

Position Paper on the Role of Deacons.

The Elders were asked to give some clarity on the role of the deacon in Central. This we are glad to do. The Diaconate is a vital component of church life and as elders we appreciate our deacons with whom we serve in the work of the Gospel. The qualifications for a deacon are high (1 Tim 3v8-13) and this is because the church is precious to Jesus. A well-ordered church is one that that recognises the valuable role of the deacon and better serves his Kingdom's purpose.

The emphasis of scripture is not on quantifying the diaconal role, so much as emphasising the quality of the deacon. Whilst the elders have the oversight of the whole church, including preaching, teaching, exhorting, rebuking etc. (2 Tim 4v2), deacons are called to take care of everything else in the administration of the church. The Diaconate lifts the administrative load allowing elders to get on with the equipping of the saints mainly in word ministry and prayer. (Acts 6v2)

Spiritual. It would be a mistake to assume that one office is spiritual and the other practical. A glance at Acts 6v1-7, where a dispute arises in the New Testament church reveals: 1. The spiritual stature of those given this (embryonic) diaconal task. 2. The involvement of the whole congregation in the process of discernment. 3. The positive missional impact as a crisis is averted and the word of God spreads. In Acts 6 Dr Luke is prompting us to make the connection between the diaconal role and the spread of the gospel. A sound and supportive diaconate is essential to the mission of any local church.

Practical. The Diaconate is not a *second chamber* like the House of Lords but is a valued shaping part of what we do in Central Baptist in planning, presenting proposals to the church meeting and using other diaconal gifts like administration, maintenance and problem-solving. It is the role of the church meeting (of which all members are a part) to hold the elders accountable. The task of deacons is to support the work of the gospel in a range of ways and ensure that the elders are released to fulfil their role. In a context of mutual honouring God's work flourishes.

Pattern. The pattern in Central is not top-down but collaborative because both offices – elder and deacon – are not to be thought of as hierarchical but functional.¹ In Luke 22v27 Jesus intervenes in a dispute between the disciples over service and status: “For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.” In the New Testament the Greek word normally translated as ‘serve’ is *diakoneo* from which we derive our English word deacon. The diaconate is not a board of management (although the role sometimes calls for such skills!) but is to be a fellowship of Christ modelling sacrificial service.

Pastoral. We found in the Acts 6 account that the diaconal role was also pastoral. We cannot imagine men like Stephen or Philip approaching their assigned task of serving tables in any other way than a pastoral way. This kind of pastoral care is part of the diaconal role. It is an anomaly when a church has a primary pastoral care team that sits outside of the diaconate. Whole congregations can – of course - be engaged in ‘one anothering’ (Gal 5v13) – and we can have additional pastoral groups - but there is a particular pastoral component to the role of the deacon.

Some years ago, we recognised that a proportion of our deacons were not feeling engaged because their gifting was less administrative and more pastoral. This was an opportunity to address the (previously mentioned) pastoral anomaly. Deacons were offered the opportunity of being part of a pastoral stream. This offer was taken up by approximately one third of the diaconate and has proved to be an important development because: 1. It gives the pastors/staff team a stronger pastoral interface with the deacons. 2. It taps into the gifting of more pastorally minded deacons. 3. It expands the coverage of pastoral care. 4. Given that deacons are those who have been tested and approved by the congregation their role carries more weight. It is, however, important to remember that there is *one* diaconate and not *two* kinds of deacon. Any deacon can join the pastoral stream at any time.

¹ There is an authority vested in elders by the local body of believers, but this authority is to be applied lightly and in love. (Heb. 13v17)

We trust that this Paper illustrates something of the multi-faceted and rich calling of the deacon. We recognise that there is a crossover in some qualifications for deacons and elders, but also recognise that in the wisdom of God, he has given two distinct offices to his church, that of deacon and elder.

A healthy and well-functioning church is one that recognises the offices of deacon and elder, seeks to honour the example Jesus left in his word, operates in the conscious enabling of the Holy Spirit and in the knowledge of the grace of God (which is the oil that lubricates church life!) as we learn together what greatness looks like in the kingdom of God. “Jesus called them (his disciples) to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20)