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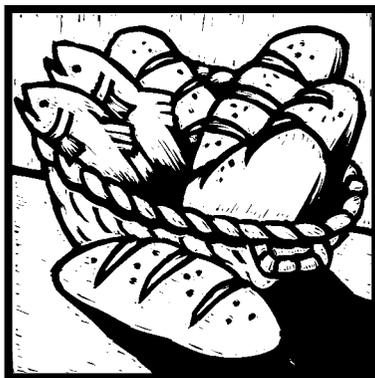
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the
Deacon's
handbook



By Lori Wiersma and Connie Kuiper VanDyke

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Preface

This book is a practical guide for those called to serve as deacons in the local congregation. It is based on experiences shared by deacons serving in churches across the United States and Canada and on our own experiences in a variety of roles in diaconal ministry. We've included many how-to suggestions and resources on various issues you may encounter.

While the office of deacon dates back to the early New Testament church, the role of deacons in the life of the church is still being defined. The *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* (2008 revision) states:

While the function of elders and pastors is fairly well established in the life of the church, the place of the diaconate in the church's structure and assemblies is still in need of special attention. This concern is wholesome and has stimulated serious efforts to give the diaconal office its proper place in the ministries of the local church and in the church's ministry to the community and the world.

Designed to enhance these efforts, this book includes five parts:

- ▶ Part 1 provides a brief biblical background about the office of deacon and describes how the role of deacon has evolved, specifically in the Christian Reformed Church in North America.
- ▶ Part 2 focuses on you, the person who has accepted God's call to serve as deacon. It examines the charge you accepted and looks at how you can use your gifts and those of your congregation as you grow together in ministry. You'll be challenged to remain spiritually healthy as you meet the demands of your office.
- ▶ Part 3 emphasizes your role as a catalyst in your local diaconate as you get to know the people you serve, meet the needs of your congregation, and provide leadership for congregational acts of stewardship and service.
- ▶ Part 4 looks at your role as a catalyst for community mission-focused ministry. In this role, you'll help your congregation look

beyond their own needs as they partner with other ministries locally and globally.

- ▶ Part 5 looks at the challenges and joys of diaconal ministry.

While this book is especially helpful for first-time deacons, it can also be used for group study in council meetings, deacons' conferences, or training sessions for new deacons. The Topical Index will help you revisit information as specific needs arise in your work, and the Appendixes include resources and other tools designed to help you in your work.

Although written mainly from the perspective of the Christian Reformed Church and its denominational structure, this book will also be useful to deacons in other Reformed denominations. We trust it will inspire those who serve in God's kingdom wherever needs arise.

This book was written as a companion to *The Elder's Handbook* by Louis M. Tamminga (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2009). We have referred extensively to material in this book that is applicable to deacons as well. We express our gratitude to Lou for the spiritual wisdom and discernment shown in his book and especially in his daily walk.

Our prayer is that this book will enable you to see how wide God's kingdom is and to understand your role as a catalyst in helping your congregation learn to love their neighbors as themselves.

To God be the glory!

Lori Wiersma and Connie Kuiper VanDyke

Starting at the Beginning

The office of deacon was established by the early New Testament church specifically to meet physical needs that the apostles, overwhelmed with the ministry of the Word, weren't able to meet. Over the centuries, and still in more recent times, the ministry of deacons in the church has changed. This section will help you understand how the office of deacon originated, how it developed over time, what is involved in the charge you have accepted, and where the office of deacon fits into the governmental structure of the Christian Reformed Church.

Part 1

1. Deacons in the New Testament Church

Ironically, the office of deacon was developed because of a specific charge of injustice in the early church. Acts 6:1-6 relates how some of the believers who were Greeks came to the disciples to report that the widows in their group were not receiving as much help as the widows among the Jewish believers. Responding to the charge that these Greek widows were “being overlooked in the daily distribution of food” (v. 1), the twelve apostles called the whole community of disciples together and announced that seven wise and Spirit-filled men should be selected from the community and appointed to the task of “waiting on tables” (in Greek, *diakoneo*).

The *diakoneo* task, essential for a group that “had everything in common” (2:44), would have included

- ▶ receiving the money as people sold their possessions.
- ▶ “banking” it until it was needed.
- ▶ distributing it wisely and fairly.

Both justice (treating everyone fairly) and mercy (offering help gladly without condescension) were important. This new role was given the title of *deacon*. From then on, the early church recognized two equally important offices: elder and deacon. The elders concentrated on prayer and teaching and preaching the Word. The deacons, charged with handling practical and administrative matters of the church, also readily shared the gospel with the people they met. Luke, the writer of Acts, acknowledges the effective witness of two of these original seven deacons.

Stephen was brought to the Sanhedrin and put on trial because of the great wonders and miraculous works he was doing among the people. His unwavering testimony to these “stiff-necked people” (7:51) led to his execution.

Philip, another of the seven, proclaimed the gospel in Samaria after Stephen's death and was led by the Spirit to teach and baptize an Ethiopian eunuch. "Philip . . . told him the good news about Jesus" (8:35).

Though the English word *deacon* occurs only four times in the New International Version of the Bible, the Greek word *diakonos*, meaning *deacon*, occurs over thirty times in the New Testament and is often translated as *servant*. Since this was a familiar word in classical Greek, people throughout the world would have immediately understood that being a deacon involved serving others by meeting physical needs.

Jesus had taught the apostles this concept when he said that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45); there he used *diakoneo*, a related verb that means to do menial work or to wait on others. He used the same word in Luke 22:27 when he told his disciples, "I am among you as one who serves." How exciting that in accepting the role of deacon, you are doing what Jesus said he came to do!