

The office of deacon in today's church has its roots in the office of deacon in the early church. The word **deacon** comes from the Greek word **diakonos** which means **servant**. Deacons give leadership to the church's ministry of serving the physical and spiritual needs of members and people beyond the church.

## History and Background

The beginning of the office of deacon is described in the book of Acts (6:2-4). The 12 apostles asked the body of disciples to pick out seven men "of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" to serve tables. The apostles did not want to give up preaching the word of God in order to serve tables. From the initial assignment, the role of deacon has grown to designate people responsible for the servant function in the church. Most typically these are people selected by the church to help the pastors in meeting members' needs. Deacons call on sick members, counsel, collect food and clothing for the needy.

In the past, deacons were older men well respected in the church for their uprightness and faithfulness. Women of equal stature were usually deaconesses whose responsibilities were related to the preparation of the communion elements and care of the communion ware. In addition, the Evangelical Church established an

order of Deaconesses who dedicated themselves to lifelong service within hospitals of the church. Today deacons are male and female, of all ages, carefully chosen to minister and represent the church.

## Common Practices

In some denominations the word "deacon" refers to clergy. In the United Church of Christ deacons are laypeople elected to the office of deacon in their local church. Some churches elect people to a term on the board of deacons. Others elect a governing board and then appoint some members to be deacons and others to be elders or trustees. In some churches deacons are set apart by the congregation and hold the title for life. Deacons have varied roles in the United Church of Christ.

In some churches deacons are the people selected to be the servants--to call, to assist the pastor, to respond to the need of the hungry with food baskets or to visit the jail. In other churches deacons are responsible for helping the church organize and carry out its ministry of service. Rather than working directly, they identify needs, recruit and train people to meet the needs, and provide the resources and support needed by members in their ministries of serving others.

Increasingly, a board of deacons closely cooperates with the pastor in overseeing the pastoral ministry of the church. Based on the conviction that everyone in some way needs the ministry of the church, deacons

develop sensitivity and skill in identifying needs and making decisions about allocating time, energy and the congregation's human resources to meet the needs. Deacons help the church be aware of two avenues of service: seeking out and meeting the needs of church members and seeking out and meeting the needs of the community, and others who may not be related to the church.

Deacons are interested not only in one-to-one ministries of service but also in the organizational and structural ways in which needs are met. Pastoral counseling for a couple going through divorce is one approach to meeting need. Organizing a group of divorcing or recently divorced people within the church is another. Deacons seek to equip and encourage members in their individual ministries of caring. They also seek to equip the congregation to meet needs through its groups and programs.

There is great variety within local churches of the United Church of Christ in the role and function of deacon. In some churches, functions are divided between deacons and elders. Deacons may deal with outreach programs and stewardship, have primary responsibility for the relationship between the pastor and church members or focus on the spiritual life of the church. In some churches a board of deacons may divide responsibilities with a board of Trustees.

## Responsibilities

These responsibilities are often carried out by deacons. Your church needs to be clear about which are yours:

- Determining your tasks.
- Establishing clear and workable directions, goals and plans of action.
- Helping the congregation understand and value the work of the deacons.
- Developing a budget for the deacons.
- Planning and overseeing the church's ministry of service and caring for its members and the community.
- Leading the annual stewardship, education and promotion program.
- Working at the resolution of conflicts that arise within the church.
- Assisting in planning worship services and arranging lay leadership for the services.
- Attending church services regularly.
- Preparing for, serving and cleaning up after communion.
- Helping make arrangements for and participating in services of baptism.
- Ushering.
- Visiting sick persons, persons who cannot get to church, prospective members and those in crisis.
- Devising a plan for visitation and care for all members and newcomers.

# Deacon

- Helping make confirmation meaningful and memorable.
- Providing services of a pastoral relations committee.
- Providing training in mission.
- Planning a program of evangelism.
- Providing training for new members in the meaning and significance of the church and church membership.
- Providing understanding of the church's essential nature and purpose to the governing board and congregation.
- Counseling with the pastor about the spiritual life of the congregation and of particular members.
- Participating in governing the church and planning for its future. This may mean being the governing board.
- Providing funds and physical assistance for those in need, either directly or in liaison with service agencies.
- Attending meetings of the board of deacons (whatever its name) and representing that board on other committees.

## Skills and Attributes Needed

- Willingness to be a servant of God, of God's people and of the church.
- Commitment to the church's ministry of meeting people's needs.
- Ability to cooperate with a number of people.
- Ability to listen.

- Christian character and good works that gain the respect of church members.
- Tact, friendliness and interest in and concern for all people.
- Willingness to learn and grow.
- Ability to relate well with church staff and understand the nature of their work.
- An understanding of confidentiality and appropriate boundaries.
- For counseling and visitation, specialized training and understanding the purpose and limits of the role.
- Understanding the nature of the church and its sacraments.

## Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Study the constitution and bylaws of the church and its mission statement so that you fully understand them.
- Talk with people who have been deacons.
- Ask for a position description outlining responsibilities, expectations and accountability.
- Work with other officers of the church to develop a continuing education program specifically for church officers.
- Organize your church for care giving ministries. Use **Called to Care: A Notebook for Lay Caregivers** from the Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team.

**Called to Care** includes resources that strengthen care giving skills, train church members in visitation and address over 50 life situations deacons or other caregivers may encounter in their ministry. Order from United Church of Christ Resources. Telephone, toll-free, 800-537-3394.

- Read and study about the life of the church, including history, biblical disciplines, worship and theology.
- Practice acting out visits with other deacons so that you'll feel comfortable regardless of the circumstances you encounter while visiting.
- Study about baptism, communion and confirmation.
- Increase your personal spiritual life through daily Bible reading, meditation and prayer.
- Participate in worship and prayer with other deacons at regular meetings or a retreat.
- Attend workshops and seminars sponsored by your association or conference, ecumenical groups, or colleges and universities on topics which relate to your duties.
- Attend workshops your conference or association offer for its ministers on boundaries.
- Ask association and conference staff and leaders for help.

## Issues Facing the Church

- In the not-so-distant past, it was

commonly only men who served as deacons. In what ways today do we need to recognize the ability of people of diverse backgrounds to serve in spiritual affairs of the church?

- What does age have to do with ability to be a deacon?
- In the United Church of Christ, the ways that we view deacons are so varied, it becomes difficult for a deacon to be understood throughout the church. How do your church's traditions fit with those of other churches in your association or conference or other places in the denomination? What might you learn from others?
- Many church members expect deacons to be reliable people who will provide sound counsel. What special requirements or training might help ensure these expectations are met?

## Questions

- What is the role of a deacon in your church?
- What prior experience do you have with deacons?
- What are your responsibilities?
- Which part of your responsibilities do you think you do well?
- What is one area in which you need to work? How might you begin?