

Recognising Deacons at Grace Church

November 2021

The Grace Church Elders

Contents

- 1. What are deacons?2
- 2. How do deacons relate to elders?3
- 3. Why should we recognise deacons at Grace Church?.....6
- 4. Where do we want to appoint deacons in Grace Church?9
- 5. How do we recognise deacons? 10

- Resources cited 11

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. It's about setting a trajectory rather than providing a detailed roadmap. There's a lot of 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 cementing of the conviction 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 [or *wives* – see discussion below] 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.
- 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).

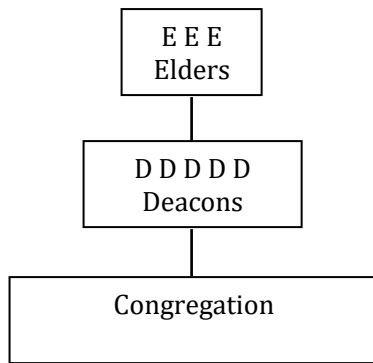
Whether or not this passage is talking specifically about deacons, surely we can take it as being 'paradigmatic' for the appointment of deacons (Wilson, 2017). Robert Thune sees in this passage, not the appointment of deacons, but an 'authorised division of labour in the church that lays the groundwork for the offices of elder and deacon' (2007, p. 3).

We gain further insight into the role of deacon by comparing the qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 with the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. Whereas elders must be 'able to teach' (1 Tim 3:2) and 'refute those who oppose [sound doctrine]' (Titus 1:9), we're told that deacons must simply 'keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience' (1 Tim 3:9). In other words, elders are 'charged primarily with the theological, doctrinal and moral leadership of the church, focusing especially on the faithful teaching of Scripture' whereas deacons are concerned with 'practical leadership of the church under the oversight of the elders' (Thune, 2007, p. 4).

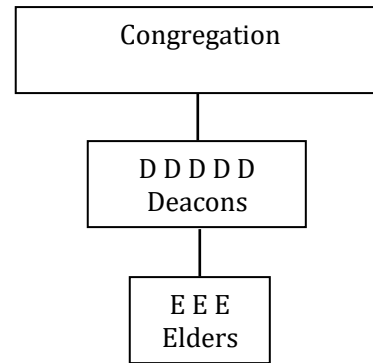
'Under the oversight of the elders'

That phrase 'under the oversight of the elders' is an interesting one, and we still need to tease out the precise nature of how elders relate to deacons. In order to do this, we need to think about our model of church government: how authority functions in the church.

Here are two different (and simplified) models of church government (there are many more, but considering these models can help illuminate the convictions we hold in Grace Church).



ELDER-LED (AKA: Presbyterianism)



CONGREGATION-LED (AKA: Congregationalism)

Without going into a lot of detail, here are some observations about our model of church government in Grace Church:

- What we're going for is a blend between these two models: we might call this *elder-led congregationalism*.
- In practice, this means recognising that the elders have special responsibility for spiritual oversight, but the decisions of the elders are not imposed on the congregation. Instead, we look for and actively encourage input from the congregation so we can discern together what Christ (the true Head of the Church) wills for us. To use the language that's been used in Advance in the past, we're looking for the elders and the congregation to 'flow together'.
- There's a wider context to understanding how elder-led congregationalism works in practice. We don't believe in the independence of the local church, but in interdependence, and this means that the elders make themselves accountable to other leaders outside the church (leaders who are part of Advance and from elsewhere).
- Elder-led congregationalism cannot be represented in a linear diagram like the one above. In fact, we reject the assumption undergirding both the Presbyterian and Congregational models which understands church government in a rigid, hierarchical sense. It's true that the office of elder carries authority, but the best model for understanding how that authority is exercised is the family household (cf. 1 Cor 4:25; Gal 6:10; Eph 2:19; 1 Tim 3:15). In other words, the way authority is exercised in the church should be understood in a relational framework rather than an institutional one. Relational dynamics cannot be adequately represented in a schematic!
- This in turn means that we reject the notion that deacons constitute a tier of church governance that exists between the elders and the congregation (either below the elders as in Presbyterianism, or below the congregation and above the elders as in Congregationalism). I'll expand more on this point below.

If, as we've suggested, we take Acts 6 as paradigmatic for the appointment of deacons, it's striking that when the Twelve gather the congregation to discuss the need to appoint practical ministry specialists that can 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, there is a sense in which deacons function 'under the oversight of the elders' but this does not mean that the elders direct them as their underlings. Elders do not micro-manage deacons! Deacons have responsibility to own vision, build team and grow their practical ministry area. In this sense, they serve alongside the elders.

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 are also responsible for implementing church discipline. In practical terms, it would be unthinkable for a deacon to stand up to an elder if they were found guilty of serious sin. The office of deacon does not carry authority in this way.

Ultimately, elders are the highest human authority in the church (we say 'human authority' of course, because, ultimately, Christ is the Head of the Church and we're all subservient to him). 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* who lay hands on the Seven rather than the whole church. 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.

In short, Acts 6 is a picture, or perhaps more accurately, a rough sketch, of elder-led congregationalism at work. The elders and the congregation flow together. Elders carry authority, but must not impose that authority in heavy handed way (1 Pet 5:2-3). This is why our response to the Presbyterian and Congregational models of church government is not to reject them, but to embrace them *both*. How exactly we do that in the instance of appointing deacons is something that we'll come back to later.

A team of deacons?

Returning to the two models of church government above, there's a further assumption implicit in how I've presented both these models which we reject, namely, that deacons should function as a recognised team in the church. John Peel puts it this way:

While having the heart and ear of the elders and bringing their wisdom and practical skills to bear, they do so as [people] of faith and wisdom in the area of their expertise, not as a specifically constituted corporate group within the leadership structure. (What in the past might been called a 'diaconate'.) (2010, pp. 5-6)

The reason for this is pragmatic. It helps clarify the issue of where spiritual authority lies in the church, ensuring that the deacons don't come to be viewed as a second tier of leadership under the elders or (worse) a rival group that challenges or dilutes the spiritual authority of the elders.

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. Each time we teach on eldership, we emphasise that our thinking about leadership in the local church is derived directly from the Bible, even down to the language that we use (hence we talk about 'elders' when most other networks choose not to use the term).

Now, we could simply appoint 'team leaders' or 'ministry leaders' in the church, people who are essentially serving as deacons in all but name. But, then we have a problem, as observed by Andrew Wilson:

[Leadership teams] think they have deacons, because they have a vaguely identifiable level of leadership that isn't eldership (including administrators, youth and kids workers, life group overseers and so on) - but none of the rest of their church ... have any idea (a) who exactly is in this vaguely identifiable group, and (b) that this is supposed to be a group of deacons, to whom biblical qualifications apply (2012).

In conclusion, it's clearly a problem if we aspire to be 'biblical' in how we practise church governance but don't have deacons in any form that Paul would recognise. Hence, Andrew Wilson concludes his paper on *Rethinking Church Government*, 'If leaders are serious about conforming their church government to the word of God, then this needs to change' (2007, p. 18).

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*

We've done some work previously on forming a pastoral care team and we need a pastorally gifted woman of excellent character with responsibility for leading the team.

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. If, as we’ve suggested, we take Acts 6 as paradigmatic for the appointment of deacons in the church, then this is a clear example of an area in which we need deacons.

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. Robert Thune notes that women were recognised in deacons roles ‘very early in church history’ (2007, p. 5). The 1 Timothy 3 passage we were looking at earlier may even imply that female deacons were recognised as early as the first century.

This isn’t an issue that’s going to be of interest to all, and readers who aren’t interested in the technical details of how we interpret biblical texts concerning male and female roles in church life can skip the next few paragraphs.

There’s been some debate over how best to interpret 1 Timothy 3:11 where the Greek word translated ‘women’ can also mean ‘wives’. In the older edition of the NIV, for example, the term is translated ‘wives’, whereas the newer edition of the NIV translates the term ‘women’. Why does this matter? Because it speaks to the issue of whether the apostle Paul expected women to be deacons. If we go with the older version of the NIV and translate the term ‘wives’, this implies that Paul is addressing the wives of deacons who are therefore *male*. However, if we go with the translation ‘women’, this opens the door to the possibility that Paul is actually addressing deacons who are *female*.

We think that opting for the word ‘women’ is the more natural reading of the passage. If Paul were talking about ‘wives’ in verse 11, it’s difficult to see why, in this passage, he would give directions to deacons’ wives but not elders’ wives. Reading the passage this way also makes more sense of its flow. Paul begins in verses 8-10 by addressing deacons in general (male and female), moves on to address issues that are especially relevant to female deacons (v. 11), and then concludes with issues that are especially relevant to male deacons (vv. 12-13). This makes more sense than having Paul begin by addressing deacons (vv. 8-10), before breaking off to talk about people who aren’t deacons (‘wives’) (v. 11) and then returning to address deacons again (vv. 12-13).

Sometimes, Phoebe in Romans 16:1 has been cited as a biblical example of a female deacon. However, this isn’t conclusive, as Paul may be using the word *diakonos* in the broad sense of ‘servant’ rather than in the narrow sense of referring to the office of deacon. What our consideration of 1 Timothy 3 shows is that there isn’t a clear biblical requirement for deacons to be male, and the passage may even indicate that women were appointed deacons in Paul’s churches. As an aside, this is a position accepted by Christians from across the spectrum of belief concerning male and female roles in church life. (Even Wayne Grudem, who believes that some roles in church life should be restricted to men, is supportive of women being appointed to the office of deacon (1994, p. 944).)

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?

As we've seen, Acts 6 challenges us to think about how the congregation can be meaningfully involved in the selection of 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). We might wish that the New Testament gave us more direction on how to do this!

As an eldership team, we've 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 and empowering the congregation.

Resources cited

Wayne GRUDEM, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1994)

John PEEL, *What on Earth is a Deacon?* (unpublished paper, 2010)

Robert THUNE, *Deacons: A Theological Study* (2007)

<file:///F:/Data%20Backup/Andrew's%20computer/Book%20notes,%20papers,%20etc/Thune,%20Robert%20-Deacons%20A%20theological%20Study.pdf>

Andrew WILSON, *Rethinking Church Government* (unpublished paper, 2007)

Andrew WILSON, *Deacon Anomalies* (3 August, 2012)

<https://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/deacon-anomalies>

Andrew WILSON, *Want to Serve the Poor? Appoint Deacons* (6 September, 2017)

https://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/want_to_serve_the_poor_appoint_deacons