

Deacon Commitment Statement

One of the complexities in Baptist life regarding deacon service is our multiple models for what the diaconate should be and do. A further complexity is the extraordinarily busy lives many of us lead. A third challenge in trying to imagine an ideal for deacon service today has to do with the varying talents, abilities and experiences of individual deacons.

At the recent Deacon Summit hosted by Center for Baptist Leadership and CBF Georgia, a frequently expressed theme was the desire of deacons to serve well, to do more, and to contribute more fully to their churches and to the Kingdom of God. While enhanced mentorship, experience and training can help deacons achieve this goal, perhaps there is also need to challenge those elected to this high office to be more intentional with regard to servant leadership.

Accordingly, deacons might be invited at the beginning of their terms or even at the beginning of each year of service to engage in a period of reflection and discernment and then to commit to a limited number of individual goals both for (a) specific ministries or areas of service and (b) spiritual development. The reflection/discernment portion of this process might include reading scripture passages and other information about the office of deacon (e.g., Carol Younger's recent paper). An assessment instrument might also be useful—for example, one that assesses spiritual gifts. Deacons might also be asked to consider a list of projects, needs, ministries or other areas of service in their congregations and to prayerfully make commitments as appropriate. One goal of such a process would be to help deacons match abilities and interests with the needs of the congregation; another goal would be to ask deacons to take stock of personal obligations and time constraints and to set responsible goals for their deacon service. A third and very important goal would be to encourage personal spiritual growth and development.

After a period of reflection—which might occur in the context of a deacon retreat or with the guidance of selected readings/materials—deacons would be asked to write a statement of their own personal goals for service in the coming year/term. That statement might be relatively brief for some individuals and longer and more reflective for others; however, the number of commitments should probably be limited to perhaps 2-4 specific goals. Such a statement should include not only practical commitments to specific ministries and projects but also goals for spiritual development appropriate to the office of deacon. For example, what deacon would not benefit from a deeper, richer, more disciplined prayer life? (The presentations by Craig Williamson and Mike Ruffin on prayer at the Deacon Summit may even suggest a way to connect (a) and (b) above.)

Recognition and utilization of commitment statements of individual deacons would depend on (1) the outcomes desired by ministers, deacons and congregations; and (2) the practices and local culture of churches. Incorporating the presentation of commitment statements into the worship service at which deacons are ordained and/or installed would emphasize the importance of the statements and add a meaningful element to the observance. Perhaps deacons might be asked to place their statements in a basket, offering plate or urn on the Communion table during such a service.

During the year that follows, deacons would need to be called to accountability regarding their statements. Deacons might be asked periodically to engage in self-assessment. At a minimum, time might be set aside in conjunction with a diaconate meeting for small groups of deacons to discuss their commitments, progress, challenges and questions. Institutionalizing such a commitment process will obviously require (a) strong leadership from the deacon chair and (b) on-going mentorship on the part of the pastor and other ministers in a congregation. Reflection at the end of the year or term about the usefulness of the process could be used to adapt or strengthen this component of deacon service.

While this proposal focuses on individual deacon commitment, a strong, effective diaconate depends greatly on the ability of the deacon body to function well corporately. The individual commitment statement might also be designed to include attention to skills and practices necessary for team work. If, for example, a deacon makes a commitment to prayer as part of her personal spiritual development, she might incorporate regular prayer for her fellow deacons and for the thoughtful and fair deliberations of the group. Another deacon might make a commitment that involves a greater personal effort to be in touch with fellow deacons, to listen more intentionally, to read and learn about conflict resolution, etc.

The establishment of the CBF Deacon Network in Georgia and future development of on-line resources provide hopeful possibilities for facilitating greater commitment and more intentional service by deacon servant-leaders.

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