

Deacons Are Doing

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The Book of Order calls ordained deacons to a ministry of “compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress” (G-2.0201). A tall order!

Unfortunately, the ministry of deacons in our congregations is often limited to those mundane tasks in the internal life of the church that no one else wants to do, the Cinderella tasks—“do the mending and the sewing and the mopping. ...” To be sure, a part of the deacon witness is humble service, and in the spirit of Philippians 2:1–13 there are no tasks so menial that they cannot become an act of ministry and a moment of witness for the common good of God’s people.

It is the job of the ruling elders (Session) to ensure that deacons are not so burdened or burned out by the maintenance tasks of ministry within the congregation (setting up tables for every church meal) that they have no energy or imagination left over for the mission tasks of ministry beyond the congregation (breaking bread with neighbors and strangers). A wise session will help deacons make room for person-to-person ministry with those who most need to see the “redeeming love of Jesus Christ” within but also beyond the congregation.

Often in Presbyterian churches, the office of deacon is perceived as a secondary or peripheral ministry; perhaps even understood as a kind of proving ground for possible “promotion” to ordination as a ruling elder. But if there is wider agreement than ever before that the church does not just have a mission, but is a mission, and that if our summons as followers of Jesus is not only to go to church but to be the church, then it follows that the ministry of the deacon—“compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ”—is the leading edge of our common life in and for the world.

Nominating committees seek out those saints with spiritual gifts that align with the sacred work of compassion, witness, and service to serve as deacons. Ruling elders (Session) and Teaching Elders (Pastors) use their influence to highlight and encourage the work of the deacon, regularly reminding the congregation that the church is always and everywhere called to participate “in God’s mission to care for the needs of the sick, poor, and lonely; to free people from sin, suffering, and oppression; and to establish Christ’s just, loving, and peaceable rule in the world” (Book of Order, F-1.0302d).

First Pres provides for deacons who lead God’s people outward and upward, always pointing to Jesus—the chief minister among us all.

by Ralph Hawkins, Office of the General Assembly (edited)

<https://www.pcusa.org/news/2016/2/16/regarding-ruling-elders-ruling-elders-and-deacons/>