

SERVING AS DEACONS

Preface

The Bible clearly teaches that there should normally be deacons in the Christian Church. Hence it is encouraging that there are Churches today that are seriously trying to obey this commandment. The Presbyterian Church of Australia decided in 1994 to investigate the issue of deacons, and in 1997 the Committee on the Diaconate reported to the General Assembly of Australia. This report was accepted by the Assembly, and is reproduced here in the hope that it will prove more accessible and useful to those congregations which are seeking to set up deacons to minister in a practical way to the poor and needy of this fallen world. It is given with the hope and prayer that God will raise up an order of deacons to His glory and for the building up of His kingdom.

- Peter Barnes

REPORT ON THE DIACONATE FOR THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA, 1997

1. DEACONS TODAY: A SURVEY

It seems that the role of deacons has been much misunderstood in virtually all branches of the visible Church of Christ. In the Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholic Churches, deacons tend to be viewed as apprentice priests. The vast majority of priestly candidates are 'deaconed' a year before they are ordained into the priesthood. Hence there are few who see the diaconate as a lifetime option for service in the Church. This view of a transitional diaconate has undermined any attempts to establish a flourishing and permanent diaconate. Many Baptist Churches, on the other hand, have made the deacons the official board of the church, with the deacons operating as governors and rulers. In a number of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches deacons, if they are found at all, have worked as property managers. Whether Roman Catholic, Anglican, Baptist or Presbyterian, the Church seems to have neglected the clear teaching of the New Testament that the diaconate constitutes an office which serves people - deacons are first and foremost to minister to the temporal needs of God's suffering people.

Thankfully, in virtually all Christian traditions today there is a discernible movement which is in favour of reviving a more biblical view of the diaconate. At Dachau concentration camp during World War II a Roman

Catholic priest named Wilhelm Schamoni led a discussion group which looked for a renewed Church, including a renewed diaconate. In 1967 Pope Paul VI sought to restore a permanent diaconate in the Roman Catholic communion, and by 1989 there were 15,775 Roman Catholic deacons in the world, all of them men and the vast majority of them married and engaged in a secular profession.¹ There has also been a renewal of interest in the diaconate - especially a female diaconate - in sections of the Anglican or Episcopalian communion, although this faded somewhat towards the end of the 1980s. Furthermore, many Reformed Baptists and Presbyterians are increasingly seeking to implement a biblical diaconate.

The word 'deacon' is usually interpreted to mean 'servant', and the deacon is thus to exemplify the servant role of the Church in looking after needy people from within her ranks and, indeed, outside those ranks also. The rise of the welfare state in many parts of the world should not be used as an excuse for the Church to abdicate her biblical mandate. To cite Abraham Kuyper: 'The Diaconate is the Office of Christian love.'² And Christian love is not love just in words and tongue, but in deed and in truth (1 John 3:17-18).

2. DEACONS IN THE BIBLE

There are a great many passages which relate, however indirectly, to the work of the deacon. The three words *diakonos*, *diakonein*, and *diakonia* occur about 100 times in the New Testament. The word *diakonos* occurs some thirty times in the New Testament, where it can have a number of meanings. It is possible that it takes its meaning from *dia* (meaning 'through') and *konis* (meaning 'dust'), thus implying the notion of humility and lowliness. *Diakonos* can refer to the servant who performs the most menial tasks (e.g. Mark 9:35; John 2:5,9), the work of the apostolic ministry (e.g. Col.1:23), the pagan civil authority (Rom.13:4), or the official office of deacon (e.g. Phil.1:1).

The verb *diakonein* is used by Jesus to describe His own ministry (Luke 22:27) which then becomes the model for His followers (Mark 10:43-45). Even after His second coming in glory and majesty, Christ will continue to *serve* His people (Luke 12:37). The noun *diakonia* is found in Acts 1:17, 25; Romans 11:13; 15:31; 1 Corinthians 12:5; 2 Corinthians 5:18; 9:1, and elsewhere, but is not used specifically in these passages to refer to the office of deacon.

Behind the New Testament idea of *diakonia* is the Old Testament teaching that strangers, widows and orphans were not to be oppressed (Ex.22:21-27), but treated with open hearts and hands (Deut.15:7-10). Vineyards were not to be completely reaped or gleaned so that some of the crop could be left for the poor and the stranger (Lev.19:9-10; Deut.24:17-22). The Lord is described as the God who 'administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger' (Deut.10:18). He is 'a father of the fatherless, a

¹ O. Plater, *Many Servants: An Introduction to Deacons*, Cowley Publications, Boston, 1991, p.86; see also J. van Klinken, *Diakonia*, Eerdmans/Kok Kampen, Michigan/Kampen, 1989, pp.121-2.

² A. Kuyper, *Treatise for Reform of the Churches*, Amsterdam, 1883, p.65, cited by N. W. Wallis in a report to the Mitchelton Presbyterian Session in Queensland.

defender of widows' (Ps.68:5), a concern which is reaffirmed in Psalm 146. The believing community was to look after its weaker members and, indeed, all who came within its orbit.

As a result of God's character and His law, the prophets condemned those who oppressed orphans and widows (Isa.1:17,23; 10:1-2; Jer.5:28; Ezek.22:7; Mal.3:5). Likewise, in the New Testament, the Pharisees were condemned for devouring widows' houses (Matt.23:14). The believer is therefore to be one who is 'a helper to those who have no protector' (Job 29:12). He/she is 'to visit orphans and widows in their trouble' (James 1:27). 'He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and He will pay back what he has given.' (Prov.19:17; see Ps.41:1)

To the Greek mind, the idea of *diakonia* was menial and degrading, and Plato considered that it was 'fit only for a slave' and 'not becoming for a free man'.³ But the Christian Scriptures teach that all the saints are to be equipped for the work of *diakonia* (Eph.4:12). Hence the Hebrew Christians were commended for showing their love to God by ministering (*deaconing*) to the saints (Heb.6:10). The collection for the brethren in Judea was taken up in order to send *diakonia* ('relief' or 'help') to them (Acts 11:29).

Recently, this whole approach has been contested by the laicised Roman Catholic priest, John N. Collins. According to Collins, the three *deacon* words refer not to the idea of service to the needy but to conveying messages from heaven or messages between churches. Rather than 'assistance', 'service', or 'waiting at table', the operative ideas are supposed to be 'mission from God', 'liturgical service', and 'liaising between communities'. Hence, for example, the reference to Christ as 'a minister of the circumcision' (Rom.15:8) means not 'a servant of the Jewish people' (as in the NEB) but 'a minister of God who carried out his charge within the sphere of Judaism'.⁴ In addition, he appeals to the evidence of Justin Martyr in the second century to argue that the diaconate began in the arena of the sacral. Deacons distributed the eucharist to the assembly, and later the deacons would take the elements to absent members.⁵ So far as the work of an emissary is concerned, Collins writes of Phoebe, a *diakonos* of the church at Cenchreae (Rom.16:1-2), 'She is the community's emissary - no doubt also the bearer of Paul's letter - but the precise nature of her business is unknown'.⁶ When it comes to the deacon of 1 Timothy 3:8-13, Collins can only say that 'his function cannot be satisfactorily determined'.⁷ Yet even Collins acknowledges that 'In the gospels the words under discussion mainly designate menial attendance of one kind or another'.⁸ Ultimately, Collins' work may broaden our understanding of the

³ R. McGlashan, 'Diakonia and the Diaconate' in Churchman, vol 84, no 1, 1970, p.7.

⁴ J. N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, Oxford University Press, 1190, p.227; see pp.335-7 for a summary of his views. Collins' interpretation is aimed directly at the approach adopted, for example by the *Festschrift* for Karl Barth, edited by James McCord and T. H. L. Parker (see under *Further Reading* at the end of this booklet).

⁵ J. N. Collins, *Diakonia*, p.244.

⁶ J. N. Collins, *Diakonia*, p.225.

⁷ J. N. Collins, *Diakonia*, p.237.

⁸ J. N. Collins, *Diakonia*, p.245.

deacon words, but the general New Testament picture of loving service remains intact.

Now we need to look at three main New Testament passages which figure most prominently in any discussion on the diaconate:

(a) Acts 6:1-7. The early Church looked after her widows, but a dispute soon arose as the Hellenists (i.e. Greek-speaking Jewish Christians) contended that the Hebrew Christians were neglecting the Hellenistic widows. The twelve apostles considered that it would not be right to neglect their tasks of prayer and the ministry of the word in order to perform the good work of looking after the physical welfare of the Church's widows. 'Overbusyness' or 'busyness' in too many fields - all legitimate no doubt - can be as destructive as laziness in the kingdom of God.

The simple apostolic solution to this problem was to call upon the Christians to select seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, who were to be appointed to cater for this need and stave off any possibility of schism in the new Church. Acts 6:4 sets out a division of labour - the apostles were to pray and teach while the seven men were to 'serve tables'. It is likely that these were tables from which food, rather than money, was distributed. In any case, the two offices were not mutually exclusive in an absolute sense. Paul was both a teacher (1 Tim.2:7) and one who remembered the poor (Gal.2:10). But these seven men - all with Greek names, interestingly enough - were set apart to relieve the suffering members of the Church. The apostles did not feel obliged to control everything - the congregations chose the Seven and the apostles laid hands on them to commission them for service. It is significant that diaconal work was clearly being carried out before there was an official diaconate.⁹ In one sense, as a servant, the deacon only does what all Christians are called upon to do, but deacons are needed if only on the principle that 'everybody's business can easily become nobody's business'.

It must be conceded that Acts 6 does not contain the Greek word for 'deacon' (*diakonos*), and James Monroe Barnett considers it 'virtually certain' that the Seven held an office that was unique and cannot be equated with the diaconate.¹⁰ John MacArthur¹¹ and Ormonde Plater¹² agree. Of the Seven, Stephen took to preaching (Acts 6:8-7:60) and Philip preached (Acts 8:5,12,40), baptised (Acts 8:12), and evangelised (Acts 21:8) - not activities that are traditionally identified with the diaconate. Back in the days of the early Church, Chrysostom refused to see the Seven as deacons.¹³

However, Acts 6 does refer to the noun *diakonia* in verse 1 and the verb *diakonein* in verse 2, and the notion of the diaconate is very much

⁹ One should also point out that Acts 14:21-23 and Titus 1:5 make it clear that churches operated before there were elders to teach and rule in an official capacity.

¹⁰ J. M. Barnett, *The Diaconate*, Trinity Press International, Pennsylvania, 1995, pp.31, 33.

¹¹ J. MacArthur Jr, *Answering the Key Questions About Deacons*, The Master's Communication, Panorama City, 1985, pp.10-16.

¹² O. Plater, *Many Servants*, p.19.

¹³ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Acts*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Eerdmans, Michigan, reprinted 1979, p.91.

present, as Barnett acknowledges. Hence Alexander Strauch's comment seems quite justified: 'it is reasonable to assume that the Seven became at least a prototype of later deacons.'¹⁴ Acts 6 may tell of a temporary measure which later led to the formation of deacons. Some of the Seven, notably Stephen and Philip, were more than deacons, but they *were* at least proto-deacons.

J. B. Lightfoot goes further than Strauch, and says of the Seven and the diaconate, 'I do not see how the identity of the two can reasonably be called in question.'¹⁵ Calvin viewed the origins of the diaconate in the same way.¹⁶ It is instructive that as early as Irenaeus of Lyons in the late second century the Seven were viewed as deacons.¹⁷ In fact, a council meeting about the year 314 at Neocaesarea in Cappadocia declared that 'In even the largest towns there must be, according to the rule, no more than 7 deacons. This may be proved from the Acts of the Apostles.'¹⁸ Such a rule could not last, but even a hundred years later the church historian Sozomen was writing, 'Again, there are even now but seven deacons at Rome, answering precisely to the number ordained by the apostles, of whom Stephen was the first martyr; whereas, in other churches, the number of deacons is a matter of indifference.'¹⁹ It is plausibly argued by J. G. Davies that the limitation of deacons to seven led to the proliferation of minor orders such as doorkeepers, sextons, singers, and acolytes.²⁰

(b) Philippians 1:1. Writing to the church at Philippi, the apostle Paul referred to all the saints in Christ Jesus who were there, along with the overseers and deacons. From the New Testament, it is clear that the overseer (*episkopos*) and the elder (*presbuteros*) refer to one and the same person. The elders in Acts 20:17 are called overseers in Acts 20:28; and we find a similar interchange of terms in Titus 1:5,7 and 1 Peter 5:1-2.²¹ The early Church possessed the extraordinary apostolic and prophetic offices, which passed away by the end of the first century with the writing of the Scriptures as God's final, inerrant and sufficient Word.

This leaves us today with the ordinary offices referred to in Philippians 1:1, those of overseer (or elder) and of deacon. As we have seen, the word for deacon(s) often refers to literal servants in the New Testament (e.g. Mark 9:35; Matt.22:13; John 2:5,9). Paul can also describe himself and other preachers as servants, ministers or deacons (Rom.15:8; 1 Cor.3:5; 2 Cor.6:4;

¹⁴ A. Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon*, Lewis and Roth Publishers, Colorado, 1992, p.52.

¹⁵ J. B. Lightfoot, *St Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, Hendrickson Publishers, Massachusetts, 1868, reprinted 1982, p.188.

¹⁶ J. Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, III, 9.

¹⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.12.10; 4.15.1.

¹⁸ R. P. Symonds, 'Deacons in the Early Church' in *Theology*, vol 58, Nov., 1955, p.408.

¹⁹ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VII, 19, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, second series, vol II, Eerdmans, Michigan, reprinted 1983, p.390.

²⁰ J. G. Davies, 'Deacons, Deaconesses and the Minor Orders in the Patristic Period' in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol 14, April 1963, p.15.

²¹ This has been clearly demonstrated by J. B. Lightfoot, *Philippians*, pp.181-269.

Eph.6:21; Col.1:7, 25). Here Paul is not referring to the office of deacon, but to the servant-like aspects of the work of ministry. In Philippians 1:1, however, Paul is referring to the office of deacon which is separate to the office of overseer or elder. It is possible that Paul referred to the deacons (in the plural, let it be noted) because they had conveyed financial help to him from the Philippian Christians (Phil.4:10-20).

(c) 1 Timothy 3:8-13. The implication that the New Testament Church possessed two ordinary offices is reinforced by Paul's setting out of the qualifications for the overseer in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and for the deacon in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, with no other offices mentioned. Paul declares that the deacon has to be worthy of respect, not double-tongued, not addicted to wine, not fond of sordid gain, holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience, beyond reproach, the husband of one wife, and a good manager of his children and household. In short, the deacon has to be one who is worthy of the trust of the people of God.

It is immediately obvious that so many of the qualifications for the overseer/elder (1 Tim.3:1-7) are the same as those for the deacon (1 Tim.3:8-13). Neither can be suspect in the areas of alcohol and money, and both must be beyond reproach in a general sense. The married man must be the husband of one wife and must be able to manage his household well. How a man conducts himself at home will tell the Church much about his real character. The clearest difference between the presbyter and the deacon is found in the fact that the presbyter must be able to teach (1 Tim.3:2) and to exhort and convict those who contradict the faith (Tit.1:9), whereas the deacon only needs to *hold* the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience (1 Tim.3:9). The deacon is to be a believer, but he is not necessarily a teacher.

Because the Greek word for 'women' is also the word for 'wives', it is not clear whether verse 11 is referring to women deacons,²² or to the wives of deacons,²³ or perhaps even to women who assist the deacons.²⁴ It must be admitted that the seven chosen in Acts 6 were all men who ministered to women, meaning that there was no division of labour according to gender. But there seems to be cogent reasons for believing that the New Testament allows for women deacons:

1. There are no parallel qualifications listed for the wives of elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. It may be true, as Strauch maintains,²⁵ that the wives of deacons would be more involved in diaconal work than the wives of overseers would be in presbyterial work. But in view of the damage that can be done

²² As favoured by Patrick Fairbairn, John MacArthur, and J. N. D. Kelly. Chrysostom, Jerome, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Theodore in the early Church also believed that it referred to women deacons. Of the Bible translations, the RSV, the Jerusalem Bible, and the NASB favour this interpretation.

²³ As favoured by George Knight III in his commentary on the Pastoral Epistles, and by Calvin and H. P. Liddon. It is also the view of James Monroe Barnett (*The Diaconate*, p.40), as well as the following Bible translations: KJV, NKJV, NIV, NEB, GNB, LB, ESV, Phillips, and Moffatt.

²⁴ W. Hendriksen, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1976, pp.132-4.

²⁵ A. Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon*, p.127.

by unsuitable spouses in either work, it seems more than a little strange that Paul sets out qualifications for deacons' wives but not for elders' wives. This makes it more likely that Paul is referring to women deacons rather than deacons' wives.

2. Paul does not say *their* wives - the possessive pronoun is missing. This argument is no more conclusive than the previous one, but it does favour the view that Paul is simply referring to women, not wives.

3. Deacons are not covered by the prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 which excludes women from the official governing and teaching office of the Church. Since deacons as such do not rule or teach, this prohibition does not forbid women deacons.

4. In Romans 16:1-2 Paul commends 'our sister Phoebe' who is referred to as 'a deacon (or servant) of the church at Cenchrea'. John Murray thinks that there is no warrant for seeing any church office in the ministry of Phoebe, but he has some formidable commentators lined up against him, including John Calvin, Robert Haldane and Charles Hodge. C. E. B. Cranfield sides with the latter interpretation, and considers that it is 'virtually certain' that Phoebe was a female deacon.²⁶

5. The fact that there were women deacons (or deaconesses) in the early Church must be a supporting argument to the view that the New Testament allowed female deacons. The idea of women presbyters is hardly ever raised in the early Church, except, for example, in an erratic and heretical group like the Montanists. In short, the impetus to set up an order of deaconesses does not seem to have come from within the Church nor from the culture of the day but from the New Testament itself.

Dogmatism is out of place. Charles Ryrie is emphatic: 'Women workers, yes; women deacons, no.'²⁷ So too is G. M. Burge on the other side: 'It is certain that women served actively as deacons.'²⁸ The weight of evidence, however, would seem to tilt the balance - with a fair measure of assurance - in favour of women deacons. The notion that women be encouraged to work in diaconal tasks without occupying the office of deacons - the position put forward by George Knight III²⁹ - seems forced and artificial.

Finally, Paul declares that those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus (1 Tim.3:13). This surely refers to their standing before God and their fellow Christians rather than to a possible 'promotion' to the office of presbyter. As Calvin explains so well, 'For my own part, though I do not deny that the order of deacons might sometimes be the nursery out of which presbyters were taken, yet I take Paul's words as meaning, more simply, that they who have discharged this ministry in a proper manner are worthy of no small honour; because it is not a mean employment, but a highly honourable

²⁶ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol 2, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1979, p.781.

²⁷ C. C. Ryrie, *The Role of Women in the Church*, Moody, Chicago, 1978, p.91.

²⁸ G. M. Burge, 'Deacon, Deaconess' in W. A. Elwell (ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker, Michigan, 1985, p.296.

²⁹ G. W. Knight III, *The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women*, Baker, Michigan, 1977, pp.49-53, 68.

office.³⁰

We must also deal with the widows whom Paul mentions in 1 Timothy 5:3-16. This much-neglected passage recognises that Christian widows over the age of sixty can be enrolled in order to receive support from the Church, and presumably to minister in some way for the Church. No specific duties are mentioned, but prayer and visitation may be implied. Unworthy widows were not to be enrolled, while widows who were younger were encouraged to marry again.

To 'honour' (v.3) means 'to provide financial and material support', just as widows were supported in the Old Testament (Deut.14:28-29; 24:19-21). Only morally qualified widows were to receive support from the church (1 Tim.5:5-7,9-15). The Bible forbids us to support 'merry widows' or freeloaders; it is a sad fact that charity can promote irresponsibility and dependency. In the Old Testament widows who were able had to actually glean the vineyards, while in the New Testament those who were young enough were to remarry. In other words, they were to help themselves if at all possible. Furthermore, the task of providing for any widow is said to be the job of her family first (1 Tim.5:4,8,16). These principles of charity - widely ignored in today's atmosphere of amoral welfarism - need to be recaptured if diaconal work is to truly reflect the will of God.

To trace the story further into the period of the early Church, one should note that the fiery African Tertullian wrote of an order of widows in the early Church - and the pagan satirist Lucian of Samosata referred to them as 'old hags'.³¹ There is one inscription from this early period which honours a widow named Ragine who died at eighty, having 'never burdened the Church'.³² By the mid-third century the church at Rome was supporting 1,500 widows and destitute persons while by the end of the fourth century the church at Antioch was supporting 3,000 widows and virgins.³³ The *Didascalica Apostolorum*, a manual on church order which survives in a Syriac version from the fourth century, refers both to deaconesses and to an order of widows. The exact relationship between widows and deaconesses in the early Church is unclear. It is Bonnie Bowman Thurston's contention that clerical deaconesses only arose in the period A.D. 200-250 in the east (and much later in the west) and took over the less institutionalised and much richer ministries to women that widows had exercised.³⁴ This thesis contains as much special pleading as historical accuracy. So much is not known with any exactness - the functions of the widows; the relationship between widows and deaconesses; and the decline of the order of widows (or its absorption into the emerging orders of nuns).

3. DEACONS IN THE HISTORY OF THE

³⁰ J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans by Rev. William Pringle, Baker, Michigan, reprinted 1979, p.87.

³¹ cited in B. B. Thurston, *The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1989, p.74.

³² cited in B. B. Thurston, *The Widows*, p.42.

³³ see P. Brown, *The Body*, Faber and Faber, London, 1990, p.148.

³⁴ B. B. Thurston, *The Widows*, pp.105, 114, 116.

CHURCH

The Early Church

Deacons played a most significant role in the life of the early Church. In fact, James Monroe Barnett refers to the period from A.D. 100 to 600 as the 'Golden Age of the diaconate'.³⁵ Deacons are mentioned, for example, in the *Didache*, the epistles of the martyr Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, the *Didache*, 1 Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, Justin Martyr, and in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus. In the opinion of Ignatius of Antioch, the threefold ministry - as he saw it - of bishop, presbyter, and deacon was essential to the definition of the Church, 'for without these three orders no church has any right to the name.' Ignatius even taught that the deacons represented Christ as the bishop represented the Father and the presbyters the apostles.³⁶ So influential did the diaconate become that Jerome claimed that presbyters in Rome were 'less thought of' than were the deacons. He attributed this to the fact that there were many more presbyters than deacons - greater numbers brought less appreciation. Naturally, there were abuses, and the Shepherd of Hermas complains of deacons 'who served badly and plundered the living of widows and orphans, and made profit for themselves from the ministry they had accepted to perform.'³⁷

Often the deacon would undertake liturgical and administrative, as well as charitable, tasks, so there was some fluidity and lack of precision in the Church's concept of the diaconate. Sometimes deacons were seen as the assistants of the bishop (e.g. in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus), and it was not uncommon for the senior deacon to be elected to succeed his bishop on the latter's death. This was the case for the great Athanasius who attended the Council of Nicea in 325 as a deacon and assistant to his bishop but who himself soon became the bishop of Alexandria. In 440 Leo went from being a deacon to become the bishop of Rome, while in 590 Gregory went from being a monk and a deacon to become the bishop of Rome. The deacon Ephrem Syrus in the fourth century has left homilies arranged in metre, but Ambrose of Milan at the end of the same century says that deacons did not preach in his day. The Council of Arles in 314 had to forbid deacons to offer the eucharist, and this prohibition was reaffirmed at the Council of Nicaea in 325.³⁸ But there are a number of references to deacons who were allowed to carry out baptisms.³⁹ In the midst of this somewhat conflicting evidence, one should also note that deacons were often left to exercise the pastoral oversight of rural churches.

In the year 251, Cornelius, the bishop of Rome, sent a letter to Fabian, the bishop of Antioch. Here he mentions that there were 46 presbyters, 7 deacons, 7 sub-deacons, 42 acolytes, 52 exorcists, readers and doorkeepers as well as over 1,500 widows and persons in distress who were supported by the church in Rome. Indeed, wrote Eusebius of Caesarea, 'All these are supported

³⁵ See J. M. Barnett, *The Diaconate*, p.43.

³⁶ Ignatius, *The Epistle to the Trallians*, 3.

³⁷ J. M. Barnett, *The Diaconate*, pp.46-7.

³⁸ See R. P. Symonds, 'Deacons in the Early Church', p.412.

³⁹ e.g. the Synod of Elvira in the early part of the fourth century, and in Cyril of Jerusalem who died in 386.

by the Master's grace and love for men.⁴⁰ This appears to indicate a situation - which was not altogether unique - where the deacons (and sub-deacons) were functioning in something like their biblical roles. Christian love and kindness has never been what it ought to be, but it was impressive in the period of the early Church. As late as 362 the emperor Julian (known in Christian history as Julian the Apostate) lamented that it was proving difficult to turn the Empire back to paganism. He thought he knew why: 'For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.'⁴¹

According to James Monroe Barnett, there was a radical transition in the fourth century as the Church came to imitate the structure of the Roman Empire.⁴² Over the years, bishops had ceased to be preachers in a local church, and had come to be administrative heads of dioceses. There was a development from a Church structure that was horizontal and organic to one that was vertical and hierarchical. As part of this development, presbyters began to offer the eucharist apart from the bishop, and the diaconate began to decline in importance. Barnett's picture is overdrawn - one should not see a sudden transformation in the fourth century, for example - but there is no doubt that the diaconate lost its biblical moorings. Instead of being viewed as a different office, it was seen as a lower office, and there was little incentive for any man to remain in it. This is well illustrated by the Council of Nicaea in 325 which decreed that 'the deacons keep within their proper bounds, knowing that they are the ministers of the bishop and inferior to the presbyters.' The deacon increasingly became a minor minister with some liturgical tasks. When Photius became patriarch of Constantinople in 858, he was made a monk one day, a reader the second day, a subdeacon the third, a deacon the fourth, a presbyter the fifth, and a patriarch on the sixth day.

Deaconesses receive some mention in early Church literature, although it is Aimé Martimort's contention - contrary to J. G. Davies⁴³ - that deaconesses were not female deacons.⁴⁴ According to Hippolytus, baptismal candidates were baptised naked by a naked deacon. This naturally disturbed the sensibilities of female candidates, and the situation was usually relieved by the use of a deaconess who did everything for the female candidate except the actual baptism. Such is the reason given in Epiphanius and the *Apostolic Constitutions*. To cite Epiphanius: 'There is in the Church ... the order of deaconesses, but ... (it) exists for the purpose of preserving decency for the female sex, ... whenever the bodies of women are required to be uncovered ...'⁴⁵ This is a consideration which is important but it is hardly crucial in explaining the existence of deaconesses.

⁴⁰ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans by G. A. Williamson, Penguin, Harmondsworth, reprinted 1984, p.282.

⁴¹ J. Stevenson (ed), revised by W. H. C. Frend, *Creeds, Councils and Controversies*, SPCK, London, 1989, p.57.

⁴² See J. M. Barnett, *The Diaconate*, pp.96-8, 104-5.

⁴³ J. G. Davies, 'Deacons, Deaconesses and the Minor Orders ...', p.1.

⁴⁴ See Aimé Georges Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study*, trans by K. D. Whitehead, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1986, e.g. pp.22, 156.

⁴⁵ See A. G. Martimort, *Deaconesses*, pp.112-3.

As early as the correspondence between Pliny (the governor of Bithynia) and Trajan (the emperor) about the year A.D. 112, there is evidence for the existence of deaconesses. Pliny told Trajan that he had tortured two deaconesses to find out about the possible revolutionary intentions of the Christian Church.⁴⁶ Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Basil, Theodoret and Palladius all mention 'female deacons'.⁴⁷ In 249 a mob in Alexandria rioted, and in the ensuing tragedy an aged deaconess, Apollonia, was burned to death. Because her teeth were knocked out first, she has become the patron saint of dentists and toothache victims!

Chrysostom's aunt, Sabiniana, was a deaconess, and it is sometimes claimed (probably wrongly) that Macrina the Younger, the head of a community of nuns in Cappadocia and the sister of Gregory of Nyssa and Basil of Caesarea, was a deaconess. Deaconesses are mentioned at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 - they had to be over forty years of age and remain unmarried. In 535 the emperor Justinian wanted no more than 100 deacons and 40 female deacons in the imperial capital of Constantinople.⁴⁸

It was not unknown for the widows of 1 Timothy 5 to be identified with deaconesses. The Church historian Sozomen says that the emperor Theodosius I restricted women in the diaconate unless they were over the age of sixty - an obvious allusion to 1 Timothy 5:9. Basil of Caesarea also identified the widows and the deaconesses. But increasingly both deaconesses and the widows became absorbed by the emerging order of nuns.

By the tenth or eleventh centuries, deaconesses had virtually disappeared from the Church of the East. Aimé Martimort considers that the practice of infant baptism reduced the role of deaconesses in female baptism.⁴⁹ In Martimort's view, the early Church of the West was never as keen as the Eastern Church to ordain deaconesses, but it is of some significance that in 799 Leo III, returning to Rome, was met by a welcoming party which included deaconesses.⁵⁰

The Medieval Church

As the Middle Ages unfolded, false views of justification came to prevail in the Church. Archbishop Hincmar of Reims in the ninth century wrote that 'God could have made all persons rich but he willed that there be poor in the world so that the rich would have an opportunity to atone for their sins.'⁵¹ Such a view meant the poor were often seen in terms of their potential contribution to one's salvation. In the seventeenth century Vincent de Paul was to write that 'The Daughters of the Hôtel Dieu have as their end first their own perfection and then the relief of the sick.'⁵²

Begging was often recognised as a way of making a living. Jacques de

⁴⁶ Conveniently found in J. Stevenson (ed), revised by W. H. C. Frend, *A New Eusebius*, SPCK, London, 1989, pp.18-21.

⁴⁷ see A. G. Martimort, *Deaconesses*, pp.77, 83, 123.

⁴⁸ A. G. Martimort, *Deaconesses*, p.109.

⁴⁹ A. G. Martimort, *Deaconesses*, pp.166-7.

⁵⁰ A. G. Martimort, *Deaconesses*, p.204.

⁵¹ Cited in C. Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, pp.32-3.

⁵² Cited in C. Lindberg, *Beyond Charity*, p.61.

Vitry (c.1160-1240) told of two beggars - one blind, the other lame - who were healed against their wills when they could not get out of the way of a procession bearing the miracle-working body of Saint Martin. The supposed miracle destroyed their easy-going lifestyle. Hence Sebastian Brant could write of beggars in his *Ship of Fools*:

*And evermore their numbers grow,
For begging's pleasant, that they know.*

There was much poor relief in the medieval period - some of it quite heroic - but there were also much chicanery and superstition. The charitable foundations were set up for the salvation of the donors, and tended to be indiscriminate in their distribution.

Given such a theological climate, it was inevitable that the diaconate could hardly fulfil its biblical functions. Hence the medieval diaconate tended to become an interim or transitional office as a man made his ecclesiastical journey from the laity to the priesthood. By the seventh century there were seven holy orders in the western Church - doorkeeper, lector, acolyte, subdeacon, deacon, priest, and bishop. This is not to say that there were no such beings as influential deacons. Alcuin, at the court of Charlemagne, was a deacon throughout his life. Hildebrand was an archdeacon in 1073 when he was elevated to the papal throne as Gregory VII. Francis of Assisi was a friar who preached, but he seems only ever to have been ordained as a deacon, not a priest. Even during the Counter Reformation, Reginald Pole was installed as one of the three presidents of the Council of Trent while he was still in deacon's orders. We should also note that there were deaconess-abbesses in the tenth century, and at the end of the eleventh century deaconesses are mentioned in central and southern Italy.⁵³

The Reformation

Carter Lindberg has portrayed the sixteenth century as 'the watershed of poor relief'.⁵⁴ In thesis 43, from the 95 theses, Martin Luther wrote that 'Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences.' Although his own charity tended to be indiscriminate, Luther favoured the abolition of begging and the promotion of worthwhile work. He considered that deacons were first installed in Acts 6, and that their task was to distribute the church's bounty to the poor.⁵⁵ Towns and cities which adopted the Reformation often set up 'common chests' to look after their deserving poor. These common chests were at first managed by deacons, but later by those who were called *Kastenherren*. The first town to adopt this system of poor relief seems to have been Nuremberg in 1522. It did not take long, however, for the early vision to fade, and as early as 1536 deacons in Wurttemberg were fined for refusing to fulfil their duties or attend deacons' meetings.⁵⁶

⁵³ A. G. Martimort, *Deaconesses*, pp.205, 217.

⁵⁴ C. Lindberg, *Beyond Charity*, p.9.

⁵⁵ M. Luther, 'The Pagan Servitude of the Church' in J. Dillenberger (ed), *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, Anchor Books, New York, 1961, p.349

⁵⁶ J. Atkinson, 'Diakonia at the Time of the Reformation' in J. I. McCord and T. H. L. Parker (eds), *Service in Christ: Essays Presented to Karl Barth on*

The recapturing of evangelical views naturally had implications for the role of deacons. The great Strasbourg reformer, Martin Bucer, was one who furthered the office of deacon, and his ideas had a significant influence on the Genevan Reformer John Calvin. In his Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541, Calvin viewed the deacon as one of the four offices of the Church, the other three being doctor (or teacher), pastor, and elder. Indeed, Calvin saw two kinds of deacons - 'one to serve the church in administering the affairs of the poor; the other, in caring for the poor themselves.'⁵⁷ The former was called a procurator and the latter an hospitaller. These two types of deacons were to be elected each year by the General Council to work in the General Hospital. In practice, most of these were re-elected each year, and a number of them were also elected as elders. Later, as refugees (especially from France) streamed into Geneva, the 'French Fund' (the Bourse Française) was set up to look after poor foreigners in the city. Calvin himself was particularly fond of this work, and gave it considerable financial support.

To better understand Calvin's view of the diaconate, one needs to remember that the General Hospital was organised in 1535, before Calvin arrived in the city, and tended to be an institution of the General Council rather than the Church. In Roman Catholic days Geneva had had eight charitable institutions (seven 'hospitals' and a Box for All Souls in Purgatory) which were run by priests and nuns. This all changed in 1535 when the General Hospital took over the work. As Jeannine Olson explains, 'The General Hospital of Geneva was less a hospital in the modern sense than an all-purpose welfare institution.'⁵⁸ It looked after those who were orphaned, crippled, elderly, or weak, and its tasks including marrying off girls and finding apprenticeships for boys.

Because the General Hospital had been set up the year before Calvin arrived in Geneva, Robert Kingdon has contended that Calvin was consecrating an existing institution rather than moulding one according to Scripture.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, Calvin tried to find justification for the two types of deacons in Romans 12:8, with the procurator contributing in liberality and the hospitaller performing acts of mercy with cheerfulness.⁶⁰ Calvin considered that the widows of 1 Timothy 5 could serve the Church as deacons in this second sense,⁶¹ and in his sermons on 1 Timothy 5, he lamented that 'there was in those days that (which) we have not now'.⁶² Against Robert Kingdon's social

his 80th Birthday, Epworth Press, London, 1966, p.88.

⁵⁷ J. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, III, 9. The references to deacons in the 1541 Ordinances can be found in J. K. S. Reid (ed), *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, reprinted 1954, pp.64-6.

⁵⁸ J. Olson, 'The Bourse Française: Deacons and Social Welfare in Calvin's Geneva' in R. C. Gamble (ed), *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol 10, Garland, New York & London, 1992, p.19.

⁵⁹ R. Kingdon, 'Calvin's Ideas About the Diaconate: Social or Theological in Origin?' in R. C. Gamble (ed), *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol 10, Garland, New York & London, 1992, pp.171, 179.

⁶⁰ J. Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, trans by John Owen, Baker, Michigan, reprinted 1979, pp.462-3.

⁶¹ J. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, III, 9.

⁶² J. Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistles to Timothy and Titus*, Banner of Truth

explanation of Calvin's double diaconate, Elsie McKee believes that it was Calvin's need to incorporate women deacons - notably Phoebe from Romans 16:1-2 - into his coherent picture of early church order that forced him into interpreting Romans 12:8 as he did.⁶³

Deacons in sixteenth century Geneva - who were always male, despite what Calvin said about the widow-deacons in 1 Timothy 5 - financed the salary of the copyist of Calvin's sermons and helped to finance Beza's editions of the Psalms. They also sent (illegally, of course) Bibles, Psalters and Catechisms into France. The Bourse paid a doctor, a surgeon and an apothecary, but volunteers were used wherever possible, to save costs. One of the Company of Pastors was assigned to work with the deacons, but it must be said that the Hospital carried on its work without much reference to the pastors. It is both interesting and significant that the General Hospital is still in operation in Geneva today.

It is unfortunate that the Lutherans and Zwinglians tended to assign the diaconal function to Christian civil authorities. Johannes Bugenhagen drew up ordinances for Braunschweig, Hamburg and Lübeck where the revenues of the common chest were administered by 'deacons'. Calvinists tended to leave room for a diakonia in the Church as well as civil welfare activities. Amongst the Anabaptists, the Hutterites established deacons of material needs as parallels to deacons of the Word.

Under John à Lasco, the diaconate developed in refugee congregations in London. After 'Bloody Mary' came to the throne in 1553, John à Lasco and some Dutch refugees returned to Emden in Holland where they founded a diaconate which had some influence on the Reformed Churches in Germany and the Netherlands. In 1568 the Netherlands Reformed Church gave its approval to the establishment of deacons to collect money, to distribute it to the poor, and to comfort those in need; but it must be acknowledged that little was actually done. In Scotland the *First Book of Discipline* (1560) provided for the annual election of elders and deacons. The deacons were to receive the rents and gather the alms of the kirk, and keep and distribute the same. The *Second Book of Discipline* (1578, approved by Parliament in 1592) was more comprehensive, and referred to the office of the deacons as 'an ordinary and perpetual ecclesiastical function in the Church of Christ', concerned with the collection and distribution of the alms of the faithful and with property.⁶⁴ From 1574 until the Poor Law of 1845 the minister's stipend came from teinds (tithes) and other sources while the congregation looked after the poor.

After the Reformation

The centuries which followed the Reformation saw impressive attempts at ministering to the poor and needy. The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government from 1645 recognised the role of deacons, declaring that 'The scripture doth hold out deacons as distinct officers in the church. Whose office

Trust, Edinburgh, 1579, reprinted 1983, p.450. The quotation has been slightly modernized.

⁶³ E. A. McKee, 'Calvin's Exegesis of Romans 12:8 - Social Accidental, or Theological?' in *Calvin Theological Journal*, vol 23, no 1, 1988, pp.6-18.

⁶⁴ See F. Maxwell Bradshaw (ed), *Basic Documents on Presbyterian Polity*, Christian Education Committee, PCA, 1984, pp.31-4, 65-6.

is perpetual. To whose office it belongs not to preach the word, or administer the sacraments, but to take special care in distributing to the necessities of the poor.' But declared intentions were not always translated into action. G. D. Henderson comments that by the early eighteenth century, 'the theory was unaltered, but ... in practice there were in many places no deacons as such, their functions being performed by elders.'⁶⁵ George Yule also considers that the Puritans failed to develop the idea of the diaconate.⁶⁶

On the continent the German Pietist, August Hermann Francke (d.1727), founded a school for orphans and the children of poor families, but his efforts were not grounded in the diaconal life of a congregation. In both the Old World and the New World in the eighteenth century, George Whitefield proclaimed the evangelical gospel and collected funds for Bethesda, his orphanage in Georgia. In the next century, in 1833, Johann Hinrich Wichern started up a home for vagrant boys in Hamburg. Friedrich von Bodelschwingh (1831-1910) looked after epileptics at the renowned centre at Bethel (near Bielefeld in Westphalia), and it was his son Fritz (a pastor) who successfully resisted Nazi attempts to kill epileptics under the euthanasia laws of the Third Reich. The evangelical revival thus saw a proliferation of works of mercy, but they were not necessarily tied to the diaconate. To give but one more example, Tom Barnardo was converted in 1862, and saw his life's work in setting up orphanages.

Charles Simeon at Cambridge did much to see that - for all his emphasis on the priority of the ministry of the Word - diaconal work was not neglected. During a famine in 1788 he rode out every Monday into the country to see that the bakers sold their bread at half-price to the poor. But essentially relief was administered by thirty leaders, both male and female, of districts.

One of the most impressive attempts in Scotland to revive the diaconate as a ministry of mercy can be found at St John's in Glasgow in the 1820s as Thomas Chalmers sought to tackle the problem of urban poverty. The office of deacon had been revived in Scotland during the Reformation, but had almost lapsed by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Chalmers regarded the absorption of the diaconate into the eldership as nothing less than 'poisonous'.⁶⁷ Accordingly, Chalmers partitioned St John's into 25 parts, with an elder responsible for each one, and a deacon responsible for about 400 individuals. Cage and Checkland sneer at Chalmers' 'system of family inquisition'⁶⁸ where the deacons first determined whether the applicant for relief was able to work or to be supported from family and friends before relief was granted. But indiscriminate bureaucratic benevolence at taxpayers' expense should not be confused with responsible and loving Christian welfare (see 2 Thess.3:10; 1 Tim.5:3-16). Stewart Brown's summary is worthy of citation: 'The most

⁶⁵ G. D. Henderson, *The Scottish Ruling Elder*, James Clarke & Co, London, 1935, pp.67-8.

⁶⁶ G. Yule, 'The Puritans' in J. I. McCord and T. H. L. Parker (eds), *Service in Christ*, p.134.

⁶⁷ cited in G. D. Henderson, *The Scottish Ruling Elder*, p.72.

⁶⁸ R. A. Cage and E. O. A. Checkland, 'Thomas Chalmers and Urban Poverty: The St John's Parish Experiment in Glasgow, 1819-1837' in *Philosophical Journal*, vol 13, Spring 1976, p.43.

important feature of the St John's poor-relief system was this trained order of deacons, with each deacon assigned to a specific territorial district, and all deacons meeting together monthly for discussion of methods and problems.⁶⁹

In West Port in Edinburgh in 1844-7, Chalmers tried again to abolish poor relief based on legal assessments in favour of a system of purely voluntary charity couple with a programme of vigorous church expansion. But whereas at St John's in Glasgow, poor relief had been provided from the sessional fund, there was no such relief at West Port. A savings bank was opened, as well as a school, and a church based on interdenominational Protestant cooperation.⁷⁰ Neither the St John's experiment nor the West Port experiment can be portrayed as an unqualified success, but they each represent a serious and worthy attempt to encourage the *diakonia* role of the Church.

The nineteenth century also saw the setting up of orders of deaconesses within the Lutheran, Anglican, and Methodist Churches. The continental Lutheran pastor, Theodore Fliedner, led the way in 1831 when he set up a training institution at Kaiserswerth for deaconesses. Florence Nightingale trained there in 1851, and Archibald Campbell Tait visited there in 1855. As Bishop of London, Tait admitted Elizabeth Ferard to the office of deaconess in 1862. In 1864 Richard Hooker Wilmer, the Episcopal Bishop of Alabama, instituted three deaconesses in 1864, and ordained two (Mary Johnson and Mary Caroline Friggell) in 1885. But the push for the admission of women to the priesthood has meant that the drive for deaconesses in the Anglican communion has faded in recent times. The same can be said for other communions, including the Church of Scotland which established the Order of Deaconesses in 1888, but admitted women into its ministry in 1969.

Australian Presbyterianism followed the trends of Presbyterianism elsewhere, especially in Scotland. Deacons and managers increasingly came to be regarded as synonymous terms. So far as deaconesses were concerned, the Victorian Assembly led the way by opening an Institute to train deaconesses in 1898 (after 1933 this was known as Rolland House). Only in 1903 did the NSW Assembly decide to investigate the question of the institution and training of deaconesses. The best-known deaconess in NSW was Miss Eva Holland who from 1907 headed up the social service work in the declining inner city charge of Palmer Street, Woolloomooloo. The work of deaconesses expanded although deaconesses were only paid a living allowance. C. A. White was not altogether clear in 1951, but he may have implied that some deaconesses performed ministerial work 'except for the administration of the Sacraments'.⁷¹ Over the years that certainly became true, and the deaconess came to be viewed as a kind of truncated minister - she was trained and could perform most ministerial functions except baptism and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. It was a repeat of the old error - the work of the deacon was blurred into the work of the presbyter. As a result, the number of

⁶⁹ S. J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1982, p.132.

⁷⁰ cf. S. J. Brown, 'The Disruption and Urban Poverty: Thomas Chalmers and the West Port Operation in Edinburgh, 1844-47' in Records of the Scottish Church History Society, vol XX, no 1, 1978, pp.65-89.

⁷¹ C. A. White, *The Challenge of the Years*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1951, p.225.

deaconess candidates declined, especially as the eldership and ministry were opened up to women.⁷² Aimé Martimort, an opponent of the ordination of women, has some reason to warn that the restoration of deaconesses is 'fraught with ambiguity',⁷³ but there is no need for this to be inherently so.⁷⁴

Even in the midst of the Church's general confusion regarding the role of deacons, some sterling stories can be told. During World War II, for example, the Dutch Reformed Church, through its deacons, helped those who were being persecuted by the Nazis. In response, the Germans decreed that the elective office of deacon should be eliminated. On 17 July 1941 the Reformed Synod resolved: 'Whoever touches the diaconate interferes with what Christ has ordained as the task of the Church.' The resolve of these Dutch Christians proved to be so strong that the Germans were forced to back down.⁷⁵ An effective and biblical diaconate can minister to Christ's poor and challenge an ungodly world.

History can be twisted to teach anything and nothing, but there are obvious points that stand out in the chequered and not altogether impressive history of the diaconate in the Church. The first is that the diaconate has only worked with any degree of effectiveness at intermittent times in the Church's history - during the early period, in Calvin's Geneva, in Glasgow during Thomas Chalmers' ministry, and for part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries so far as deaconesses are concerned. The second point is that the diaconate has declined whenever its functions have become confused. Presbyters and deacons need to be viewed as two prongs of the Church, and not as two rungs on an ecclesiastical ladder. There is invariably a loss of direction and coherence when deacons function only as presbyters who lack something. The same can be said when deacons are seen as property and finance managers. It was Laurence, the Roman deacon and martyr put to death under the emperor Valerian in 258, who, when asked to produce the treasures of the Church, pointed to the meek and poor who constitute her membership.

4. THE RENEWAL OF THE DIACONATE IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA

Part of the problem in the recent history of the Presbyterian Church has been that deacons have been confused with managers. Even John Macpherson (1847-1902) in his work on *Presbyterianism* paints the work of the deacon with too broad a brush: 'Deacons are required to give attention to the secular

⁷² See Lisa Patston, *What is the Presbyterian Understanding of the Offices of Deaconess and Deacon?* unpublished TS, Sydney, 1993, pp.12a-14.

⁷³ A. G. Martimort, *Deaconesses*, p.250.

⁷⁴ A most helpful summary of the role of women in the history of the Church is found in William Weinrich, 'Women in the History of the Church: Learned and Holy, But Not Pastors' in J. Piper and W. Grudem (eds), *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, Crossway Books, Illinois, 1991, pp.263-79.

⁷⁵ cited in E. A. McKee, *Diakonia in the Classical Reformed Tradition and Today*, Eerdmans, Michigan, 1989, p.27.

affairs of the congregation, see to the collection for General and Congregational Schemes, and attend to the poor and to the education of the children of the poor.⁷⁶ It seems too much to ask deacons to look after finance, property and the temporal welfare of God's people. The contention of Berghoef and de Koster - that deacons are the New Testament counterpart to Levites and so should distribute the bread and wine⁷⁷ - also seems not to be particularly helpful. It may be correct and permissible, but it is hardly the main point.

One matter that will need to be faced is that of a term diaconate. Alexander Strauch contends that the deacon should remain a deacon until he no longer desires the work of the diaconate or he disqualifies himself in some way. He rejects the notion that there should be a two or three year term of service.⁷⁸ Barnett too suggests that the Church only ordain those to the diaconate who intend to make it a permanent vocation.⁷⁹ But perhaps a renewable term of, say, three years might be the best way forward for the Presbyterian Church of Australia at the moment.

However that question is answered, deacons could be used to minister to the physical needs of Christians who are poor, sick, unemployed, aged, shut-in, dying, or in difficulties of one kind or another, including crisis situations. To give but one well-known example, the special car that was made for Joni Eareckson, after her diving accident of 1967 left her totally paralysed from the neck down, was provided by her church. Furthermore, there could be wider work with those who are outside the household of faith (Gal.6:10). Deacons need to be as familiar as possible with local Pregnancy Help Centres, hospitals, prisons, half-way houses, rehabilitation centres, refuges, nursing homes, training centres for employment, and institutions to aid the handicapped.

The renewal of the diaconate could be a wonderful tool in God's hands to play a part in the renewal of the whole Church. Deacons should be the visible and formal expression of the Church's desire to be merciful as God Himself is merciful (Luke 6:36). As Jonathan Edwards said in a sermon on 'Christian Charity' based on Deuteronomy 15:7-11, 'It is not merely a commendable thing for a man to be kind and bountiful to the poor, but our bounden duty, as much a duty as it is to pray, or to attend public worship, or any thing else whatever; and the neglect of it brings great guilt upon any person.'⁸⁰ Or, as Calvin put it, 'Love to men springs only from the fear and love of God ... But it would be wrong in any person to attempt to separate our love of God from our love of men.'⁸¹

Yet there is a higher authority than Jonathan Edwards or John Calvin.

⁷⁶ J. Macpherson, *Presbyterianism*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, n.d., p.102.

⁷⁷ G. Berghoef and L. de Koster, *The Deacon's Handbook*, CLP, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1980, p.54.

⁷⁸ A. Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon*, p.109.

⁷⁹ J. M. Barnett, *The Diaconate*, p.163.

⁸⁰ J. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol 2, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, reprinted 1976, p.164.

⁸¹ J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans by Rev. William Pringle, Baker, Michigan, reprinted 1979, p.160.

Christ Himself declares that 'whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant (*diakonos*). And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served ('deaconed'), but to serve ('to deacon'), and to give His life a ransom for many.' (Matt. 20:26-28) Christ is both Lord and servant (John 13:14-17). As such, the Saviour Himself is the model deacon - in His life of service, of sacrifice, and of commitment to the needs of others. The idea of *diakonia* is inherent in the person and work of Christ, and in the gospel itself.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The diaconate is a separate office of mercy, not of government and teaching. Hence its functions are not those of the eldership, but there needs to be frequent consultation between deacons and elders.
2. Since the diaconate is to be concerned with ministering to people, it is logically distinct from the Committee of Management which looks after property and finance.
3. There is a need for some training for all deacons (as there is for all elders), and full-time deacons (like full-time teaching elders) require adequate training.
4. The diaconate is an office which is open to both men and women.
5. The diaconate is to be firstly concerned with the poor and needy within the local body of believers, then with those believers further abroad, and finally with the temporal welfare of all humanity (Gal.6:10). This aid is not to be indiscriminate but to follow clear biblical guidelines.
6. The argument about a term diaconate as opposed to a lifetime of service in the office is not easily resolved, and perhaps for now it may be better to opt for a term diaconate.

SUGGESTIONS

1. Any congregation needs to be informed that the establishment of a diaconate has a biblical mandate, and is not just the brain-child of one man. Hence it will be necessary for the pastor to preach on the biblical texts referring to the diaconate in order to enthuse the people - or at least many of them - to embrace the notion of a diaconate in their local church.
2. There then needs to be an election of deacons. Deacons will serve for a three-year renewable term.
3. Those who are elected will need to undertake a course of training under the supervision of the session, such course to include matters like the biblical basis of the diaconate, basic counselling skills, hospital visiting procedures, dealing with death and grief, working with the elders, and preserving confidentiality.⁸²
4. Each deacon should then be commissioned by the elders at a service of public worship. This should include the laying on of hands.
5. Each deacon should be attached to an elder (there is no need, of course,

⁸² Some of these suggestions have been put forward and been put into practice in the Presbyterian charge of Eltham in Victoria under the leadership of Rev. Theo Fishwick.

- for the number of elders and the number of deacons to be the same).
6. The deacons should meet together on a regular basis and elect a coordinator to lead them.
 7. There should be a Deacons' Fund set up under the Committee of Management. Perhaps the old practice of taking up a collection for the deacons at each communion service could be revived.
 8. The Deacons' Court needs to give a report to the Annual General Meeting of the charge, without violating any confidences.
 9. The vast majority of deacons, like the vast majority of elders, will be part-time in the sense that they will have other employment. Most will work at the local level, as do the elders, and be immediately subject to the session, not the presbytery.
 10. The limits of diaconal work will only be determined by the vision of the deacons themselves, the needs they encounter, and the resources they possess.

Recommendations

1. That the G.A.A. urges the immediate re-establishment of deacons' courts in local churches following the guidelines of this report.
2. That the various state assemblies make whatever changes need to be made to the state Code Books to implement these changes.

Further Reading

It must be said that not all of these books and articles can be endorsed in their entirety.

Books

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- R. P. Symonds, 'Deacons in the Early Church' in Theology, vol 58, Nov, 1955, pp.408-414.

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- Lisa Patston, *What is the Presbyterian Understanding of the Offices of Deaconess and Deacon?* Sydney, 1993.

- Rev. Dr Peter Barnes, Convener