



# Essential Servants II: More Reflections on the Caring Ministries of Deacons

*by Fred Swartz*



Church of the Brethren



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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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## SPIRITUAL CAREGIVING

One of the outstanding speakers at a past Annual Conference Deacon Luncheon was the Rev. Robert (Bob) Cover Bowman, then a member of the faculty at Manchester College. A former pastor, Bob knew the value of having deacons to share the pastoral care in the congregation. On this particular occasion, he addressed the 200-plus deacons who were present, on the topic of spiritual caregiving, as he said it, "Not just caregiving, but *spiritual* caregiving,"

"We pastors need deacons to give spiritual caregiving," he said, "not just because we are too busy and you can fill in the gaps, but because there are certain dimensions of spiritual caregiving which we cannot give for three reasons. First, you have longevity in a community, normally we do not. You not only know the people, you often knew those people when they were children, and what their grandparents were like. Second, because you are laity, you are not 'paid' to go and pray with them. There is immense respect for one who comes not because they are paid to, but because they care. Third, you do not have the trappings of power. As much as we dislike it, pastors are seen as persons of power in the community. A deacon, however, can approach someone with equality."

My experience as a pastor certainly resonates with Bob's. There have been many times when I have referred persons with conflicts or issues to deacons for understanding and help because I have been aware that those deacons have come through similar circumstances victoriously. Furthermore, the deacons were their peers and could relate on a par with them. I also affirm with Bob that deacons are in a unique position to offer spiritual caregiving. Bob gave five qualities necessary for spiritual caregivers:

- A spiritual caregiver needs to be close to God. "Those deacons I have admired in my lifetime," Bob recalled, "have been those whose genuineness, compassion, and devotion have exhibited holiness. They are the ones who have cultivated the ability to listen to more in life than the sirens of secularity."
- Spiritual caregivers exhibit a life of prayer. They not only are faithful in their daily prayers of thanksgiving and intercession, they also have their own treasury of prayer experiences. They know the power of answered prayer and the pain of unanswered prayer. They know that prayer is more than giving God a

shopping list of persons we want healed and causes we want blessed.

- Spiritual caregivers need to have a knowledge of the scriptures, to read the Bible, not as an object of study, but to incorporate biblical images into their heart. They should have a well of Bible stories that speak to the most common life experiences.
- Spiritual caregivers need to grow skilled at reading what is written on the walls of the soul. Anyone well acquainted with people soon learns that what is being said with the lips does not always match what is being said with the soul. Spiritual caregiving involves listening to the heart of a person, to not feel you need to know all the answers or that you have to “fix” the problem. It involves staying with a person and not taking their deep feelings away from them. Don’t say, “Oh, I know just how you feel, the same thing happened to my Aunt Betsy.” You *don’t* know how they feel.

Bob urged the deacons at the luncheon to remember the friends of Job. “As long as they sat in silence with Job, they were comforting. When they opened their mouths to point out Job’s problems, they failed God and Job both. They should have opened their mouths to support. They (and we) should learn to accept persons where they are.”

- Spiritual caregivers need to submit to the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans that the Holy Spirit helps us in our times of weakness (Romans 8:26). Often we are afraid to provide caregiving because we anticipate that we will be embarrassed by an inability to say or do something helpful. Paul himself is proof that we can do many things we thought ourselves incapable of doing, if we surrender our selves (egos especially) to God’s Spirit and leading.

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) Discuss the distinction Rev. Bowman makes between the “special” pastoral care deacons can give that pastors cannot. Is that a challenge deacons in your group are willing to accept? What difference might this insight make in how you go about your caregiving as deacons?



- 2) Rev. Bowman implies that "holiness" or being close to God is having the "ability to listen to more in life than the sirens of secularity." What does that mean to you? What would you list as spiritual values, as opposed to secular values? Are deacons more likely to have those values than others in the congregation? If not, should deacons at least model the spiritual life?
- 3) Would it provide reinforcement for the power of prayer if there was a time in every deacon meeting for individuals to share stories about prayer in their lives or in the lives of others? Could deacons take the lead in organizing a prayer retreat for members of the congregation?
- 4) Perhaps the hardest part of Rev. Bowman's list of qualities for spiritual caregiving is in having the patience and self-restraint to listen and to attend persons who are in great need. Discuss further what it takes to really "be present" for someone, in contrast to imposing your own remedy for their "recovery."
- 5) Encourage persons in your deacon group to relate experiences when they have received power beyond their own perceived ability to do things. What does it take to be receptive to the Holy Spirit's guidance and power?

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## **DEACONS ARE SPIRITUAL, NOT PERFECT**

"I don't feel I'm worthy of being a deacon." I have heard this comment numerous times, both as a pastor and as one involved with the Denominational Deacon Ministry. I'm certain the feeling is genuine, but I am inclined to think it is an evaluation drawn more from perception than from confession. What do I mean by that? Simply that we have created an image of deacons (and ministers too, for that matter) that is impossible humanly to match. We take too profoundly the "set apart" label and interpret that to mean someone who is as pure as Ivory soap and as pristine as Fenton glass, to say nothing about "without sin or blemish." It is no wonder that some persons in the church think of themselves as "unworthy" to be a deacon, or even a minister, with that kind of expectation hanging over their heads.

The other piece of the story is that we do want persons who we set apart for caregiving ministries in the church to be persons who exhibit a high degree of spirituality; at least we want to think of them as being "spiritual" leaders. Whoever said that "spirituality" is synonymous with "perfection" did us a great disservice! Being spiritual has more to do with the way we live than with the mien we exhibit. Neither is being spiritual synonymous with being holy; it simply means having or striving to live by religious values.

So what constitutes spirituality for deacons? My profile of a deacon is someone who is a spiritual leader and caregiver. I hasten to add that I do not consider these qualities to be out of reach for any member of the church!

- A deacon is committed to the centrality of Christ for his or her life. This includes belief in Jesus Christ as savior and teacher, and consistent evidence in every aspect of life that the deacon is honoring and trying to live Christ's hope and way.
- A deacon will exhibit the love of Christ in his or her concern for people, from the simplest greeting to a sacrificial rescue from danger or despair.
- A deacon will be an active and loyal participant in the body of believers gathered in a congregation. He or she will be positive about the church and always be an inviting influence for the church.
- A deacon will exhibit a willingness to share in the tasks and ministries that enable others to experience the grace and

presence of God. These include such acts of grace as alms, baptism, love feast and communion, anointing, prayer and worship.

A deacon who possesses these four qualities is a spiritual leader, and his or her life is undergirded by a spiritual base. They are not issues of "worthiness;" they are qualities of discipleship and love. They also are the stuff of abundant life!

#### Questions for Discussion

- 1) Have you heard persons say that they are unworthy or not fit to be a deacon? Do you agree that this is a myth caused by too high a perception? Do you find this article a helpful antidote?
- 2) Part of the problem of too high an expectation for deacons may spring from the time when the deacon elders ruled the decisions made by a congregation. Now the deacon posture is a more humble one as we assume the role of caregivers in the congregation. Do you see this change being recognized in your congregation? Does this make a difference in recruiting new deacons?
- 3) What do you think of the author's four qualities that define "spiritual" for deacons? Examine each one again, expanding on what it implies. Is this a realistic expectation? Is it an ideal that every Christian should be working toward?

## DEACONS CAN BE SPIRITUAL LEADERS

The Church of the Brethren has a severe leadership crisis. Now, that may be a startling statement for some of you; for others it may not be a big surprise. The crisis is not only at the congregational pastor level, although there the crisis is at mega-severe proportions. Not only are there not enough pastors to fill the openings, increasingly the number of trained and home-grown pastors is decreasing, presenting the church in many places situations of denominational mutiny and divisive actions within congregations.

Throughout the church we are not developing and nurturing persons to give visionary and spiritual leadership to the church, present and future. It is particularly painful to sit with the denominational nominating committee as each year they try to identify 35-50 persons who could serve effectively at denominational positions. Typically, the nominating committee receives two-thirds enough names from the denomination at large to consider for the ballot. The eight-member committee has to discern candidates from among persons they know to make up the remaining one-third. Sometimes that task is very difficult.

While looking at this issue of leadership, I received inspiration from a book entitled *Spiritual Leadership* (Broadman and Holman, Nashville, Tenn., 2001), written by Henry and Richard Blackaby, a father-son team who have some sensible and progressive things to say about the nature of effective leadership for the church. Their definition of spiritual leadership is "moving people onto God's agenda."

How do we support and develop deacons who not only go through the motions of deacon functions, but who are spiritual leaders of their congregations in the process? The one place that a weakness has been identified in the highly-acclaimed *Deacon Manual for Caring Ministries* is that we did not have a chapter or section on the part of the deacon vision that refers to deacons as "sensitive to the presence of God's Spirit in their lives and in the lives of others...." So we now ask the question, "What constitutes spiritual leadership for our churches, whether it be deacons, pastors, or other lay leaders?"

The Blackabys point out that spiritual leadership is not the same as leadership in general. While spiritual leadership involves many of the same principles as general leadership, spiritual leadership has certain unique qualities. Jesus is the ultimate model. It is difficult to piece

together in Jesus' ministry what we might commonly call today a "strategic plan." That is not to negate the importance of a strategic plan, but rather to note that Jesus' plan was simply to follow God's will as that will was revealed to him in what and who he encountered. For example, there was considerable "hoop-la" when Jesus entered the city of Jericho on that first Palm Sunday. Were plans laid ahead for him to meet with the city officials, to have lunch with some of the brightest brains of the Sanhedrin, to hold a crusade in the court square? No. Rather, as was his custom throughout his earthly ministry, he was simply alert to where God was working and the kind of thing God wished to accomplish through him. And so he spied Zacchaeus in the tree and recognized that God was already at work in the mind and spirit of this despised and thieving tax collector. And so, Jesus bid him come down and spend the lunch hour with him.

The spiritual leader therefore has as her or his major objective to try to move people from where they are to where God wants them to be. They accomplish this, not by exerting undue authority, not by cajoling, accusing, pleading or bullying, but through the way they themselves follow the example of Jesus in their attitudes and behaviors. Moving people is not the same as driving or forcing people to do something. Moving people involves compassion, sensitivity, seeking first to learn for what the person is yearning or lacking in their sense of wholeness, and then gently leading them to a more solid foundation in the grace and power of God.

Spiritual leaders thus will rely heavily in their own lives upon God's Holy Spirit. Spiritual leaders work within a paradox, for God calls them to do something that, in fact, only God can do. It is the Spirit who brings about change and transformation in people, including ourselves. Unless we see and relinquish our results and credit God's Holy Spirit, we will accomplish far less than that of which we are capable. Such commitment and power can only come through a prayerful relation to the Holy One.

Thirdly, spiritual leaders are accountable to God. When you have a sense of such accountability, it is easier to remove the temptation to try to do it all yourself, or the temptation to want to act in such a way that you receive commendation. Gratitude is also a part of the humility of accountability – gratitude for the opportunity to serve, gratitude for the people one serves, especially for those people who are the most challenging, who perhaps need to be moved the most toward God's plan, and finally, gratitude for the gifts God has given

you to enable you to serve. And until that gratitude becomes, as Paul says, an attitude of "giving thanks to God in everything" (I Thess. 5:18), we have not reached the point at which our service (aka leadership) is spiritual.

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) Do you agree that there is a leadership crisis in the church today? What about your own congregation – does it struggle to get persons to answer the call to leadership? Do you have trouble adding deacons? What are some of the keys to developing and nurturing leaders for your church?
- 2) Does this meditation help you distinguish between "general" leadership and spiritual leadership? Is there a place for both in the church, or should all church leaders strive to be spiritual leaders, i.e. those whose primary objective is to "move people from where they are to where God wants them to be"?
- 3) What about deacons...should they all be spiritual leaders? Should evangelism be a part of the functions of deacons? In what way can deacons be evangelists?
- 4) The Blackabys say that gratitude is so important in the life of the Christian and that it is an essential attitude for spiritual leaders. What is the level of gratitude in your church? What can deacons do to raise that level? Does your deacon group, collectively and individually, model the attitude of gratitude to the congregation?

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## **MAKE PRAYER NATURAL**

Are you a bit shy about offering a prayer at the close of a conversation or at the end of a visit with someone who is not a close friend or relative? Are you afraid the chair is going to call on you for a prayer to open or close a meeting? Don't feel badly – you are not alone. Even the disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us how to pray" (Luke 11:1).

A few factors combine to make us uncomfortable when it comes time to pray in public. For one, we imagine prayer as being an eloquent discourse of the King's English, replete with flowing, graceful, adjective-enhanced sentences. Mark Twain once remarked sarcastically about a pastoral prayer offered by his pastor, "It was the finest prayer ever delivered before a Boston audience." Prayer is not a performance; rather, it is simple conversation with God. It does not have to be "fancy" to be heard or to be effective. When Jesus responded to the disciples' question, he offered what we commonly call the Lord's Prayer. Analyze that prayer and you find simple, to-the-point petitions; no fancy words, no attempt to describe to God the world situation. Martin Luther wrote, "The fewer the words, the better the prayer."

Another perception that figures into our shyness about prayer is that prayer, particularly prayer in a group or prayer with another person, is more the function of a minister than a lay person. That notion was properly derailed by the Reformers' emphasis upon the priesthood of all believers, which was embraced by the organizers of the Brethren fellowship. Any person may speak or pray for all in our tradition.

Another impediment to feeling natural about praying is embarrassment. We wonder if the listener(s) will think us too good or "better" than they, or if we will say the wrong thing or nothing of worth. Yet, we do believe in prayer and its power to change either the course of something or enhance our ability to cope with a crisis or problem. We also believe in prayer that gives thanks to God for the blessings of our lives. Through this understanding of prayer comes a model we can remember when we are called on to pray:

- √ Thank God for what we have and enjoy
- √ Pray for specific needs
- √ Ask God to help us remove anything in our lives that would keep divine help and presence from us
- √ Praise God for the model of a caring and saving life in Christ

For further reading about deacons and prayer, review the chapter "Prayers and Other Worship Aids" in the *Deacon Manual for Caring Ministries* (pg. 280 ff). A number of prayers are offered in this chapter for use at special times. There is no shame in using a prayer someone else has composed, which is a good reason for taking the *Deacon Manual* on visits or to meetings. Likewise, there is no problem with writing out a prayer beforehand or having some composed prayers with you. I always felt that the Holy Spirit had more time to express the appropriate petitions through me if I gave time to receiving his thoughts and writing them down, than when I attempted to "listen" spontaneously and speak at the same time!

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) Discuss within your deacon group the issue of being comfortable or uncomfortable praying in public. Do you agree with the reasons given in the article as to why lay persons are not eager to be called on to pray? What do you expect when someone leads in prayer?
- 2) The article suggests that you analyze the Lord's Prayer. See if you agree that the petitions are simple and to-the-point.
- 3) Ask the pastor how she or he feels about always being called on to give a prayer to open a meeting or to bless the covered dish supper. Does the pastor feel that he or she is the only one "qualified" to pray? Would the pastor be willing to have a training session to help lay persons get over their shyness about praying in public?
- 4) What do you think about Martin Luther's statement: "The fewer the words, the better the prayer"? And do you believe a written prayer is just as "valid" as a spontaneous one?

## **SPARE GOD THE DETAILS**

I was a little aggravated upon a recent visit to the doctor. My complaint was a sinus infection, and I could only get an antibiotic by seeing the doctor. But before I could see the physician, I had to submit to a "health interview" with the nurse. To what was I allergic? Am I taking any medications now? When was I last to the doctor? What was my mother's maiden name? I didn't mind giving the answers. The ironic thing was that the nurse was writing on my medical history file which already had all of those answers!

I thought about how eager we are to make sure God knows all the details of our lives or those of others. I heard it said of a pastor that "his prayers are like sermons." Does God need to be "preached to?" Does God need to be reminded of the ailments that led to Sadie being admitted to the hospital and what the tests have revealed so far? Yes, we need to intercede for the restoration of Sadie's health, but God very well knows of Sadie's condition.

This crass introduction was a segue to the priority of prayer chains in the church, often instituted and managed by the deacons. Prayer chains or prayer fellowships (meetings and groups) are a vital ministry for the congregation to offer its members and friends. As the 2002 Annual Conference affirmed, prayer is a powerful channel for God's grace.

One of the things to guard against, however, is that prayer request lines, whatever design they take, do not serve as information channels to satiate curious minds; more specifically, that they do not become conduits for passing along or incubating gossip. Many of us played that old youth game called "Gossip" in which everyone sits in a circle while one person initiates a mini-story and whispers it in the ear of another person. That person, in turn, whispers the story to his or her neighbor, and on around the circle until the story is told to the person who originated it. That person then reveals the initial version of the story in contrast to how the story got adulterated as it was passed from person to person. The same thing can happen when we include too many details about someone's illness or crisis in the initial request for prayer. It can be sufficient to say that "prayers are requested for Lester, who is having surgery tomorrow" without giving the details that it is "a prostate problem and I suppose they will be testing to see if it is cancerous." That detail will surely end up somewhere as "Lester

has prostate cancer, and even if his surgery is successful tomorrow, he may only have six months at best to live.”

Add to these comments the fact that today’s concern for the privacy of an individual (i.e. the HIPAA Act) places the church in an awkward position. In most hospitals there now is a sign posted reminding everyone that discussion of any resident in the common areas of the facility is not allowed. 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 say through the prayer chain why Susie is in the hospital?” “Can the church share with its members the need for contributions to help a family meet their medical costs?” Perhaps deacons as well as pastors should seek some sensitivity training in how to respect the dignity and privacy of members and yet maintain the caring nature of the church fellowship.

Remember, though, God already knows the details; our prayer is not to inform the Almighty but to unite concerns and faith energy with the divine love and healing effort. Caregivers’ prayer emphasis should be upon intercession and not upon giving a commentary on the news.

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) Do you agree that too many “details” can be given over the prayer chain and that these details can be distorted as they are passed along? How can we change from curiosity to simple intercession? Do you think it makes our prayers for an ill person any more sincere or effective if we know all the details of their illness or surgery?
- 2) Has your deacon group, together with the pastor, studied the new regulations about people’s privacy and what that means for church announcements, bulletin statements, and prayer chain information regarding people’s illnesses and situations? Perhaps it would be helpful to have someone from local government who comprehends the HIPAA regulations to speak to your group and dialogue about some of these issues.
- 3) Are there some learnings in this exercise that would be helpful to pass along to the congregation? What means do you have (newsletter, sermons, etc.) to do this? Would it be helpful for the deacons to organize a “prayer retreat” for the congregation?

## MODELING HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

Deacons are generally viewed as servants in the church who *do* things...*do* ministry. More and more, with the new emphasis on deacons as called-out representatives of Christ's love and care, the church is beginning to look, and rightly so, at deacons as role models of the abundant life that Jesus promised. Not that deacons have to be perfect, but they are followers of Christ who strive to obey Christ's words and life.

Deacons have an understanding and commitment to keep their bodies, minds and souls as healthy as possible. One of the primary functions of deacons, as listed in the *Deacon Manual for Caring Ministries*, is that of health and healing. Furthermore, the 1997 Annual Conference statement on deacon ministry says, "Deacons will give general oversight to the health and healing ministries of the congregation. They will give specific attention to promoting healthy lifestyle choices, healthy relationships and healthy attitudes, and will reach out with the compassion of Christ to people experiencing pain and suffering."

The best way to encourage others in the congregation to work at holistic health is to see the results in the prophets themselves! Thus, deacons ought to be models of healthy lifestyle choices, healthy relationships and healthy attitudes. Has your deacon group ever discussed the following:

- ✓ Giving guidance to the congregation on healthy dishes to bring to pot-luck suppers?
- ✓ Starting a walkers' club?
- ✓ Creating a church cookbook consisting of heart-healthy recipes?
- ✓ Hosting a training session on what constitutes an annual physical examination?
- ✓ Sponsoring a health-screening day for members of the congregation?
- ✓ Promoting positive comments about the church and its ministries?

More importantly, look around at the members of your deacon group – including yourself. Are there areas of eating, exercising, and evaluating that you need? How seriously do you take the biblical observation that our bodies are "temples of the living God" (I Cor. 6:12-20)?

Deacons can surely lead the way to a healthier environment and a healthier life for the entire congregation. It is one of the most important functions the deacon body may ever undertake.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Do you agree with the statement that "deacons are to be role models" for the congregation? Does this scare you, or is it a legitimate challenge? Note that it does not demand that you be perfect, but that you are trying to live faithfully as Jesus taught and lived.
- 2) Discuss the question, "How healthy is our congregation?" Take into account not only the physical health of the church members, but also the attitude of those who attend your church.
- 3) Consider each of the questions that are marked with a check in the article. Answer each with either a "yes, that would be good for our congregation," or a "no, that wouldn't work here."
- 4) Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 together as a deacon group. Do you take this passage seriously, or is it an ideal too high to be reached realistically?

## HELPING THE CHURCH BE INCLUSIVE

Larry Rasmussen, professor of social ethics at Union Theological Seminary, New York City, characterizes the first Christian communities as “a new humanity, part of a new order, a ‘third race’ (beyond Jews and Gentiles) transcending ethnicity and nations, and the ‘first fruits’ of a new age coming to birth in the midst of a dying one.” In the same article published in *From Practicing Our Faith*, Rasmussen lists some qualities that make the Christian community an “alternative community” for our society – among them are some traditional Brethren views:

- A sense of divine power as the power for peoplehood;
- A basic equality that dignifies the varied gifts of varied members;
- A form of address that tends more toward “brother” and “sister” rather than titles;
- A sharing of resources according to need; and
- An effort to cross social boundaries for a more inclusive community.

Deacons are in a position to restore to today’s church its claim to the distinction of being “the new humanity.” Rasmussen also says that our society today bears “an eerie resemblance” to that “diverse, cosmopolitan, multilingual, multiracial, multireligious, fragmented, eclectic...and more than a little violent” era into which Christianity was introduced. According to Rasmussen, the early Christians offered their age “a faith full of feeling, energy, conviction, and the willingness to experiment imaginatively with inherited practices, traditions, symbols, and stories. They related all this to real human needs and – perhaps most important of all – offered a place of high participation to community members from all ranks and with diverse gifts.”

From the example of Abraham who invited the three journeymen to enjoy the hospitality of his tent (Genesis 18:1-8) to the vision that came to Peter that God was concerned about the Gentiles (Acts 10), the idea of an inclusive community that welcomes and offers hospitality to all people is a biblical and moral imperative. There is the expectation, dramatically underscored by Jesus’ sacrificial love “for all the world,” that God’s people welcome strangers and treat them justly. Consider the directive given to the Hebrews in Leviticus 19:33-34: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among

you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

In the New Testament, the Greek word for hospitality, *philoxenia*, literally means a love of the guest or stranger. And the person or group that is *philoxenic* develops a personality that exudes the whole activity of hospitality and provides for the needs of others unconditionally.

It is the nature and orientation of the church to treat the stranger as a human being made in God’s image and a person of worth equal to our own. Yet, the “undocumented foreigner,” when he is from a different culture or a different faith, often is not offered “warm” hospitality or even acknowledged as a human being in God’s image. Consider these questions about your church: Do those who enjoy comfort and shelter tend to take “the path on the other side” of homeless strangers? Do those whose health is strong turn away from the haggard, drawn faces of those living with AIDS? Do the prosperous ever enter poverty-stricken neighborhoods to befriend those caught in the web of drug abuse, gang violence and welfare dependency? Do those who wear stylish clothes criticize those who attend church dressed informally?

We are reminded that the earliest churches met in homes. Paul states several times in his letters that he looked forward to and appreciated the nourishing hospitality he received wherever he went, and he in turn was pleased to serve them with important apostolic gifts. The church does not need a wealth of material resources to help guests become hosts and hosts become guests.

Deacons are called to be advocates for those who are on the fringes of society, and to challenge and lead the congregation in helping both strangers and members experience the love of God. This may take a good deal of study on the part of the deacon group, to learn who is on the “outside” of the congregation’s circle. To do this, deacons must learn to know the needs of the people on the fringe, and discover what prejudice exists within the congregation. Once these issues are known, deacons can plan fellowship and educational experiences that bring the congregation and its “strangers” together in non-threatening but enlightening, mutual fellowship.

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) This article puts a lot of responsibility on the deacons as the group in the church that can best help restore to the church the



distinction as “the new humanity,” one that is inclusive of everyone who confesses Christ as Lord. Do you believe the deacons can do this? If not, what other group in the church could pull it off?

- 2) The verse from Leviticus, in the law of the Hebrews, is striking. What would it take for your church to “love the alien?” What is the status of illegal aliens in your community? Has your church acted to give them sanctuary or help of any sort?
- 3) Answer the questions listed in the fifth paragraph of the article. Do your answers suggest any action or further consideration of your church’s hospitality is needed?
- 4) When strangers appear at your church whose appearance is different from the average member, how are they greeted? Are there deacons alert to possibly sit with them, or otherwise extend a Christian greeting to them?
- 5) The 2007 Annual Conference adopted a paper on intercultural relationships and developing an inclusive church. Among its recommendations, the paper asks congregations to reach out intentionally to people from different backgrounds and to become informed about the conditions of life for ethnic and racial minorities within their neighborhood. Is there any group in your church that is studying the intercultural paper and implementing some of the recommendations? Is that something that deacons could initiate in your congregation?

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## HOW CAN YOU TELL A DEACON'S AGE?

Phyllis was completely startled when she received a call from Doris, who chaired the nominating committee of Mack Valley Church of the Brethren. "Phyllis," Doris said in a more serious tone than the light chatter with which the call began, "we would like to recommend to the congregation that you be called to be a deacon. Would you accept that call?"

"Who, me?" Phyllis hastily replied, "Why Doris, I'm too *young* to be a deacon. Besides, I have only been a member of Mack Valley for *ten* years!"

Several members of the New Jordan Church of the Brethren were talking in the hallway following worship one Sunday morning about how they might implement the caregiving program that would assign every family to a deacon team. "One thing we have to do," said Harry, "is to talk Sam and Rowland into retiring. I don't think you ought to stay a deacon past 70 or so."

So...are deacons only middle-agers who have enough experience at life not to have to be mentored and who are able and energetic enough not to have to be chauffeured? Is there any way you can look a deacon in the mouth, like you can a horse, and see if he or she is "fit"? That's an obnoxious thought, if not completely ridiculous.

Nowhere do I find in the scripture any *age* qualification for deacons. Deacons are selected on the basis of the faith they demonstrate and by the manner of their living. My personal image of Stephen, the dynamic deacon in Acts 6-7, who was the victim of the Saul-directed stoning, is that he was a fairly young fellow. And obviously some of the deacons with whom Timothy worked still had children at home (1 Tim. 4:12). So we did not get our perception that deacons cannot be under 40 from the Bible. Likewise, who is able to set a "retirement" age for a deacon? That's as absurd as saying that anyone past the age of 75 can no longer be a grandfather or grandmother!

Age is not a primary factor in one's qualification for the diaconate of the church. Rather, "select (persons) of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3). And *they* come from both the young and the old, both women and men!

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) What is the perception in your church about the age and gender of deacons? What is the average age of your deacon group? Is there a good balance of age and gender?
- 2) What method do you use in your church to call persons to be deacons? Is there an educational process to help members appreciate the value of deacon ministry in your congregation? Is there any program for cultivating and nurturing potential deacons?
- 3) Annual Conference in 1997 passed a paper on deacons that includes this sentence: "As congregations call persons to be deacons, they will seek to call individuals who manifest spiritual gifts and natural talents in keeping with the ministry of deacons." The paper also states, "Congregations are encouraged to call persons as individuals, rather than as couples, to deacon ministry. When the call is issued to married couples, the congregation is encouraged to view each partner as called individually, referring to each of them as deacons." Does this statement match your congregation's practice in calling persons to be deacons? What do your bylaws say about the calling of deacons?
- 4) Are there actions your congregation could take to encourage younger people to accept a call to be deacons? Have you considered a mentoring program whereby a potential younger member "shadows" an older deacon to get a feel for what deacons do?
- 5) Are there deacons in your church who are no longer able to be active, but upon whom you should consider bestowing the honorable status of "deacon emeritus"? You can read about the significance of "deacon emeritus" in the *Deacon Manual for Caring Ministries*, pp. 77-79. Deacon emeritus certificates, suitable for framing, are available from the Deacon Ministries of Church of the Brethren.

## AVOID DEACON BURNOUT

Being a deacon is a full-time task, not just a twice-a-year mobilization for love feast. Caregiving takes its toll, both physically and spiritually. Deacons who take their task seriously can easily become fatigued, regardless of their reliance upon the Trinity for their strength and guidance.

Add to the sheer burden of caregiving the fact that deacons are called from among the most dedicated, committed members of the congregation. Chances are that those same faithful also will be asked to assume other leadership positions in the church, such as board member, teacher, choir member, small group coordinator, or stewardship campaign chair. Usually such members feel obligated to try to do it all and then feel guilty when some perceived responsibilities go unfulfilled.

Ministers have faced the same problem since the institution of the employed pastor. There is no end to the "work" of the parish pastor, regardless of the size of the congregation. There are feelings of burnout in the pastorate, too. Some congregations are recognizing that and awarding their pastors sabbatical time.

So what about sabbatical time for deacons? Obviously it cannot be dealt with as an employment issue as it is with pastors. The relief for deacons will have to be more subtle. For starters, it would be good for every church to adopt some kind of review and evaluation procedure to use with deacons. The *Deacon Manual for Caring Ministries* (pp. 82-91) suggests some forms to use for conducting a review, particularly at the time a deacon's term is up, or at three- or five-year intervals. The purpose of this evaluation is not to judge the deacon's performance, but to discern whether there are some concerns that can be dealt with before the deacon experiences burnout. It may be, for example, something as simple as the deacon having too many assigned families and, rather than losing the deacon, some families could be assigned to other deacons, or more deacons called.

Another method of prevention is to combine the idea that deacons are free to develop a caregiving ministry and style that fits their own skills and interests. A mutual ministry could be created in which deacons share caregiving tasks of the whole body according to what they enjoy doing. Not every deacon, for example, enjoys making hospital visits. Not every deacon has the patience to read to a homebound person.

But to every deacon God has given other skills. The deacon board could create a list of caregiving tasks that are needed in the congregation, such as hospital visitation, nursing home visitation, transporting people to cancer treatments, being Sunday morning greeters at church. Each deacon can then prioritize what he or she does best. A mutual agreement could be created to share these tasks, even across shepherding units or family assignments. If Luke is uncomfortable visiting nursing homes, he might ask Rachel, who put down nursing home visits as one of her strengths, to visit one of his families. In turn, perhaps Rachel would not attempt to transport a brother in her flock who needs to care for some financial matters at a bank, and so she calls on Luke to help, because Luke identified that kind of ministry as something he does well. This sharing of caregiving tasks can lift a great many burdens off every deacon.

Of course, there is still another course to dealing with deacon burnout and that simply is to give deacons a leave of absence from caregiving responsibilities, or accept their resignation. There is a sense that a person who has the qualifications to be called as a deacon will never stop giving care; that is the inner nature of such people. They will continue on an informal, as-they-can basis, rather than a planned effort under the deacon program. Perhaps there could be a provision whereby these persons stay related to the deacon board, say as "deacons in renewal," so that the possibility for active participation in the future remains open. I still like the idea that the call to be a deacon carries with it a lifetime validity, where the call to be a deacon is a reflection of that person's life in Christ and his or her gifts and talents. The latter does not change, even though his or her ability to carry out many tasks may change. I think a leave of absence is better than "throwing the baby out with the bath water."

Hopefully, each deacon group will look at the issue of burnout and take some steps to deal with it before it devastates their deacon ministry. If nothing else, deacons might consider organizing opportunities for non-deacons in the congregation to help with some of the caregiving tasks, thereby spreading the load even wider. Remember, even Jesus established a core of called-out people to help him carry out his mission!

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) Take an inventory of how much the deacons of your church are doing. How many years of service are represented by the total group? How many hours each week are demanded of the

- deacons? Ask whether any are feeling tired of their tasks. Is there any evidence of burnout among your group?
- 2) Would your deacons welcome a review at the end of their term, or at three or five year intervals? Look at the forms in the *Deacon Manual*. Do any of those appeal to you as a workable form, or would you rather design your own? Or is an evaluation too threatening to your group?
  - 3) Does the idea of creating a list of caregiving skills within your deacon group have merit for you? Is there another method for sharing the ministry that you would prefer? Do the deacons need to call some non-deacons to help them with caregiving tasks?
  - 4) Some congregations have abandoned the shepherding program (in which every family in the congregation is assigned to a deacon or deacon team for keeping in constant touch) because it was too demanding of their time and energy. Do you have deacons who also have other major responsibilities in the church? How can you get a workable balance, or should there be limits on how many responsibilities a church member can carry?





## HELPING PEOPLE FEEL AT HOME

What do we mean when we invite guests or visitors to make themselves at home? Are we not trying to put them at ease, wanting them to feel as welcome in our home or church as they feel in their own?

Those are pretty big objectives for hospitality, and judging from the reports of so many dysfunctional homes in our society, maybe they are mistaken objectives. Sometimes the safer environment is one that is *different* from home. Perhaps we need to know something about the person before we offer them an experience that is to be identified with what they know at home.

Still, our motive is pure. We want visitors, and long-time members for that matter, to enjoy themselves in our midst, to shed hindrances that keep them from having a warm, wonderful time, and to experience an acceptance that is akin to the care and love associated with a "normal" family atmosphere.

In that vein, making people "feel at home" is a primary function and challenge for deacons. It is made all the more critical in our age of mobility and alienation. Is your deacon group aware of congregation members living hundreds of miles from parents and relatives – brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins? Do they go home for holidays such as Memorial Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas? How do congregational members celebrate major holidays if they cannot be with family? Some churches see that these congregation members without family living nearby are invited to spend the holiday with a church family or plan an activity at church to which all are invited.

Are there persons in your church who would benefit by having surrogate parents or grandparents to help them with decisions, mentor them in parenting or counsel them on managing their resources? Do you have members who would be willing to help others with the details of looking for a home to buy or rent, or who could give advice on how to invest money for the future?

Perhaps even more critical are the needs of those churchgoers whose circumstances have alienated them from their natural family relationships due to abuse, marital breakup, parental rejection, communication and caring interrupted by alcohol or substance abuse,

criminal incarceration, or other extenuating causes. These are golden moments for the church to be "family" for those whom Jesus identified as his true brothers and sisters.

I always marvel when an elderly parishioner refers to the church as his or her "family." In many cases, their natural family members are deceased. They have no nurturing, caring relatives other than people who have become dear friends, literally brothers and sisters in the church.

Take a look at the possibilities for helping people feel at home in your church. It could make for a good deacon meeting in the future.

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) Have you ever said to someone, "make yourself at home"? What new insights does this article suggest about what that phrase may mean? What does it mean when you say it to someone in church?
- 2) Does your church have a "family feel"? What contributes to that sort of warm, accepting atmosphere? Is that easily conveyed to visitors and new members of the church?
- 3) Are there persons in your church who need some family caring at holidays and other special times? How could the deacons ask for homes that would invite those persons to spend the holiday with them? Do you think there is a need to identify some persons in the church who could assist young people in buying a home or help members with such things as investments and management of resources?
- 4) Often neglected are those who have been alienated from their natural families for a number of reasons (listed in the article). Do you know of such persons in your church or in the community to whom the church needs to reach out?
- 5) The article also reminds us that the elderly often have no family other than their church friends. Does that suggest any particular activities or special connections that should be planned for the older members of the congregation?

## A MENTALLY HEALTHY CONGREGATION

Churches have not been quick to care for or about people with mental or emotional disorders, yet mental problems to some degree affect a significant portion of the membership of every congregation. Some deacon groups have begun to address this issue by providing free depression screenings periodically, hosting an annual seminar for the congregation utilizing personnel from local health-care agencies, acquiring books and educational materials on mental health, and giving special attention to members of their churches who are mentally disabled. Let's look further at how deacons can help assure that their *church* is mentally healthy.

Deacons are church members who are called by God to restore, if need be, and to maintain the spiritual well-being of the congregation. A strong and dedicated deacon group can literally save the congregation from a psychosis that wears the church down, even to the point of death.

Yes, I do believe that a congregation as a whole can move to a state of mental illness. Two very common psychoses that attack churches are paranoia and depression. Congregational paranoia can show up in many forms: it can surface in the lack of welcome to newcomers in the group, especially to those who have no prior connection to the Church of the Brethren; it can show up in the refusal to consider outreach to the community that may mean opening the church facilities to outside groups; it is the supply source of prejudice that looks disapprovingly upon persons of other cultural or social orientation; it can even infect relationships between long-established members of the church who resent and resist the possibility of the other having more control.

Deacons can help a congregation overcome its paranoia by beginning with a most obvious help – prayer. Pray that God will forgive the church for its distrust and self-shielding, and ask for God's help to establish a more positive, loving fellowship. Second, deacons can publish materials showing that Jesus ministered to those who were ostracized by the religious community of his day; for example, the Samaritan woman at the well, the lepers, the tax collector Zacchaeus, the woman caught in adultery, and others. Third, deacons can exhibit a healthy attitude of trust and acceptance. Ten outward-looking

deacons, or even fewer, could provide a therapeutic cure to a cowering congregation.

Deacons can help their congregation avoid stagnation or possibly death by depression. Depression can come to a church that has lost its hope as a result of environmental conditions, such as economic stress, lack of youth and young adults, difficulty acquiring and maintaining pastoral leadership, conflicts among groups or individuals in the church, declining membership, or a dull and uninviting church program. Depression often expresses itself in the difficulty to recruit lay leaders and in the resistance to try anything new.

First, deacons can publicize the positive aspects of the congregation, no matter how simple. Second, deacons can address the symptoms of the depression by discovering the source or sources, presenting the church board or congregational business meeting with recommendations for dealing with the symptoms, and joining in the effort to restore a positive attitude.

Deacons are in a great position to take the pulse of the congregation to see whether its spiritual heartbeat is being slowed by a mental disorder. Congregations have a corporate life that affects directly the individual member's attitude. Do a mental health check of your church now.

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) This article states that congregations have a corporate mental health as well as a physical well-being (financial support, building maintenance, etc.). Does this idea put the congregation in a little different light than usual?
- 2) What do you think about the two "common psychoses that attack churches – paranoia and depression?" Is one or both of those illnesses affecting your church?
- 3) One of the symptoms of congregational paranoia is cynicism about the church. This usually manifests itself in the "we/they" attitude that blames everything a person does not like on some group, the pastor, or "they" in some other form. Is this a common practice among members of your church? Is it possible for deacons to maintain a "positive and inviting attitude" about the church at all times? What can be done to ward off negative attitudes within the church?

## DEACONS AS MATCHKEEPERS

On one of my opportunities to conduct a deacon workshop for a church, to my horror I was told by my hosts that there were a couple of deacons in their group who had taken it upon themselves to act in the role of *matchmakers*. Apparently they saw one of the ways deacons could be “caregivers” was in trying to match up single women with single men in the church. My hosts assured me that their efforts did not have a very good success record and that some attempts by the deacon “cupids” had resulted in fairly embarrassing situations. Nevertheless, the matchmaking continued. In my workshop the next day I made a conscious effort to present deacon caregiving as being a help and not a hindrance!

Perhaps more important than trying to *make* matches is a role in helping couples *keep* their matches. When I was a pastor in the 1990s Michael McManus, a former correspondent for *TIME* magazine and a syndicated newspaper columnist, was an advocate for preserving marriages. At the urging of his wife, Harriet, McManus wrote a book entitled, *Marriage Savers* (Zondervan, 1995). It was a hard-hitting directive to society and churches aimed at making it difficult to get in and out of marriage. His point was well-taken, that we do not take marriage, and especially marriage preparation, seriously enough, and we do not emphasize the sacredness of the covenant relationship. Yet, the McManuses offered solutions in the book that are arbitrary and inexorable. Many of their methods, if carried to the letter, would drive as many persons away as they may help.

One idea from *Marriage Savers* may merit some consideration by deacon groups who are concerned about helping people begin marriage with a solid foundation. The McManuses recommended that each church assist the pastor in marriage preparation by offering mentors for engaged couples. Mentors would come from those couples in the church who have achieved a reasonable measure of success in marriage and who thus can help those about to enter marriage get a picture of both the joys and challenges of marriage. Likely, the engaged couple will feel free to share any doubts or anxieties they may have with their lay mentors. There is one Church of the Brethren I know of that has had great success in promoting this ministry of marriage mentors.

I can see deacons offering this opportunity for engaged couples as a natural part of caregiving. It may follow that the mentors stay in that role through the first few years of the marriage, and longer if the couple requests it. It would have to be a ministry that is *offered*, as opposed to required. But I can see some couples welcoming the opportunity to have some objective role models and listeners.

Now, going a step farther, the deacons might be the ideal group to organize and offer marriage enrichment opportunities for couples in the congregation. There is a Marriage Enrichment organization with trained leaders who offer intensive but enjoyable weekends to help couples learn ways to enhance their marriage. The weekend includes developing communication and relationship skills. Deacons could encourage the church to provide some funds to assist with the costs of the weekend, as well as childcare, thus making it possible for more to attend. For more information about marriage enrichment weekends, visit [www.tmewpi.org](http://www.tmewpi.org), or contact the Family Life Ministries of the Church of the Brethren.

#### Questions for Discussion

- 1) How do you feel about deacons being involved in helping to make and preserve good marriages in your congregation? Is this a role only for the pastor, or would the pastor appreciate some help? Can you talk with the pastor about his/her pre-marital process?
- 2) What is your assessment of how marriages are fairing in your church? Do you see any need for a marriage enrichment weekend, or some similar experience for couples?
- 3) Is the mentoring idea for engaged and newly-married couples an idea that the deacons could undertake? What would be the expectation of such mentors? Who would oversee the program and how would you match mentors and couples?
- 4) Might there be a need for a small group in your church that would come together regularly to share ideas and stories about marriage and family? Do you see this as something deacons could get started?

## TALK ABOUT SEXUALITY

Do you recall the expression, “I wouldn’t touch that with a ten-foot pole?” I suspect that is the way many deacon groups would feel if they were polled about dealing with issues surrounding human sexuality. Perhaps only the subject of abortion may get a more animated and emotional response than sexuality, especially when the focus is on homosexuality. Increasingly the church is being challenged to address issues of sexuality; increasingly, we are seeking ways to avoid them. Conflict – emotionally charged conflict – often results.

Who is best at addressing highly charged issues in the church? The answer that comes to my mind is the deacons. Deacons are chosen for their maturity and for the evidence of their commitment to obey Christ. Deacons are compassion oriented and desire to be agents of conciliation at every opportunity. Therefore, I urge deacons to throw away the pole and help the church deal with matters of potential conflict and controversy. Here are some non-emotional ways to respond to issues of sexuality, both before and while they surface:

1. Study the Annual Conference paper entitled *Human Sexuality from a Christian Perspective* (1983). If your deacon group has not spent time in review and discussion of this paper, it would be timely and valuable to dig it out and do so. If the paper is not in your church library or pastor’s study, it can be accessed online from the Annual Conference web site. The advantage to studying this paper will be that several persons in your church will then know the latest position of the denomination on these matters, which will help curb speculation when the church is faced with one of the issues.
2. Discuss what members of your group know about various sexual orientations, e.g. heterosexuality, homosexuality, transsexuality, bisexuality. Would it be helpful to have a professional resource person discuss these with your deacons? Would it be possible and helpful for the deacons to arrange for dialogue with persons of a sexual orientation different from the majority of those in your congregation?
3. Take time to study Bible passages that present both the positive and foreboding references to human sexuality. The 1983 Annual Conference statement can help identify those references.
4. When dealing with real life issues that are emotionally charged, it is best to push for the facts and not let rumor or innuendo describe the

situation. In fact, deacons can set an example of reserving for God the right of judgment.

5. Consider whether persons in the church who are dealing with issues of sexuality within their families or circle of friends would be helped by having a support group in which to share thoughts, frustrations, fears and hopes. The deacons also could provide a list of resources where persons could receive counseling if desired. Perhaps the deacons could maintain a fund to assist with counseling fees.

I urge deacons to be proactive in helping their congregation address issues of sexuality. One group that will definitely benefit by your initiative is the youth, who receive many conflicting messages from their environment.

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) One of the reasons why issues of sexuality are so troubling to the church is that we are reluctant to learn or even talk about them. Discuss this point first with your deacon group. Are you willing to take the risk of exploring the issue that seems to be one of the most threatening factors in maintaining unity in the denomination?
- 2) If you are willing, start with the 1983 Annual Conference paper referred to in the article. Read it in its entirety. What can you affirm about it; what questions remain for you?
- 3) Consider the suggestion that you have one or more professional resource persons talk with the deacons about various sexual orientations. Are you willing to arrange for dialogue with someone representing a different sexual orientation?
- 4) Explore where there are persons in the church who would benefit from a support group in which they could share their frustrations, fears, hopes, and concerns. How might you get this group organized?
- 5) Check the most recent Annual Conference minutes to see if there have been any new actions taken by Conference in regard to the 1983 paper. Your Annual Conference delegates will have copies of the minutes.



## POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Many of us will remember Wil Lengel, who served as national chair of Church of the Brethren deacons in the early 1990s. Wil was a gracious person, a school administrator, and a caring deacon in the Highland Avenue Church of the Brethren in Elgin, Illinois. As editor of the original national deacon newsletter, *The Caregiver*, I invited Wil to write an editorial on what he thought was perhaps the most important gift of deacons. He graciously accepted the invitation and he entitled his writing, "Deacons Need to Give Positive Reinforcement." Following is what he wrote:

Many people in our churches need joy, hope, and positive reinforcement. In the school business we frequently talked about the importance of noting when children were especially "good" and reinforcing that behavior with comments like, "I like what you are doing," or with body language that conveys "I approve of what you did" or "I like the idea you expressed." Adults need approval perhaps as much as children. Doesn't it feel good when someone tells you how much they appreciate you? Of course, I do not mean to encourage you to do good things only so someone will notice and tell you how great you are.

As deacons, we have many opportunities to recognize positive things in others' lives. Let's do it! The next time you talk to persons for whom you may have a deacon caregiving responsibility, tell them something very specific that they did that really felt good to you. Not flattery – it will get us nowhere. It must be something that is genuine and authentic. There is some danger in this approach. You will need to learn a great deal about the persons for whom you are the caregiving deacon. This will take much of your time. But what greater calling do we have than to learn to know each other well?

Jesus took time to listen and to talk with individuals. Let's stop this artificial talk characterized by, "How are you? I am fine." Recently two prominent members of our church were memorialized with some marvelous things in great detail being said about each. These were persons of my close acquaintance for over 25 years. Why had I not taken the

time to really know and appreciate their many wonderful qualities?

Reinforcing the good qualities in each of us will go a long way in helping persons grow and mature, be happier and joyous and live a life full of hope.

Wil was that kind of deacon. He did not miss opportunities to compliment his teachers, his friends, his family and others of his acquaintance when he saw us doing anything worthy of recognition. His smile was contagious as well. He reinforced your sense of worth and joy just by his presence. This is a quality of Christian living that does not rely upon education or wealth or a stellar social position. It is a quality that comes from a life patterned after Christ, whose purpose was to lift the quality of life for all humankind.

#### Questions for Discussion

- 1) Appreciation is cited here as a value to be honored. What is the level of appreciation in your church? Are those who volunteer to teach, play instruments, lead music, chair committees...are these persons periodically and adequately thanked? When was the last time you wrote a note of appreciation as a deacon to one of them? What can your deacons do to lift the level of appreciation in your congregation?
- 2) Lengel made a distinction between genuine compliments and flattery. What factors would you list under each to show how they are different? How do we know when we may go beyond genuine praise to something that stretches the truth a little? Is it okay to "pour it on" a little in order to lift someone up?
- 3) We are all probably guilty of using the "How are you? I am fine." form of greeting. Lengel urges that we get beneath the surface. Discuss what you think this means, especially in terms of the language you might use as you speak to people at church. What can we say to people that conveys that we really care?
- 4) Identify people in your church who may be yet a bit estranged from the inner circle of friendships, e.g. new members, members who do not attend functions other than worship, members who may have endured some crisis(es) in their life that has made them shy away from social encounters. What can your deacon group do toward reinforcing their sense of acceptance?

## THE HOPEFUL SIDE OF HUMOR

There's an item in *Mac's Giant Book of Quips and Quotes* by E. C. McKenzie about humor. It says, "A sense of humor can help you overlook the unattractive, tolerate the unpleasant, cope with the unexpected, and smile through the unbearable." It sounds like something deacons could use indeed! Note, however, that the quote claims only that humor will *help* you deal with challenges; it does not champion humor as the panacea of all ills.

The trick is how and when to use humor in relating to people and their needs. Felicitous emotions should not be given free rein to blurt out some flippant and perhaps inappropriate remark. There is a fine line between humor that helps and humor that offends or hurts, but a defined line nonetheless.

What usually refines a sense of humor is our degree of appreciation for the dignity of the other person, and to a lesser extent, but just as important, our respect for our own dignity. Just as humor can lighten the mood of a person or situation, it can underscore a person's melancholy by seemingly adding insult to injury. For example, imagine a deacon visiting a couple whom the deacon knows fairly well. Soon after the visit begins, it is obvious that the husband is not nearly as vibrant as usual. Presently Martha says, "I'll have to speak for Willy; he's not been feeling so well lately." Without even permitting the duration of a short breath, the deacon turns to Willy and says, "Hey, maybe you need some of that Viagra!" Even though Martha laughs and Willy cracks a smile, the joke was a hit on Willy's already-wounded esteem and an incredible miss at trying to understand Willy's ill mood. Chances are the deacon will stay about 45 minutes or an hour and leave without the slightest idea of how Willy was feeling, for Willy was not about to make himself any more vulnerable after that opening response by the deacon.

The first lesson to remember is that only guarded humor is appropriate when there are opportunities to give caring responses (which is most of the time when conversing with one another!). Now, with the qualification of sensitivity, can a sense of humor be beneficial to caregiving? Definitely.

Those who have a sense of humor also tend to be more hopeful. They know that life is not all dark and that there are silver linings to look for and pin hopes on in every minute. A sense of humor helps to look on

the “light side.” Suppose, for example, a person being visited in the hospital expresses anguish at having so much pain connected to his or her illness. Of course caregivers cannot take the pain away, but they might say something like, “I’m sorry you are in so much discomfort. I know it must be difficult to bear. I remember something my mother always told me. She would say, ‘Pain is like a train whistle; it warns you to stop what you’re doing and wait until the train goes by before you cross the tracks.’ And she would point out that sometimes it is a short train and other times a very long train. But always the train would pass.”

Those with a sense of humor also are able to handle surprises in the care of others, such as an illness or crisis-related mood that is different from a person’s well demeanor. A sense of humor can also come in handy to reconcile one’s own blunders, like tripping over a chair leg while entering a hospital room, or seeing someone you know very well but whose name you cannot recall. A good caregiver will be able to laugh at him or herself.

Then there are times when the people for whom deacons serve as caregivers simply need some “cheering up,” and an appropriate way might be to share some lighthearted stories and /or suitable jokes that will touch the lighter cord in their souls as well. Caregivers do not need a joke book in their back pocket or a memory bank of funny stories for which it is difficult to remember the punch line. Caregivers can recall from their own experiences enough humorous incidents to keep the conversation going on a cheerful level.

Humor is a lot like spice or salt. It helps to make life tastier and it helps to preserve an optimistic perspective. Carefully used, it can be a spiritual tool for deacons.

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) Discuss the place humor holds for you. Do you enjoy a funny story? Do you like to laugh? Describe some times when you felt humor was not in place or that you were offended by someone trying to make a joke.
- 2) Discuss the thought that humor is beneficial when it is tempered by sensitivity. What other criteria would you use to regulate the use of humor when you are acting as a caregiver?

- 3) Do you agree with the statement that persons with a sense of humor tend also to be more hopeful? Describe someone you know who seems to fit well that characterization.
- 4) The article suggests that "a good caregiver will be able to laugh at himself." Do you agree? Can a sense of humor save us from self-degrading embarrassment?
- 5) It has been said that Jesus had a sense of humor. Can you identify some moments in the gospel accounts that would support that observation?

*Essential Servants II: Reflections on the Caring Ministries of Deacons*  
Fred Swartz

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## HOLISTIC HEALTH STYLES

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."*

That assignment is at the heart of what the church should be doing to help persons be the wonderful beings God intended! "Healthy lifestyle choices, healthy relationships, and healthy attitudes" will go a long way toward making and maintaining a whole, healthy person. It is intriguing to speculate on the nature of deacon ministry in the congregation if this were the primary goal.

First, deacons would have a good theological perspective on Jesus' approach to health and healing. Jesus demonstrated in his ministry among people that he believed and understood the relationship between physical health and mental 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 healing. Deacons could study together some of the recorded incidents in which Jesus performed a healing and talk about the relationship of faith and health. As part of the discussion, the group could consider using an anointing service as part of a worship service in its congregation. How is the anointing offered? Do people, especially the younger members of the church, need more information about anointing?

Secondly, deacons would be sensitive to the availability of resources that will help people create and maintain healthy lifestyles, relationships and attitudes. Such resources include Bible study aids, prayer support, periodic physical and mental health evaluation days (blood pressure checks, psychological consultation, et cetera), periodic moments for anointing and laying on of hands in worship services, and a referral list for use by deacons and pastors of available physicians, counselors, and community assistance organizations.

Thirdly, deacons themselves would model whole-health lifestyles. This may take some defining within your deacon group. Does wholeness 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?
- A spiritual director?
- Regular health examinations from a physician?
- An evaluation tool for measuring spiritual and mental disposition?

Deacons are among the most confident and hopeful people who have physical or spiritual crises facing them. There is a serenity, a hope, a victorious spirit that reflects a deep faith in God. How is your deacon group doing at "promoting healthy lifestyle choices, healthy relationships, and healthy attitudes?" Certainly, this is a timely task for all deacon groups!

#### Questions for Discussion

- 1) Make sure your deacon group understands and has agreement on what holistic health is all about. Do you see persons as whole beings, with a definite connection between physical and spiritual health? Can you cite examples in human situations that authenticate the connection?
- 2) The article suggests study of some of the Gospel stories of Jesus' healing. Here are a few for starters: Matthew 8:5-13; Matthew 8:28-34; Matthew 9:1-8; Matthew 9:27-31; Mathew 15:21-28; Matthew 17:14-21; Mark 5:21-34; Luke 13:10-17; Luke 18:35-43; John 8:1-11. Do these stories substantiate the statement that "Jesus demonstrated in his ministry among people that he believed and understood the relationship between physical health and mental and spiritual health?"
- 3) Now study James 5:13-16, which is the biblical basis for the Church of the Brethren anointing service. Answer the questions in the article about how the anointing service is offered in your church and whether there is need for more information about it.



- Would an enactment of the anointing be appropriate in a worship service so that people are aware of just what it is?
- 4) Would it be appropriate and possible for your congregation or deacon group and pastor to have a list of Christian physicians and counselors in your area that would be useful for new residents seeking such services?
  - 5) The article suggests a list of things that might be included as elements for wholeness of health. Which items from that list would you affirm? Are there other things you would include to insure that you are maintaining a healthy whole person?



## WHERE SHALL WE PUT THE DEACON'S BENCH?

When our daughter learned that her teaching assignment had changed from one county to another, being single she asked Mom and Dad if she could move back "home" until she had time to find a new apartment. We, of course, agreed, but we did not remember that she had accumulated right much furniture of her own already! We had room for everything, except one sofa that was wide and awkward and heavy. We decided it had to go in the family room, which had the only door wide enough to squeeze it through. Because we already had a sofa in the family room, the "new" addition would only fit in the spot already occupied by a deacon's bench. The question then became, "Where should be put the deacon's bench?" This plain little piece of furniture had been given to us in our first pastorate by a couple who felt that the minister's home would not be complete without a deacon's bench. We thus felt obligated to have it in a prominent place, even though it was not the most comfortable seat in the house! We finally moved the bench right inside the outside door to the family room.

This may well be a parable of the transition we have seen in the role of Brethren deacons in our lifetime. The question at times literally has been, "Where shall we put the deacon's bench?" As I understand it, the term "deacon's bench" derived from the traditional place the early deacons sat during the worship services. The first pew or bench in front of the preacher was where all the deacons would sit, facing the congregation. Often it was the deacons' responsibility to read the scripture, but never to preach unless there was no preacher present. In some churches this practice evolved into a point of privilege, giving the deacon organizational authority. With the deacon's bench anchored at the front of the church, it became like a bench of law; the deacons had to agree before the church could move on anything, be it adding a Bible study or putting a new roof on the church.

I am so glad that we no longer have the deacon's bench in *that* location today! But where shall we put the deacon's bench, figuratively speaking? We take our cue from the role the Bible suggests deacons are to carry in the church...that of *caregiving*. That suggests to me that we might need a mobile deacon's bench. Throughout my ministry I kept a note of what attracted new people to join the church. Their top three reasons were: 1) An air of friendliness and acceptance; 2) Caring about people and being in the

business of peace and service; and 3) There is something here for the children. Preaching, music, comfortable pews...all these counted, but they were not the first needs for people looking for a church. Again, we need a mobile deacon's bench, one that we can easily move to serve the needs of the people.

The first place I would park the deacon's bench is right inside the front door of the church. Hospitality is a caregiver's first line of offense. Nothing warms the heart of a stranger more than the hand of fellowship and the smile of friendship. People expect that from a church, the embodiment of the love and acceptance of God and his divine Son. Deacons are in the best position to help people, both long-time members and first-time visitors, to feel welcomed and accepted by the church. That was the moral behind Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan, who didn't just greet the beaten, lonely man, but who made the sacrifice to see that his needs were attended to. So, put the deacon's bench at the front door of the church and let everyone who enters know that God and you love them, regardless of their status or sin!

Secondly, take that bench a little farther and set it down in the middle of the lives of the people in the church. If truth be told, people today are very lonely and scared. The deacon caregiver is one who can see, perhaps even feel the pain of those who are most alone in life, and can provide a listening ear and an understanding heart. Does every person in your church have someone he or she can call in the moment of a crisis or when they are feeling a bit down? Set the deacon's bench in the hearts and lives of the people your church can reach. Let them know you are there for them. Be proactive in asserting your care, not merely reactive!

Thirdly, I want to urge the deacons to take the mobile deacon's bench to the nursery, the children's department, and the junior high and youth rooms. Now, that's about as far away from the traditional place for the deacons as you can get. But there is perhaps no other place where deacons are needed more. With the weaknesses of public heroes increasingly being exposed, and the militant, atheistic main characters that children see in sit-coms, cartoons, and Wii games, children more than ever need positive Christian role models. And even more, today's children desperately need to know people other than their families, who care about them..."safe" strangers, if you will. Deacons should get to know the children in the church's families as well as they know their parents and grandparents. The children and youth are more than the future of the church; they are the church

now, too. And their lives, perhaps their future church involvements, are being formed now. So, share your spiritual leadership with the children and youth. Don't be afraid they will think of you as old fogies...rather, they will be flattered that you love them and they will carry those memories to guide them as they mature.

Come to think of it, when we moved our deacon's bench to make room for our daughter's sofa, that bench, by the door, became a place to deposit coats, books, and anything else we might carry inside the door. We might as well have thrown it out to start with, for all the use it gave us as a sitting place. Maybe today's deacons ought to just pitch the deacon's bench, too, because if you take your task seriously and joyfully, you will neither want to sit down nor have time to do so!

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) Is there anyone in your deacon group who can recall the days when the deacon bench was in front of the church? What did it symbolize for the church in those days? How are deacons regarded in your church today? Is there still the stigma that deacons are "elders" who run the church?
- 2) Do you agree with the premise that the three most important things that attract people to stay with a church are: friendly and accepting; care about and serve people; and have ministries for children? What things about a church are important to the members of your deacon group? How well does your church meet the criteria?
- 3) Review the three places the article suggests the mythical deacon's bench should be placed in the church: inside the front door (hospitality), in the midst of the people (compassion), in the children's and youth departments (role models). Which of these forms of care is *most* needed in your church? Which may be missing? How can your deacon group respond?
- 4) List the ways that your church tries to be a friendly, accepting congregation. What on the list has made the greatest difference in making people "feel at home" with your church? What kinds of hospitality may be missing from your list? Are there any individuals or groups who are obviously being "missed" by your hospitality (i.e. your love and acceptance)?

*Essential Servants II: Reflections on the Caring Ministries of Deacons*  
Fred Swartz

## BEING CHRIST TO THE TERMINALLY ILL

For a long time I have appreciated Henri Nouwen's book, *The Living Reminder* (Seabury, 1977; Harper Collins, 1983). Nouwen tells caregivers that we do not need all the answers nor be silver-tongued articulates in order to be effective messengers of God's grace, love, and hope. He particularly speaks to attending those who are suffering from crisis, illness, loss or grief. Whenever caregivers visit or minister in the name of Christ, they represent Christ's living presence to others, and that is a sufficient gift.

I have felt helpless many times in the presence of someone who is dying. Had it not been for Nouwen's encouragement, I would have felt guilt and perhaps blamed myself for not being "adequate" in the situation. What can deacons "do" when persons in the congregation have a terminal illness?

For people who are sick, the deacons' primary ministry is simply being there. Those who have a longterm or terminal illness need companionship, persons they can talk to, persons who say by their presence, "we care about you."

Lila McCray, a deacon in the Modesto (Calif.) Church of the Brethren writes: "(Our) deacons have tried to be a presence to persons who are terminally ill. We try to visit them frequently and stress the importance of deacons always being prepared to listen and to be willing and ready to read something. This becomes a soothing kind of presence, especially if (reading) something like the Psalms, which they've learned in the past."

"We find also, "she goes on, "that there is a ministry in letting those we are visiting talk about death and dying. It is important that we feel with them wherever they are in their illness and faith journey. We also let (persons) know that if they want (a deacon) with them in their final hours, we will come. Deacons need to be willing to do that - to just be there, holding the person's hand, if appropriate. Often those who are terminally ill want a deacon or minister present, in addition to their family members, because (the deacon) represents their faith community. Deacons should not shy away from being the presence of Christ to people in all situations."

Lila implied that the Modesto deacons are consistent in their ministry for the duration of a person's illness. So often deacons heap visits and assistance on persons at the onset of a crisis, then become less and less attentive as an illness (or recuperation) drags on.

Second, deacons can be diligent in their prayers for those who are terminally ill. There is great spiritual power in prayers that are earnest and sincere. In the *Deacon Manual for Caring Ministries* (pp. 155-158) Sonja Griffith published excellent helps for deacons who have opportunity to pray with someone who is ill. She suggests being direct and specific to the person's needs, affirming the life of the person, validating without judgment the person's situation, being hopeful, and using simple and comforting images.

Deacons can be extremely helpful to the primary caregivers of persons who are terminally ill. Serving a person who has a confining illness can become overwhelming, no matter how devoted the caregiver. Deacons should be alert to the needs of family caregivers and offer to attend the ill persons so that the caregivers can have "time off." Those caregivers need prayer and someone who will listen to their own anxiety and weariness, as well.

Again, there are no easy answers anyone can give in the face of terminal illness. There are ways deacons and others can stand by persons who are dying with support, assurance, and hope. Deacons can be "living reminders" of the One who said, "Come to me, you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) What do you make of the statement that "whenever caregivers visit or minister in the name of Christ, they represent Christ's living presence to others? Does that offer you consolation and/or encouragement as you are called to attend someone who is terminally ill?
- 2) Are you uncomfortable having someone talk about death and dying? Do you agree that it could be helpful to the terminally-ill patient to talk about their impending death? Would it be helpful to talk with the pastor about some ways you could respond as a caregiver?



- 3) Can you think of times when the church has “heaped visits and assistance” in the beginning of the illness, then slacked off as the illness continued? What would be a good strategy for long-range assistance to those with a long-term illness? Can your deacon group make a list of how to “be there” for the duration of the illness?
- 4) The article has a good point about care for the caregivers of persons with long-term illnesses. How can deacons best help the caregivers?
- 5) Some deacon groups have provided books for the church library on death and dying, as well as resources for caregivers. Do you have such aids in your church library?



## **GIVING GRACE TO THOSE WHO ARE ILL**

Caring for the sick is one of the most fundamental callings of the church. In Jesus' ministry, healing and giving attention to those who had a physical or mental disability were among the most obvious of his acts of grace. He also was attentive to the needs of the caregiver or parent and comforted them.

Surely the church and its deacon groups know how to care for the sick in their fellowships – we've been doing that for centuries! But as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, changes in the social climate are challenging our comfortable forms of ministry.

The disappearance of the family doctor makes healthcare more stressful. In days not so long ago, the family doctor was like a member of the family. This doctor not only ministered to everyone in the family, he knew the family's history through a couple of generations. You felt comfortable going to him for care because he knew you. 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 offices staffed by multiple physicians and HMOs, 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. Our faces are familiar and can take the place of the old family doctor in whom people had trust and confidence. Today, more than ever, the church needs to be very close to those who are involved in medical care, to provide needed comfort and support 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 their 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 who provide intensive care to a loved one.

The availability of a "parish nurse" can be a most valuable ministry of today's congregations. The parish nurse is a trained person who can check blood pressure, help interpret medical directives, advise persons regarding need for medical care, provide comforting visits to those who are ill or recuperating from illness or surgery. It is a blessing indeed if there is a nurse within the congregation who is willing to provide these services as her/his volunteer ministry. Other churches employ a parish nurse with a stipend or honorarium. Additional information can be obtained by visiting the internet at [www.parishnursing.com](http://www.parishnursing.com).

Another ministry some deacon groups are finding valuable, especially in congregations where there are a number of elderly members, is helping those members interpret Medicare and other insurance matters. Particularly confusing to Medicare patients now are the voluminous statements that come regarding Medicare payments to medical providers. Although most are clearly marked, "This is not a bill," the statements are still confusing to interpret. Some deacon groups have been able to help by having persons whom members can invite to help them interpret their statements, without probing into or disclosing the member's personal accounts, etc. Confidentiality and privacy must be strictly respected.

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 thanks from people who found the visits, cards, prayers and telephone calls of church members so meaningful during their time of illness or grief. No superior skills are needed to express your support and hope to a person who is disheartened. It does take tact, love, much listening and sometimes patience. It is a very important part of the healing process, which no other institution or physician is prepared to give like the church can. It is a primary mission of the body of Christ in the world today.

#### Questions for Discussion

- 1) Discuss what your deacon group and other ministries of the church are now doing to provide ministry to the sick and those

- recuperating from illness or surgery. Do your observations reflect a good deal of time and energy being spent here? Do you note any missing elements, or think of other things you could be doing?
- 2) Review the paragraph of this article about the “disappearance of the family doctor.” Do you see this transition from the general practitioner who knew your family to a kind of supermarket care system in your community or area? How can the church, at least in part, take the place of the doctor who once held your hand as well as treated you? Discuss how the deacons can provide that “handholding” ministry to the sick in your church.
  - 3) Are there caregivers in your church and/or community who could use some relief from persons willing to provide companionship to shut-ins for a couple of hours a week? Is your deacon group organized to provide such care if needed?
  - 4) Discuss the role of a parish nurse. Could such a person be helpful to the members of your congregation? Perhaps you could have a parish nurse from a nearby congregation talk with your deacon group about what she/he does. Also, is there a need for someone who can help interpret Medicare statements and the like for the elderly in your church?



## 1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-13

### A BIBLE STUDY ON LEADERSHIP

*1 Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. 2 Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.*

**Leaders are trustworthy stewards of God's mysteries. They will not abuse the Word, nor will they twist it out of context to promote their own personal prejudices. They will not misrepresent the Christ with hatred, rejection, exclusiveness, and meanness.**

*3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. 4 I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.*

**The servant leader makes no claims for himself, but points away from himself to Christ. Ultimately he/she is a subordinate administrator for God. If the servant is truly doing what the Master asks, then no human being or court or group can bring a legitimate accusation of wrongdoing. Nonetheless, one can still not be confident of blamelessness, for God is the final judge and God's standards are high.**

*5 Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.*

**Humans are not to usurp God's right to judge. "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged..." (Matt. 7:1ff). While not excusing an errant brother or sister from their accountability, the leader must not assume the role of prosecutor. Jesus did not condemn those who came before him confessing. Rather, he guided them gently, with love, toward a transformation of their lives. Deacons, at best, can**

**help people find hope that God loves each one with compassion.**

*6 I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, "nothing beyond what is written," so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another. 7 For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?*

**Arrogance and self-righteousness are not leadership qualities. Jesus' teachings all stress humility, e.g. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23ff). Paul says that before we get ourselves all puffed up with pride and authority, we should consider where we got our gift of leadership in the first place. A gift is something we receive from God's graciousness, not something we have achieved ourselves. John Calvin wrote, "if we have any good in us, it is all the more reason why we are indebted to God's grace."**

*8 Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you! 9 For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals.*

**Watch that you don't set yourself up like kings and queens, considering that everybody else in the congregation looks up to you. You just think you are privileged. No, instead, God has commissioned us to exhibit his dream world...the not-yet kingdom...the kingdom to come. We are to be humble examples of love and service. We may be laughing-stocks in doing so. But we know something others do not; that there is a far greater world to come.**

*10 We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. 11 To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, 12 and we grow*



*weariness from the work of our hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; 13 when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.*

**To be last in the parade is significant; we thus can be a redemptive act for others. "Fools for Christ" are God's agents for cleansing, in stark contrast with arrogance. We are not promised an easy life in service for Christ. We may take ridicule, we will grow weary, we will have opportunities to turn the other cheek. But we hang in there, because there is an incomparable joy in serving Christ and in serving others on behalf of Christ. Again, Christian leadership is not for earthy glory or gain, it is giving one's life in exchange for heavenly joy.**

#### Questions for Discussion

- 1) Throughout Brethren history, deacons have been given or assumed various forms of leadership. In the earliest record, they served as those who collected and gave alms for the poor and the widows. Then they added some leadership in assisting pastors with worship and making arrangements for the observance of the ordinances. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century deacons became like ruling elders of the congregation whose approval was necessary for any major undertaking of the church, be it mission or building maintenance. Toward the end of the century, the primary function of deacons was determined to be that of *caregiving*. Do you consider the role of deacons today to be one of *leadership* in the congregation? What qualities would you list for Christian church leadership?
- 2) It has been observed that Christian congregations today are notoriously exclusive, not welcoming in their midst those who are strangers, those who are considered the "outcasts" of today's society, those whose lifestyle may not conform to the perceived biblical profile. How judgmental is your congregation, your deacon group? Can you teach "the kingdom of God and his righteousness" without being judgmental?
- 3) Paul's image of our being "fools for Christ's sake" suggests that being a Christian leader is a risky business as we

carry out the tasks God has entrusted to us. Are church leaders today willing to take risks to model human relationships as Christ demonstrated? Do you think that deacons should simply be passive responders to calls for help, or should they lead by example the way Christ taught? How does that affect our positions on war, homosexuality, giving, materialism, church decorum, et cetera?

## **1 PETER 4:1-11 – A BIBLE STUDY ON CAREGIVING**

1 Peter 4:1-11 is not among the passages usually listed for understanding deacons, nor for giving guidance for deacons. I hope to change that in your minds because the theme of deacon caregiving is in fact prominent throughout the passage. You will note right away that there are two distinct sections to this passage. The first, verses 1-6, is highly theological; the second, 7-11, contains some very practical ways for being a Christian, and especially for being a Christian leader. You may recall that Peter's epistles were written to Christians living in the five Roman provinces of Asia Minor. Life was becoming increasingly difficult for these Christians, as many Jews and Romans alike resented this new belief system. When Peter wrote, the Emperor Nero was rising in power and the apostle sensed that he needed to encourage and enable Christians to face persecution and possible suffering in the grace of God. He appeals to their knowledge of the Master they served..."Christ also suffered," he tells them in Chapter 3, ..."for the purpose of bringing you to God."

So, he begins Chapter 4, "Since Jesus went through everything you're going through and more, learn to think like him. Your suffering is evidence that you have been weaned from the old habit of selfishness...of doing whatever pleases you and you alone" (The Message). You know, maybe we put too much emphasis upon the high theology of Jesus' sacrifice...trying to understand the meaning of "atonement" and "redemption" et cetera, and miss the example of freedom from selfishness and self-centered ways that his suffering modeled for us. Peter says, and he definitely learned this the hard way, that when you live with the motivation of life-giving, especially when that may require some demanding effort, it frees you from the old self-centered life that is undisciplined, wild, and purposeless. Now Peter mentions some of that old life in terms that, hopefully, most of us might not identify with: licentiousness, drunkenness, reveling, lawless idolatry. But there are some other "sins" of our age that subtly tempt our participation: prejudice, materialism, cynicism, lust, gossiping, violence to others, wastefulness of human and environmental resources...we could make a list that would catch all of us, at least at some point in our lives. Peter said through the example of Christ and by his very suffering, we know a better way, a more fulfilling, productive way of living. So here's what it can look like:

Verse 7: It is **focused and disciplined**. Peter says “the end of all things is near.” Curious that one commentator said that Peter said this to *encourage* the Christians in their difficulty. I would rather think it would have had the opposite effect! Who wants to hear that the world is coming to an end? Some scholars think Peter is referring to the second coming of Christ; others think Peter meant that soon Christ’s victory would be known and finished on earth. Well, we know the latter hasn’t happened. But still, I like the idea that Peter is talking about the end of all things the Christians were *before* they met Christ. There’s a definite consummation to the old life when we put on the new life in Christ. Some call that “conversion,” others call it “transformation.” I don’t care what you call it, it definitely is a new beginning...or else you weren’t dunked deep enough! So therefore...Peter says, focus yourselves, center yourselves on the model of Christ, and discipline yourselves, so that your prayers will be alert, sincere and effective. Being a Christian does not come automatically...it arises out of commitment, out of determined discipline. Jesus constantly asked the disciples if they were sincere in their choice to follow him...even asked them, as you remember, after the Resurrection. We have a reminder of our weakness, as well, when we remember that all of the disciples deserted him on the eve of the Crucifixion! “Focus on your Christian calling,” Peter says, “Accept its disciplines.”

And next, in verse 8, he says, “Above *all*, maintain **constant love for one another**.” Peter sounds much like Paul here, doesn’t he? “Faith, hope, love abide, the greatest of these is love,” Paul wrote to the Corinthians. We do believe that there is no quality of life that is more powerful and constructive than that of love. Why then is it so lacking in our world, in our communities, in our churches? That’s the healing balm we most need today. And Peter urges “constant love.” Older versions carried the word “fervent” there...fervent love. Fervent was the word the Greeks used to describe the effort of the athlete who, with taut muscles, strains every ounce of energy to win a race. This kind of love is intense, earnest, and the lover will extend his or her self to the limit for others. It is not the kind of love that is willing only “if it is convenient.” It is love with the quality of fervor that sacrifices self for another person’s welfare. And it is a love that will “cover a multitude of sins.” No, this does not mean that love overlooks or excuses sins, but rather it smothers out the sins of others with its compassion and care. By contrast, we tend to point out the sins of those we are not comfortable with. We say, “they” need to reform...before we will admit them to our fellowship. “Come back to see us when you have changed your ways.” Peter’s love accepts those

who are not perfect and seeks to help them become the persons God intended for them to be.

Here's what it means, in the next verse (9): "**Show hospitality to one another**, without complaining." To be hospitable means to, literally, take someone in. In the Old Testament hospitality was extended to strangers, without question of their credentials. There were very few Motel 6's and Holiday Inn Expresses in Palestine. "If anyone sees his brother in need and does not open to him everything that one has...how does the love of God dwell in him?" You recognize that from John's epistles. Times of persecution and distress necessitated that Christians be hospitable to one another. Some had lost everything they owned...some lost family members. Hospitality became an important means of dealing with a number of issues for the church in Peter's day.

Are you concerned about evangelism today...about the church winning others to Christ? One of the best strategies for that is hospitality...welcoming the visitors, the stranger in our midst...not just in the church but also in the community; helping those new members feel at home in the church and feel needed. "Happy hospitality" is what Peter calls for...hospitality that is extended without complaining that we have to do it. "So let each one give as you purpose in your heart, not grudgingly or of necessity, for God loves a cheerful giver." How often have we heard that spoken as an offertory, but maybe not applied it to hospitality?

Verse 10: "As good stewards of the manifold grace of God, **serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.**" Let me comment on the second phrase of that sentence first. In one of the comic strips of "Beetle Bailey." Beetle Bailey, the army private, is standing in front of Sarge's desk and Sarge is saying, "The results of your aptitude test came back." "Yeah?" exclaims Beetle Bailey, "What am I good for?" And Sarge replies, "Nothing." You wouldn't get that answer from Peter! Peter has learned that *everybody* has been given at least one gift from God that can be used for God's kingdom and glory. And the gifts of God's grace are a multitude, not just those unique gifts that are sometimes called "the spiritual gifts," but gifts of singing, and sewing, of baking and bearing another's burdens, of helping and healing, of teaching and listening....everybody has a gift or gifts from God. There are no persons, no deacons, whose gift is not needed or whose gift cannot be used. And if we are stewards, then we are the caretakers of those gifts...to develop them, invest them, use

them...as Christ used every ounce of the human and divine gifts with which God endowed him for our salvation.

And finally, Peter himself is in a great position to know and to proclaim that however our gifts are used, they must be submitted to the power of God, the wonder-working power of God, so that our efforts will not only be multiplied many times over what we could do of our own strength, but also so that they will glorify God and witness to his authority in all of life.

You know, we have just touched the surface of this tremendous passage. I think I will leave this challenge to you, that you might make this passage, 1 Peter 4:1-11, the object of a study within your local church deacon group sometime, when you can look at its implication for the ministry and commitment of your group and your personal lives, as God's called-out servants. And in whatever you do, may you experience and rejoice in the blessing and power of God.

#### Questions for Discussion

- 1) The Bible study suggests that life was difficult for first century Christians. While we may not be persecuted today, how difficult is it for us to maintain Christian principles and standards?
- 2) Do you believe that there is true freedom in following the example of Christ? In what ways can deacons authenticate that freedom through their words and actions to other members of the congregation and to those with whom they work, live and play?
- 3) Does your congregation, do you as deacons, show *constant* love to all the people in the congregation? What does *constant* love look like? Name some of the images of constant or fervent love. Are there actions you could take as deacons to help cultivate such genuine love within your church?
- 4) Take an inventory of how well your church shows hospitality to all it has opportunity to serve. How is hospitality a form of evangelism?
- 5) Peter urges his readers to use the gifts God has given them to serve one another. How well does your church provide opportunities for and encourage the use of the gifts of its members? In your deacon group, do you know and affirm each other's God-given gifts? Would it be well to take a "gifts inventory" within your deacon group to enhance the accomplishing of your mission?

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Fred Swartz



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