



Organizing for Effective Deacon Ministry

Compiled by Roy Lee Saint

Deacon ministry is one of the most complex areas of ministry in the church. The average church member has all kinds of understandings and misunderstandings of their concept of deacon ministry. How your deacon ministry is organized will determine how readily the church will accept your ministry. Therefore, deacons serve their churches better when deacon ministry is organized. This fact does not mean that the organizational structure for each deacon council will be the same. Some churches will use a simple structure for organizing deacon work, while other churches will choose a more complex plan. Regardless of which method is used, any method for organizing deacon work has its purpose to help deacons accomplish their ministry.

From time to time, a church should evaluate the method in which its deacon work is organized. The deacon council chairperson, along with the pastor, can guide the church and the deacon council to develop the organization needed.

Guidelines for Effective Organization

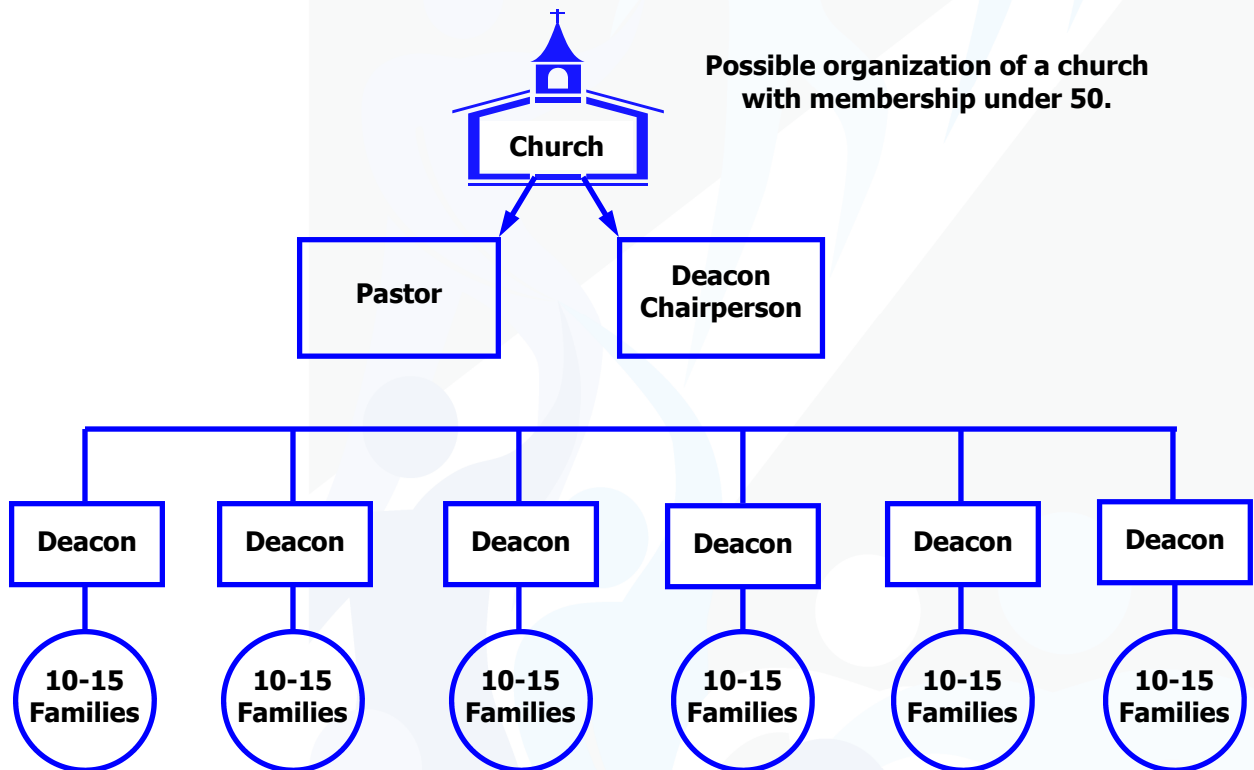
The following suggestions are basic and can be applied to any size church and any size deacon council.

- 1. Keep the organization simple and flexible.** The temptation is to over organize. Any organizational plan chosen should serve the needs of the deacons and the church. Having many different deacon officers and deacon committees is not always a sign of good organization. The opposite can be true. Having more organization than needed can be as bad as not having enough. The purpose and tasks of deacon ministry should dictate the kind of organization chosen. Deacon councils who decide to use the three deacon ministry plans (care plan, leadership plan, and proclamation plan) will want to adopt an organizational structure that helps the deacon council carry out these three ministry plans. Sometimes, temporary deacon committees are chosen or temporary assignments are made within the deacon council. After these temporary committees do their work, or after the temporary assignments are completed, those committees and assignments no longer are part of the organizational structure. An effective organizational plan is always a flexible plan. Ministry needs within the church might change. Needs within the deacon council might change. When these kinds of changes occur, the organizational structure used by the deacons might need to change as well.
- 2. State deacon duties in writing.** This step offers benefits to both the deacons and to the church.
 - The importance of deacon ministry is highlighted.
 - Expectations of the church are made known.
 - Good relationships among the deacons and other church programs are ensured.
- 3. Establish working relationships.** Effective deacon ministry often depends on how well individual deacons relate to one another and to other organizations in the church. These relationships are important if team spirit in the church is to develop. A winning team develops its winning ways because each player understands the position and role he is to play on the team. Likewise, deacon councils develop winning ways so long as they understand their role and the role of other ministries in the church.
- 4. Report regularly.** Periods of reporting to the deacon council build accountability into the deacon council. Regular reporting also encourages teamwork. During each deacon meeting, the agenda should show a time for reporting. Examples would be reports of visits made, ministry acts performed, prayer requests, deacon committee actions, and other reports. Report times offer opportunities to celebrate God's blessings and to encourage other deacons.

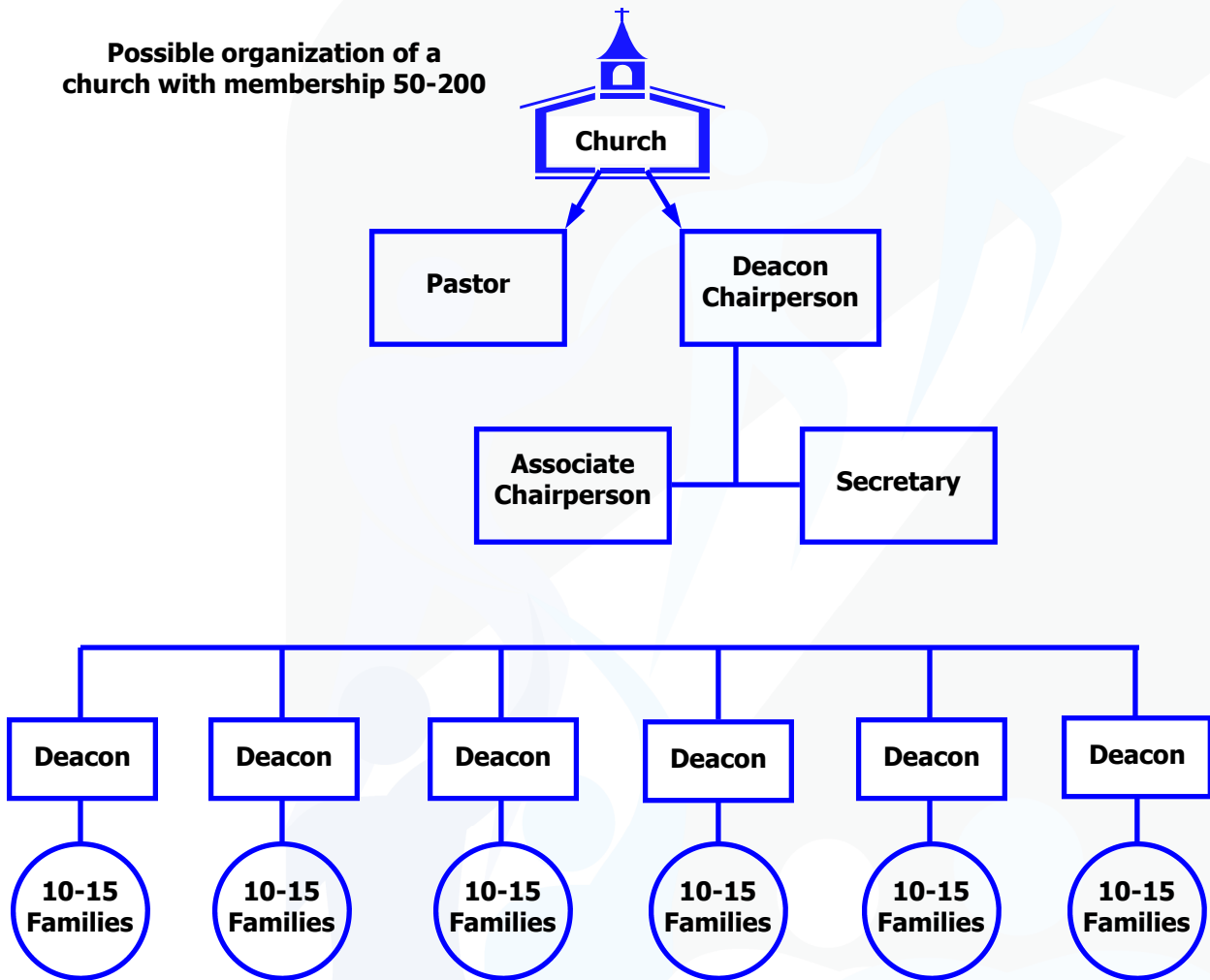
The deacon secretary should record the reports in the minutes of the deacon meetings and should provide each deacon with a typed copy of the minutes.

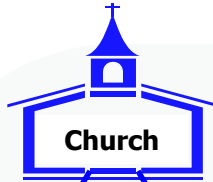
Suggested Organizational Patterns

The following charts show different ways deacon ministry can be organized. These charts reflect differences in the size of the church as well as the size of the deacon council.

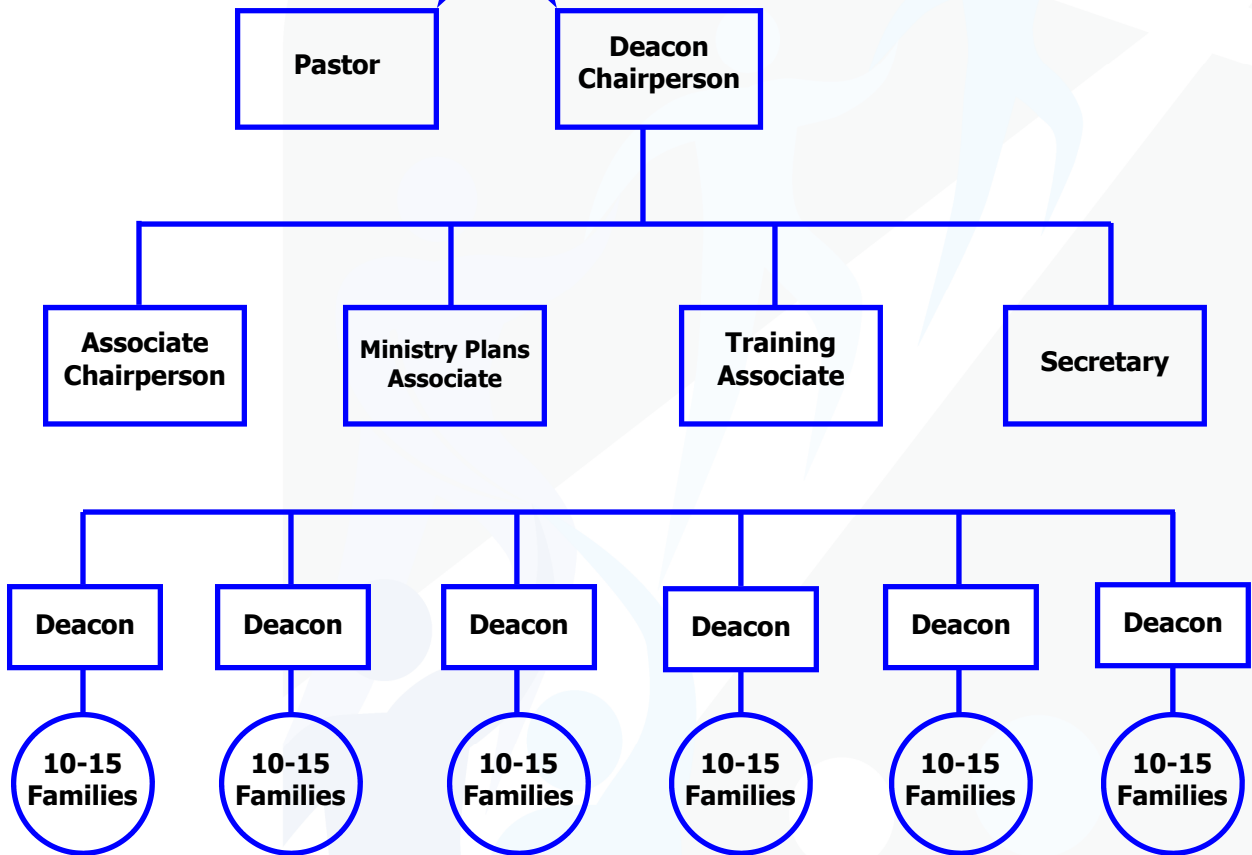


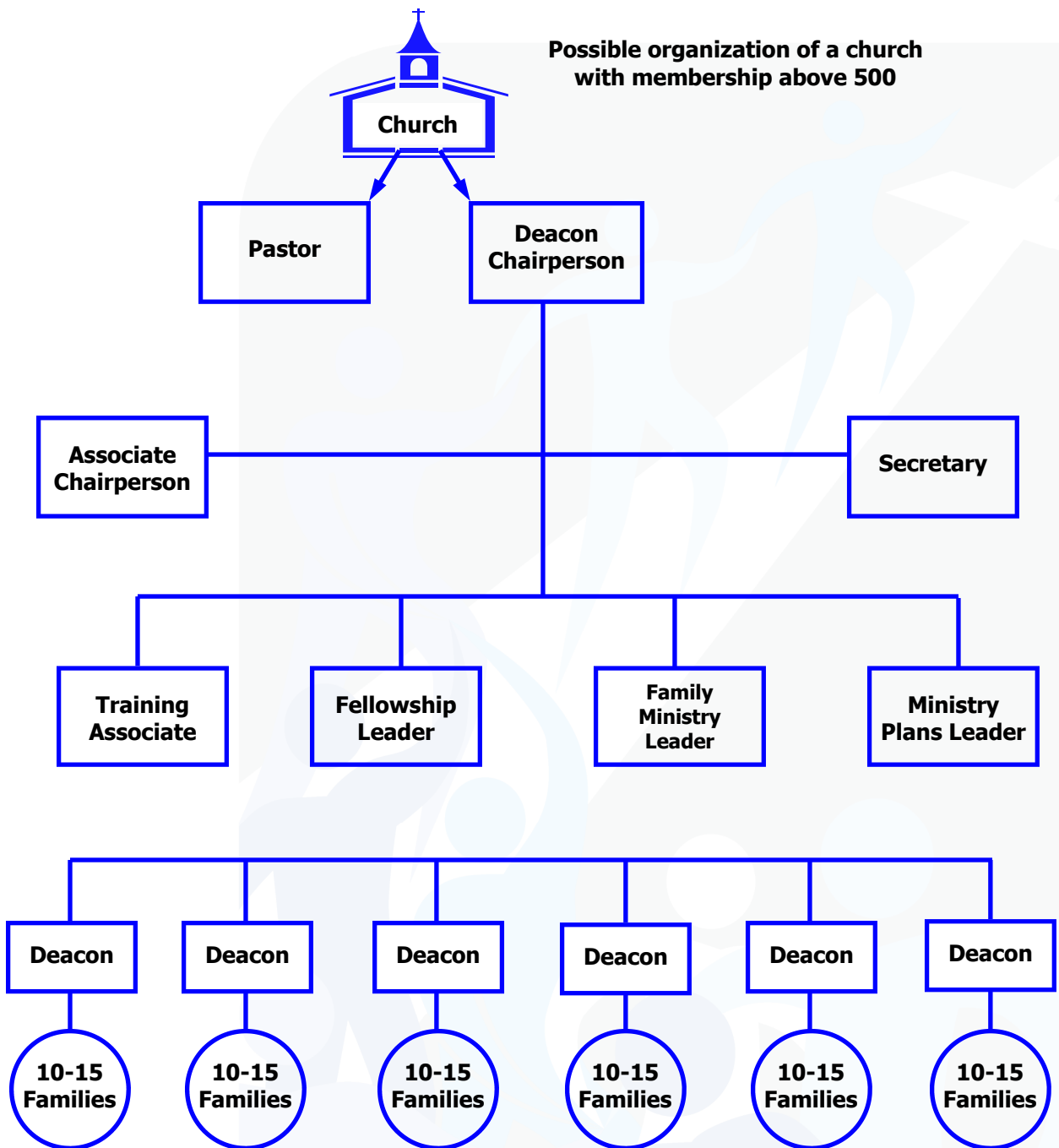
Possible organization of a church with membership 50-200





**Possible organization of a church
with membership 200-500**





Suggested Duties of Deacon Officers

You will notice in the preceding patterns that each pattern begins with the chairperson of deacons. This person's work is the key to an effective deacon ministry.

The Deacon Chairperson

This individual is more than a presiding officer. The chairperson has the privilege of leading the deacons to fulfill their mission as deacons. Charles Treadway, in a book that is out of print, mentioned seven important relationships that need to be cultivated by all deacon chairpersons.¹

1. **Relationship with the Lord.** This relationship begins with the chairperson's own faith in Christ and includes a commitment to follow the Lord daily. This relationship requires effort, but it is this relationship that determines how well the other relationships are developed.
2. **Relationship with self.** The deacon chairperson does more than just fill a job. Often this individual grows as a person during his time of service. The work of this deacon officer is important enough to demand priority attention.
3. **Relationship with family members.** Love, understanding, trust, and care are the qualities needed at home if the chairperson is to serve well. Much time will be required from the chairperson. He must be careful not to neglect family members while performing his duties as chairperson.
4. **Relationship with the pastor.** The opportunity to minister alongside the pastor might be the greatest reward of serving as chairperson. The following are some ways the chairperson can encourage the pastor:
 - Join hands with him as a fellow partner on the ministry team.
 - Support the pastor in his daily life and work.
 - Pray with him and for him.
 - Defend him when he is criticized unfairly.
 - Give loyal, redemptive advice when he is mistaken.
 - Guide the church to meet the pastor's needs.
 - Share with him information about the needs of church members and other deacons.
 - Take initiative to include him when you plan deacon meeting agendas.
5. **Relationship with other deacons.** The chairperson gives leadership to the entire deacon council in these ways:
 - Encouraging fellow deacons in their Christian walks.
 - Setting a good example for other deacons.
 - Helping deacons understand their work.
 - Making sure training opportunities are provided.
 - Making sure fellowship times are provided.
 - Praying for fellow deacons.
 - Being a friend to each deacon.
6. **Relationship with the Church Leadership Team or Church Council.** By attending Church Leadership Team or Church Council meetings, the chairperson represents the interests of the deacon council. In this capacity the chairperson interprets, coordinates, and gives information about the work of the deacons.

7. **Relationship with the church.** A church went for ten months without a pastor. When a new pastor finally was called, the chairperson said to the new pastor, "I'm glad you're here. Running this church has been a tough job." The chairperson's role never is to "run" the church. Instead, he shows concern for the church and supports the church with his active participation.

The chairperson really is the deacon body's representative to the entire church. He involves the deacons in the church's life by helping the church understand the work of deacon ministry, by helping the church to see the need to improve its deacon selection procedures, and by involving other deacons in the church's ministry.

The Deacon Chairperson as a Leader

When giving leadership to the deacon council, the chairperson should guard against an *autocratic* leadership style. The chairperson's job is not to dictate the decisions, policies, or procedures of the deacon council. Nor should the chairperson use a *manipulative* style of leadership in which he manipulates other deacons to achieve the chairperson's present plans.

The best leadership style will be a *delegating-equipping* style in which the chairperson involves each deacon in planning, doing, and evaluating deacon projects. When this leadership style is used, the other deacons are led to identify and use their ministry skills and are more motivated.

The chairperson will need to enhance these skills:

- Planning skills
- Communication skills
- Motivation skills
- Delegation skills
- Evaluations skills

Duties of the Deacon Chairperson

1. Lead the deacons to become an effective ministry team.
2. Lead the deacons in planning, conducting, and evaluating their work.
3. Plan, conduct, and evaluate deacon meetings.
4. Lead in providing deacons with adequate training and resources for doing their work.
5. Guide the deacons in developing deacon ministry plans.
6. Serve as a member of the Church Council. Interpret deacon work to the Council and provide deacons with information from the Council.
7. Report regularly to the church on the work of the deacons.
8. Give guidance to the pastoral ministries program in the church in the absence of a pastor.

Duties of the Associate Chairperson

1. Conduct deacon meetings in the absence of the chairperson.
2. Assist the chairperson in fulfilling responsibilities as assigned.
3. Participate in all deacon work.
4. Coordinate the preparation of Lord's Supper elements. In some churches, a separate Lord's Supper committee will do this. In those churches, the associate chairperson could work with the Lord's Supper committee.

5. Coordinate the preparation for the observance of the Lord's Supper, if this responsibility has not been assigned to a committee.
6. Serve as the coordinator of deacon training, unless this work has been assigned to another deacon officer.

Duties of the Secretary

1. Keep accurate minutes of deacon meetings and records of deacon ministry.
2. Maintain deacon membership records, records of deacon rotation, and deacon ministry reports.
3. Order and maintain a supply of deacon ministry materials for deacons to use in their work.
4. Prepare official correspondence for the deacon council.
5. Prepare and revise Deacon Family Ministry Plan resource books, if the church does not have a deacon officer who performs this responsibility.
6. Participate in all deacon work.

Duties of the Training Associate

1. Work with other deacon officers and the disciple making training director to provide training conferences in deacon ministry for the deacons and for all church members.
2. Encourage deacons and their spouses to attend associational, state, and national deacon ministry conferences.
3. Keep accurate records of deacon ministry training.
4. Participate in all deacon ministry activities.

Duties of the Fellowship Leader

1. Lead in planning and providing fellowship activities that increase team spirit among deacons and their spouses.
2. Lead deacons to discover ways they can contribute to improving the church's fellowship.
3. Order needed resources for fellowship improvement activities.
4. Participate in all deacon ministry activities.

Duties of the Family Ministry or Team Leader

1. Lead in organizing deacon family ministry. Coordinate the Deacon Family Ministry Plan or deacon teams.
2. Give monthly or quarterly reports to the church of deacon ministries to church families and team areas.
3. In the absence of a training associate, take the lead in providing training opportunities for deacons, their spouses, and other persons involved in the Deacon Family Ministry Plan or team ministry assignments.
4. Participate in all deacon work.

Duties of the Ministry Plans Leader



1. Lead in developing plans for the three pastoral ministries program tasks of care, lead, and proclaim. Each deacon ministry plan should include at least one project in each of these three areas.
2. Interpret and report regularly to the church concerning the various deacon ministry plans.
3. Work with the training associate in providing training to enable deacons to carry out each ministry plan project.
4. Participate in all deacon work.

Duties of Leaders in Each Plan Area

If the deacon council is large enough, the deacon organization could include a separate leadership care plan leader, plan leader, and proclamation plan leader. These persons would be responsible for doing the work of the ministry plan leader, but in more specific ways.

Planning Effective Deacon Ministry

When the appropriate organizational structure has been chosen and deacon officers have been elected, the deacon council is ready to begin its work of planning. The scope of the planning task covers the general needs of deacons and the specific projects chosen in each of the three areas of care, lead, and proclaim.

Who Should Do the Planning?

The deacon chairperson assumes the lead, but he does not do the planning alone. Initial planning for deacon work can be done with the various deacon officers. A better approach is to involve the entire deacon council in planning sessions. Be sure to invite the pastor to attend any planning session.

The following are some guidelines for doing effective planning:

1. **Plan from ends to means.** That is, determine deacon ministry priorities and goals first. Then decide which steps are necessary to help the deacon council achieve those priorities and goals.
2. **Involve all deacons in planning.** Involvement by all deacons increases commitment to the plans made. Don't you enjoy looking at pictures of your own children or grandchildren more than you enjoy looking at pictures of someone else's kids? In like manner, few of us get excited about achieving someone else's goals or plans.
3. **Be objective in the planning process.** Be open to new ideas and to the suggestions of other deacons. Guard against traditional ideas and preconceived notions about deacon work. The attitude that says, "do not disturb me with the facts, my mind is made up" destroys effective planning.
4. **Keep the planning simple.** Try not to schedule unnecessary meetings or develop lengthy processes that complicate the planning.
5. **Allow for flexibility.** Adjust plans made as time passes. As new information and needs arise, plans can be adjusted to meet the changing times.
6. **Coordinate all deacon plans with the Church Leadership Team or Church Council.** This is the reason the chairperson of deacons serves on the Church Leadership Team or Church Council. The calendar of deacon ministry plans will need to be coordinated with the calendar plans of the church's various program directors.

7. **Evaluate plans made at least twice a year.** Times of evaluation allow deacons to ask: What is working well? What is not working well? What adjustments should we make?

What Areas of Deacon Work Should be Planned?

Planning will take place for a wide variety of deacon activities. Any ministry need highlighted as a priority need becomes the subject of careful planning. And from year to year, the following areas will always require planning.

1. **Deacon meetings.** Deacon ministry is not accomplished totally during deacon meetings. These meetings, however, are important for fellowship, encouragement, reporting, training, and coordinating ministry plans and activities.

Deacon meetings need not become personnel committee meetings or finance committee meetings. Hopefully, the church already has elected committees to take care of personnel and financial matters. Any time the deacons meet, they should assemble as a spiritual, ministry-oriented team. The tone and the agenda of the meeting reflect this spirit. The deacon chairperson assumes responsibility for planning deacon meeting agendas. The agenda of any deacon meeting will reflect the priorities and understandings of the deacons about their ministry role.

(A well-planned meeting and a written agenda given in advance of the meeting helps deacons like these mentioned to see the value of deacon meetings.)

Some suggestions for developing an agenda are:

- Involve the pastor and other deacon officers in the preparation of the agenda.
- Mail or e-mail a copy of the agenda, along with a copy of the previous meeting's minutes, to each deacon in advance of the meeting.
- Give careful thought to the place and time of the meeting.

Suggested Deacon Meeting Agenda *

1. Devotion (by a deacon) and prayer time.
2. Reading and approval of minutes from previous meeting.
3. Sharing of ministry reports:
 - Celebrating accomplishments
 - Discussing special needs and concerns
 - Praying for these needs and concerns
4. Training period.
5. Pastor's period in which he shares matters of interest to the deacons.
6. Information period in which reports are given from the church staff, Church Leadership Team or Church Council, and other leaders about various areas of church life.
7. Discussion period (items listed on the agenda in priority order).
8. Prayer.

*** This agenda usually requires two hours of time.**

2. **Deacon ministry plans.** Detailed plans in the three previously mentioned plan areas (care plan, leadership plan, and proclamation plan) represent priority needs in deacon planning. Develop both long-term and short-term projects for each of the three areas. At times in the church's life, more concentration will be called for in one of the three areas than in the other two. During the course of time, however, strive for balance in all three areas.
3. **Deacon training.** If the deacon organization calls for a training associate, this person will assume responsibility for planning and training sessions. Plan training opportunities for an entire year. Some of the training will be done through individual study, while other training will be accomplished as a group. Some training will be provided during deacon meetings, while some training might be offered during the disciple making small group training. You may want to plan a church deacon retreat that involves your pastor, staff, fellow deacons, and spouses. Invite someone from the State Convention, Association or another church that is skilled in deacon ministry to conduct this retreat. Training will also occur as deacons attend associational, state, and national deacon ministry conferences.

The importance of effective deacon training cannot be overstated. The deacon who does not know what to do and how to do it cannot be expected to function properly. A well-trained and equipped deacon models self-confidence and eagerness to serve. If the church has no training associate, the chairperson assumes responsibility for training deacons. Make sure training events selected are placed on the church's calendar in coordination with the Church Leadership Team or Church Council.

4. **Deacon election and ordination.** Planning for deacon election and ordination is always done with the pastor and always follows the church's established procedures. While deacons should never become a self-perpetuating group, they can take the initiative to ensure the deacon election and ordination time to become a positive, spiritual experience for the church.

A Suggested Planning Guide

The following nine steps become the guide for all deacon planning:

- Step 1: Relate to church objectives.
- Step 2: Develop deacon ministry concerns.
- Step 3: Discover deacon ministry needs.
- Step 4: Establish priority needs.
- Step 5: Set ministry goals.
- Step 6: Plan and schedule actions.
- Step 7: Provide the organization to accomplish actions.
- Step 8: Order needed resources.
- Step 9: Evaluate periodically.

Understanding Deacon Rotation

The subject of deacon rotation affects the deacon organization and must be planned carefully.

There are merits for deacon rotation. Deacons are people with individual responsibilities; being elected for a specific period of time is important to the church as well as to the individuals. Almost all churches use a three-year pattern of rotation. After this period of service ends, each person rotates off, and is not eligible for one full year. Some reasons for rotation:

1. Provides a broader base of leadership, allowing more (qualified) persons to serve their church as deacons. This keeps new and refreshing concepts of service.

2. Allows qualified young adults the opportunity to serve. If there is no rotation your deacon body will grow older.
3. Discourages the concept of a governing board of deacons versus a serving deacon council.
4. Provides a Christian way to replace those who unfortunately, have not served well.
5. There is the situation where the rotating plan may remove a man from the deacon council whose leadership seems irreplaceable. You may ask what will we do without this individual's leadership. We are all expendable. Death, illness or being transferred may remove any of us. God can and will provide any church proper leadership.
6. Provides protection from burn out. If a deacon is serving the way he is supposed to, a year off will provide time for refreshment and refocus.

Guidelines for Deacon Rotation

The decision whether to have a rotation system is a decision to be made by the church, not the deacons. Remember, deacons are accountable to the church. While deacons will be involved in the process of deciding whether there should be a rotation system, they refrain from making decisions for the church.

1. **Make this decision carefully and patiently.** Strong emotions against a rotation system might be voiced by some deacons and some members of the church. Help all parties involved understand what rotation is and why it is needed. Allow for full discussion about this matter.
2. **Discuss the advantages and disadvantages for the church.** One obvious disadvantage is the loss of some faithful deacons for a period of one year. The size of the church and the number of qualified people also affect the decision whether to adopt a deacon rotation plan.
3. **Determine the number of deacons needed by the church.** If a church is beginning from mission status and has no deacons, a guideline of one deacon for every fifty members seems to serve many churches well. As the church grows, the number of deacons could be set on the basis of one deacon for every ten to fifteen church families.

Deacon Rotation Schedule

The deacon rotation schedule calls for deacons to serve a three-year period and then serve one year in reserve status before being eligible to rejoin the active deacon ministry team. However, no schedule will be free from some difficulties or devoid of some disadvantages.

After the plan begins, the matter of those who rotate in a given year is a simple matter. How do you begin the process?

1. Using the church's regular procedure for electing deacons, conduct the vote.
2. After the group has been elected, let the group draw for years of service. This method is not the only one used but seems to offer the fewest possibilities for problems and confusion.
3. A church should never rotate off more than one third of their deacon council at one time.

Record of Deacon Rotation

Accurate records are essential for administering a deacon rotation system. The secretary of the deacons has the responsibility for establishing and maintaining the official list. In a church with a church secretary, this person can be enlisted to assist in this task.

The secretary of deacons should provide the deacon nominating committee and the chairperson of deacons a list of those deacons whose time for rotation to reserve status has come. Consider planning a special recognition service for these individuals for the ministry they have rendered to the church.

Compiled from *The Ministry of Baptist Deacons* and *Handbook For Planning Deacon Ministry* by Robert Sheffield

¹ Charles Treadway, Former Deacon Consultant, LifeWay



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