

**Recognising Deacons
at Grace Church
(abridged version)**

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The Grace Church Elders

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All quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version (UK)

This paper is a collaborative work involving the three elders of Grace Church, Truro: Andrew Sampson; Matt Leach, and Ben Sewell.

Introduction

Following Andrew Sampson's talk on elders and deacons on 14th November 2021 (with a follow up talk from John Peel on 21st November), we feel that it's time to talk about appointing deacons at Grace Church for the first time.

This paper is about drawing you into our thinking and planning as an eldership team. There's some processing that we still need to do before we're ready to talk about timescales, but one of the outcomes of this project so far is the recognition that we want and need the active involvement of members of the Grace Church congregation in the process of recognising deacons.

1. What are deacons?

The term 'deacon' comes from the Greek word *diakonos* and simply means 'servant'. The noun appears 29 times in the New Testament. Sometimes the word has a broad meaning: someone who helps put out the chairs on a Sunday morning is a 'diakonos' in this sense. But there are at least two specific places in the New Testament where the term denotes a specific office in the church:

Philippians 1:1

To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers [elders] and *deacons*...

1 Timothy 3:8-13

⁸ In the same way, *deacons* are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. ⁹ They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as *deacons*.

¹¹ In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

¹² A *deacon* must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. ¹³ Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

In the words of Robert Thune, the New Testament indicates that:

A deacon is a servant of Christ and His church. But not everyone who serves God or the church does so in the official capacity of deacon. In other words: while every deacon is a servant, not every servant is a deacon (2007, p. 2).

2. How do deacons relate to elders?

The fact is that the New Testament doesn't give us a huge amount to go on. Acts 6:1-6 is traditionally understood to be a key passage about the appointment of deacons in the church, although the term *diakonos* is never used. Here's the passage in full:

¹ In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.'

⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

However we understand this passage, we think that the following points are relevant:

- This instance in the early church is about a clear division of responsibility in the church leadership.
- That division of responsibility is a direct response to the practical problems that threaten to overwhelm those leaders who carry specific responsibility for spiritual oversight. These problems, in turn, seem to be connected with the growth of the church (see how Luke introduces this section of his narrative in v. 1).
- The Seven are chosen specifically to meet the practical needs of the congregation. They are 'practical ministry specialists'.
- The primary consideration in deciding who is suited to serving in this role in the church is maturity of character: Luke records that the Seven are chosen on the basis that they're 'known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom' (v. 3).
- The whole congregation is involved in their selection and recognition (v. 3).
- Luke connects the division of responsibility in the church with further growth in the church (v. 7).

One of the striking things from Acts 6 is that when the Twelve gathered the congregation to discuss the need to appoint ministry specialists to supervise the daily distribution of food, they state their intention to '*turn this responsibility over to them*' (v. 3). The sense of the passage is that the Twelve were not merely looking for capable individuals who they could 'line manage' as they did the elders' bidding. No, the Seven were given *real* responsibility – we might say, senior level responsibility – as they took charge of this ministry area. In other words, it's not so much that they operated *under* the elders as *alongside* them, and this is precisely why it was so important to ensure that the Seven who were appointed met such high requirements in terms of their character and spiritual maturity.

To apply this principle to our own situation, elders don't direct deacons as if they were the elders' underlings. Deacons have responsibility to own vision, build team and grow their practical ministry area. In this sense, they serve *alongside the elders* in managing the practical aspects of the church.

But there's also a sense in which they serve *under the elders' oversight*. This is the same sense in which the entire church is under the oversight of the elders. Elders define doctrine and the vision of the church. They're responsible for implementing church discipline. We believe it's the elders who will ultimately be called upon by Jesus to 'give an account' for how they have watched over others' souls (Heb 13:17).

Perhaps we see a hint of this in Acts 6:6. Here, it's the *apostles* (not the congregation) who lay hands on the Seven. Colin Richards (personal communication, 2021) remarks that even though the Seven were selected by congregation, we can presume that the apostles had the power of veto. Certainly, it's difficult to imagine any of the apostles proceeding with the laying on of hands if they didn't feel they could do so in good conscience.

3. Why should we recognise deacons at Grace Church?

i) It's biblical

Philippians 1 and 1 Timothy 3 show that, along with eldership, the office of deacon is a God-ordained role. Given the emphasis that we place on the importance of our church leadership structures being biblical, it would seem strange if we didn't recognise deacons at Grace Church.

ii) It's strategic

There are a number of ministry areas that we want to develop, especially in the areas of pastoral care and social action. It's important that these areas are led by ministry specialists, rather than the elders who need to be able to give their primary attention to matters of spiritual oversight (remember the twin emphases of 'prayer and the ministry of the Word' in Acts 6:4).

Let's spend some more time thinking about these two areas for growth:

- *We need a female pastoral care leader*

At the moment, it's plain to all that the (male) elders are available to provide pastoral care, but who does a woman approach if she requires specialist pastoral support? She could approach any of the elders' wives, or a community group overseer, but we don't have a female leader in the church whose gift in pastoral care is formally recognised, and who can serve as a point of contact for women in the church needing support.

- *We need to develop our service to the wider community*

We take seriously our call to 'remember the poor' (cf. Gal 2:10). Over the years, we've established a strong relationship with Christians Against Poverty in our local area and run a Job Club for those needing help in finding employment. We're not running the Job Club at present but we would like to see this initiative relaunched and do much more to serve the needs of people in our wider community.

iii) It helps us model our theology of leadership plurality

Ben Sewell observes that the recognition of deacons provides a strong 'cultural push' against people saying, 'This is Andrew's church', or, 'This is Andrew, Matt and Ben's church'. Instead, it helps cement the understanding that 'this is Jesus' church and we're all serving in it.'

This means having women as well as men serving in formally recognised, senior leadership roles and working closely alongside the elders to develop particular ministry areas. Church history shows that women were recognised as deacons very early on (Thune, 2007, p. 5). We think that the 1 Timothy 3 passage we were looking at earlier may even imply that female deacons were recognised as early as the first century (look at verse 11).

iv) It gives gifted leaders who are not called to eldership something to which they can aspire

Not all leadership is eldership, and we recognise that it's important to ensure that gifted leaders who aren't called to eldership something to aim for. The fact is that we want to encourage all those who are 'ambitious in God' to aspire to leadership. We want to see women as well as men serving in significant leadership roles in the church, providing examples to follow, and fuelling people's aspiration to grow as leaders.

The advantage of using the biblical term 'deacon' is that it immediately directs attention to the character standards for people filling this office. This ensures we maintain a 'high bar' for people who aspire (or who we want to encourage to aspire) to this leadership office in the church.

v) It adds weight to areas of ministry that are not under the direct purview of the elders

Andrew Wilson talks about this issue in particular relation to serving the poor, but the point he makes is more widely applicable. He notes that 'three things will happen almost automatically' when you recognise deacons in the church:

One: the congregation will assume that what they do is important ... Two: the elders ... will assume that what they do is important. Three: their very presence will ensure that questions are asked about, profile is given to, resources are allocated for and vision is shaped by the needs of the poor in the community. Appointing leaders is a good way of focusing attention, and if you don't believe me, ask anyone who has recently appointed a kids worker (2017).

In other words, recognising deacons helps ensure that we don't neglect certain ministry areas in the church. Quite the opposite, in fact, as attention and resources are channelled into those ministries.

vi) It helps us raise leaders

Josh Thorns (personal communication, 2021) has remarked that 'the absence of the office means that we have an absence of people to fill the office.' In church life, it's often more helpful to create the roles that we want people to fill, rather than wait for people to grow into the roles – because that may never happen!

Creating vacant posts that we aspire to fill focuses our prayers, fuels our faith, and stirs the minds and hearts of people in the congregation, some of whom begin to think, 'Maybe I could do that. ... Lord, is it *me...?*'

4. Where do we want to appoint deacons in Grace Church?

John Peel notes that ‘there are no scripturally mandated duties for deacons ... This releases us from cultural limitations and opens up vast opportunities. It gives us the freedom within our settings to determine what will best serve the elders and the church as a whole’ (2010, p. 4).

At Grace Church we really can see this as an opportunity to broaden and strengthen our senior leadership in a way that feels true to who we are and where we are as a church.

In light of the previous discussion about the weight of deacon responsibility, we think the following principles are helpful. We’re looking for people who:

- Are strong role models, possessing godly character, having the confidence of the elders and congregation as being good examples to follow.
- Are focused on leading a particular ministry area where it isn’t necessary or desirable for an elder to take the lead.
- Feel a keen sense of responsibility for and are invested in that ministry area. They recognise they’ve been given a mandate to be proactive the way that they lead and are committed to succession planning if God moves them on.
- Get the vision of the church, are committed church members, and work well with the elders.
- Are able to lead effectively and recruit other people to the vision of the church (note: not merely ‘their’ vision) for their ministry area.

One obvious area in which it would make sense to recognise deacons is among our board of trustees who are already carrying significant responsibility as the *legal* guardians of Grace Church. As we’ve said above, we’d also like appoint a new, female leader to head up a pastoral care team, and recognise a deacon or deacons who can work to develop our service to the wider community.

We’ve also discussed a number of additional areas in church life where we may wish to recognise deacons. The New Testament makes it plain that the call of deacon is connected with character and not just with role. In practice, this may mean appointing deacons who lead in an area of ministry which may, at some point in the future, be led by someone who isn’t a deacon. This is something that we’ll be working through over the coming months.

5. How do we recognise deacons?

Wayne Grudem points out that ‘although Scripture does not explicitly command one specific system of choosing church officers, it would seem most wise to have a system whereby the entire church has a significant role in the selection and recognition of the officers of the church’ (1994, p. 922).

As an eldership team, we’ve recently been feeling the weight of the challenge of Acts 6 in which the apostles didn’t commend the Seven to the congregation; the congregation commended the Seven to the apostles! Where we’ve landed is proposing the following process:

- We teach about the role of deacon.
- We state our intention to find deacons that can lead a pastoral care team and help develop our service to the wider community.
- We invite church members to get in touch if they would like to put names forward (or put themselves forward) for consideration in connection with these specific areas of service.
- When the time comes in the future to recognise deacons in other aspects of church life, we invite church members to get in touch about who *they* regard as being exemplary servants who meet the biblical criteria of deacons (this is not something we’re planning on doing imminently).
- The elders evaluate all feedback, having the right of veto.
- We speak to specific individuals who we agree should be brought before the church as potential deacons.
- We name these individuals to the church, explaining why we believe they should be recognised as deacons, and invite further feedback.
- If we decide to proceed, we identify a Sunday morning when we set aside individuals for the role by the laying on of hands.

In the case of recognising deacons, we think that those laying hands on the appointees should include the elders and representatives of the congregation (e.g. trustees, team leaders, community group overseers).

We think this process finds a happy middle ground between recognising the authority of the elders to lead while at the same time empowering the congregation.

Resources cited

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