NOAC and National Youth Conference (NYC) fell in the same summer this year, and I still hear excited reverberations from the youth conference which attracted more than 4,500 young people to Colorado Springs in July. What tremendous resources these two groups bring to our churches from opposite ends of the age spectrum! And what an opportunity for caregiving deacons to respond, not just to emergencies these groups may have, i.e. hospitalizations, illness, grief, financial support, and more, but also to enable both youth and seniors to contribute their personal gifts to the mission and ministry of the church!

I have two examples in mind. A senior high youth recently asked me who makes the communion bread that we use in our Love Feast and communion services at church. That youth expressed interest in learning how to make the bread "for the next communion," she said. I was able to connect her to the deacon sister who was the superb communion bread maker in the congregation and the youth helped prepare the bread for the next communion. Have you thought of involving the *youth* in helping with some of the caregiving functions that are deacon responsibilities?

The second example involved a woman in her 70s who asked me if she could be of help in a disaster relief project. She said she could not do construction work, but "maybe there's something I could do," she stated. I wonder if we sometimes *assume* for others, particularly those of retirement age, that they would not be interested in serving in certain capacities, instead of asking for and affirming the gifts they could still contribute.

Don't overlook the younger children, either, when you are considering both deacon care and deacon help in the congregation. Children are curious about what deacons do. They like to be cared for, too, and they need to be regarded as full "members" of the congregational family. My experience with children is that they quickly identify deacons, who take the time to relate to them, as caring people. My own memories as a youth in the congregation identify those who were deacons in the church as among those people for whom I not only had the highest admiration, but among those from whom I learned the most about faith and service.

Are there others in the church you may be overlooking who could be helped to find a place in the discipleship of the Lord? Don't overlook or make unfounded assumptions about the physically disabled, or the busy executive, or the person without Brethren background! Enabling people to be complete disciples is a caregiving function of deacons!

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Have you thought of enabling people to follow Jesus as disciples to be a function of deacon caregiving ministry? What might that mean for your congregation?
- 2) Can you identify ways you might involve the youth and the older folk of the congregation in caregiving ministries for others?
- 3) What opportunities could be created for deacons to share with the children of the church (e.g. in church school, special programs, Vacation Bible School, etc.) about what a deacon is and what you do?
- 4) Could the deacons conduct an evaluation of how people with special or limited circumstances find ways to be involved in the church? For example, in one congregation a woman confined to a wheelchair at home was the contact person for requests for prayer, and she initiated the prayer chain calls.

TAKE ANOTHER LOOK AROUND

I am not convinced as yet that the majority of our Brethren congregations have been diligent in their ministry to persons in their churches and communities who cope with a variety of disabilities and other challenges. I would include in the category of disabilities not only physical challenges but factors of environment, age, and situation that may impose some restrictions upon a person's opportunities and abilities. Deacons are called to be most sensitive to the needs of all people related to the church and to help each one experience wholeness of life. For some coping with disabling circumstances, relating to the church may be one of the most trying or impossible challenges they face.

Here are suggestions on how deacons can "take another look around" to see how your church is responding to the needs of all those disabled in a variety of ways:

- *Evaluate the church facilities* as to how well they accommodate all persons. Is there at-level or ramp access to the main activity center? Are bathrooms accessible to wheelchairs; are grab bars installed? Can everyone reach water fountains, sinks, all bathroom facilities? Are there places in the sanctuary where persons in wheelchairs or mobile seats can park without being in the aisle? Are floor surfaces conducive to persons with walkers, canes, or other devices of assistance?

It may be helpful to ask two people in the church, each disabled in a different way, to make an evaluative tour of the facilities with you. And if there are no such people available from your church, ask for help from the local Office on Aging, or someone from an agency related to monitoring access for the physically challenged.

- *Install or upgrade hearing and sight aids.* The number of persons in our churches who have some difficulty hearing or seeing is *not* diminishing. On the contrary, with longevity increasing and technology taking its toll on the senses, sight and hearing are receiving more attention. The church should provide hearing aids and large print materials for those who want them, and deacons need to assure people that there is no stigma to using such aids. Church newsletters should also be produced in large type.
- *Arrange transportation for the elderly,* especially at night. Churches are losing many capable older leaders because the latter cannot drive

themselves to church for evening meetings. Deacons can make sure transportation is not an excuse when older persons are asked to serve.

- *Sponsor workshops on relating to challenging circumstances.* There are all kinds of opportunities here: helping children *and* adults understand the “world” of a person with disabilities; helping caregivers know how to cope with the demands upon their time, energy, and wisdom; educating the congregation with medical and research information about debilitating illnesses; providing important information on how to be helpful (or not!) to those with disabilities.
- *Provide resource material.* Deacons could explore whether the church library has books and other resource materials that would help others understand the issues related to disabilities and other physical challenges. Sources for titles could include the Internet, the local Office on Aging, and the local public library.
- *Consider those whose responsibilities limit their freedom.* How can the church minister to persons who need to work on Sundays, to those who are restricted by their commitment to care for shut-ins, to those who are dependent upon others to transport them places? Are there others in this category? Are deacons helping the church include these persons in an active way in the church by means that are alternate to the normal planned programs?
- *Include the disabled in church life.* It is not enough to make sure the church is accessible! Those who find it difficult to be as mobile as the majority, or whose situation limits their ability to be socially active...are these persons welcomed in the fellowship of the church? Are they made to feel valuable? Are there ways by which they can contribute their talents and time to the church? Does the church program include persons trained and willing to care for persons with a variety of special needs?

Deacons are urged to “take another look” at how well their congregation is attending to the needs and *joy* of those who don’t fit the stereotypical adult, for whom most of our facilities and programs are designed. One motivating thought is that the majority of us at some time or other in our lives will no longer fit that “perfect” stereotype either!

Questions for Discussion

- 1) The premise of this article is that deacons have a responsibility to insure that all persons in the church have access to the church’s help

- and fellowship. Does our group believe this to be a legitimate role for them? What kind of survey or inventory will you initiate to evaluate your church's accessibility to all people?
- 2) Does this article expand your vision for people with various kinds of disabilities? In the seven action points above, identify those persons who currently may be excluded from participating in most of the congregation's activities. How can you "bring the church" to them?
 - 3) As you identify needs for greater accessibility, physical and otherwise, what/who are the committees, groups, and leaders in the church who could address them?
 - 4) Are there books and other literature available in the church library or literature racks in the church that would help caregivers and other members be more sensitive to the needs of those with a variety of disabilities and challenges? If not, might your deacon group initiate the gathering of such resources?

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