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PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

RESOURCES

for DEACONS

*Love Expressed Through
Mercy Ministries*



Table of Contents

Preface	5
The High Calling of Deacon — Dr. George C. Fuller	7

Biblical Basics for Diaconal Ministry

The Mandate for Mercy Ministry	15
The Definition and Dynamic of Mercy Ministry	18
Two Common Objections to the Ministry of Mercy	21
Five Common Questions on Evaluating Need	23
The Three “Levels” of Mercy	25

Organizing for Diaconal Ministry

The Biblical Office of Deacon	29
Two Proposals for Committees of the Diaconate	32
Evaluation of Present Diaconal Ministry	35
Diaconal Spiritual Gifts	37
Diaconal Ministry and Church Growth	39
Steps for Mobilizing a Church Mercy Ministry	42
Surveying Your Community for Diaconal Needs	44
Guidelines for a Deacons’ Fund	48
The Service Bank: By-laws	50
“Service-Talent Bank” Survey	52
Outline for Mission Groups	54
The Ministry of Referral	56
Mercy Ministry Planning Worksheet	59
Presbytery Diaconal Associations	61

Needs and Programs for Diaconal Ministry

Programs for the Poor	65
Resettling Refugees — Dr. John H. Skilton	71
Needs of the Elderly	74
Programs for the Elderly	81
Nursing Home Ministry	84
Programs for Disadvantaged Children	86
Helping Parents With Their Parenting	89
A Flow Chart for Helping Unwed Mothers	92
Prisoners: Their Problems and the Biblical Solution	95
Guide for Visiting the Sick	97
Programs for the Handicapped	104
Ministry in Disaster	106

Table of Contents

Casework in Diaconal Ministry

Two Kinds of Poverty	109
Assessing Mercy Needs	111
Strategies for Adequate Employment	114
An Outline for Vocational Counseling	115
An Outline for Financial Counseling	117
How to Help Someone Face Suffering	119
Developing a Ministry Plan	122
Two Case Studies	126

Preface

In 1983 the National Presbyterian and Reformed Fellowship published **A Sourcebook of Mercy for Deacons** edited by George C. Fuller and Timothy Keller. That notebook is foundation for this manual. Dr. Keller is responsible for the diaconal ministry program in the Presbyterian Church in America and is a staff member of Mission to North America. He is also on the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary assisting in the practical theology department plus coordinating the Doctor of Ministry program.

Approximately half of the articles in this manual are articles from the **Sourcebook**. Combined with the completely new articles, Dr. Keller has developed a “think tank” source for mercy ministries in local churches.

There are forty brief articles in this manual. Each deals with a specific aspect of diaconal or mercy ministries. Most of the articles are very brief and basic. They are designed to act as springboards for interested members who can use each one to develop a plan of action for implementation in the local church.

We suggest that each church use this manual as a study in its entirety. Then in light of the present situation in your church and community we encourage you to begin to set up priorities that will most reflect your understanding of God’s will for you and your church at this point in time.

Don’t be overwhelmed by the tremendous volume of ideas and ministries suggested. The tendency might be to put it aside. To avoid such a procedure prioritizing your opportunities would be an invaluable step.

Much that comes under the category of mercy ministry requires an education and training process that will help your people see the needs and be trained to be part of that vital ministry.

You will find this manual to be a gold mine of ideas and resources in this much neglected part of the Christian ministry. It is divided into four major areas. You could study the entire manual, or select one major group at a time or even one section.

Our desire in offering this manual to the churches of the Presbyterian Church in America is that they will be encouraged to become more aware of and involved in mercy ministry. The entire Reformed and Evangelical world has been, at least for the past ten years, attempting to look seriously at the social implications and applications of the gospel.

If the PCA is to be on God’s cutting edge and implementing a ministry that is effectively carrying out God’s purpose, mercy ministry must be a vital part.

We commend to you this manual and its many ideas for ministry to those in need.

Charles Dunahoo

The High Calling of Deacon

George C. Fuller

Just north of Hyde Park and overlooking the Hudson valley stands the palatial Vanderbilt mansion. During the winter months two people lived here, served by over twenty maids, butlers, chauffers, groundskeepers, cooks and servants. Vanderbilt money was plentiful and powerful. Measured against the standards of past and present societies, the Vanderbilts "had it made." Wealthy, powerful, they sat where others have longed to be.

Jesus told his disciples, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them."

The world has always measured greatness by the standard of service, not service a person gives, but that which he receives. In business a man or woman is often judged successful if many people "report to him." Happiness and success is then to be found at the top of the pyramid. At the bottom is misery and drudgery.

Plato said, "How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?" For the Greeks, menial "service" was not dignified, surely not to be sought as a way of life.

But Jesus changed all that, radically reversing the world's standards. He did not make subtle changes or adjustments in a well-entrenched system. He turned the whole thing upside down, making, as it were, the first last and the last first.

That kind of change does not allow for compromise. Choice is necessary, and only between two options. Greatness in life, achievements is measured by the world's standard, "service received," or by the standard of Jesus: "service given."

How does someone reverse a standard whose acceptance has been so nearly universal among all people and throughout all centuries, perhaps especially in our present world? First, know that we are not talking about "someone"; we're talking about Jesus. More than Jesus the man, he is Jesus the Creator, Jesus the Son, Jesus the Lord. This world owes its beginning and its continuance to him and his power. The one who seeks to overturn the standards of a world that exalts men of power is himself King of kings and Lord of lords. With God the Father and God the Holy Spirit he is alone at the top of the pyramid; in fact, he is above the entire pyramid. So the precise question is: How does the Lord of glory set forth in a world of sin standards that utterly contradict its life-style, begun in Adam and continued to this day?

He does it by demonstration. He "deacons." Place high value on that word; it rises from the heart of the gospel. The Greek word meant to "serve at tables," and by extension, "to render humble, menial service for the benefit of others," Jesus said. "The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve."

That's the word: "I came not to be 'deaconed,' but to 'deacon'." For Jesus, "deaconing" meant giving sight to blind eyes, hearing to deaf ears, comfort to afflicted hearts, strength to weak legs, deliverance to tormented souls. He washed the disciples' feet. No wonder they were confused; their and the world's value system was being challenged. He endured capital punishment, emotional and spiritual agony beyond our comprehension, and not for any crime he had committed. He did it for others; he "deaconed."

If Jesus had not taken upon himself the "form of a servant," if the Lord of glory had not also "humbled himself and become obedient unto death, even death on a cross," the world's standard would be unchallenged. Not only would we be without his supreme example, as the one who though Lord of all became servant of all, we would also be deprived of his essential power. Having endured, suffered, died, Jesus was then raised, powerful, victorious, triumphant, now to live in and through his people. He is the "deacon," our ultimate example, and in his fulfilling of that charge from God is power for his people, his body on earth, to do his ministry.

The relationship between what Jesus did for us and what he does through us lies in the depths of his love. "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Jesus' love for us is love for sinners. A righteous, pure, holy God loves that which is unclean, impure, unholy. He loves us in spite of what we are. To say of such love that it is unusual is an understatement; it is absolutely unique. He loves the unlovely, the unlovable, who have rejected him and his mercy. He loves them anyway and brings them to himself.

"If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." The same kind of love with which the Christian was loved becomes his, namely, love for the unlovely, the unlovable, the dirty, the unclean. The love that Jesus demonstrated on the cross accomplishes our salvation, but it also gives us power for ministry. As no other person has every done, he "deaconed" on the cross. "He came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." In his diaconate, his ministry as deacon, there is the only hope for our diaconate, our ministry as deacons.

But Jesus does more than demonstrate the office of deacon and empower his people to fulfill that calling. He demands diaconal ministry from his people because they belong to him, whose life was marked by total self-giving and service. The New Testament calls his people "douloi" and "diakonoi," "slaves" and "waiters." As deacons, menial servants, they render service to God (II Cor. 6:4), to Christ (Jn. 12:26), to the new covenant (II Cor. 3:6), to the gospel (Eph. 3:7), to their fellow disciples (Mk. 10:43). Those who have his yoke placed upon them are commanded, "love your neighbor" or "love your enemy." I do not need to remind you that the entire New Testament makes clear that love which stops short of practical help is "in word only" or simply "with the tongue," a denial of the Lord we serve. The Reformers reminded us that absence of obedience is a sign of "no faith," "no salvation."

By example Jesus leads his people into diaconal ministry. In his death and resurrection he empowers them for this task. By command he calls them to obedient service. All that a deacon must do must be based on the diaconal ministry of his Lord and Savior. Our ministry of service is possible and is required, because Jesus came in the form of a servant.

The Reformation taught the priesthood of all believers; individual Christians have direct access to God through Christ. If we all share that privilege, if we are all priests, then we also all share responsibility for ministry. We are all deacons, ministers, servants, table-waiters to the benefit of each other, the world and to the glory of God. Such service is not optional. Empowered by the cross and resurrection of Jesus, it is commanded by Jesus. Cross-kind of love, cross-kind of service is characteristic of new life, the new view of greatness.

At the same time Scripture makes clear that certain people, properly chosen and elected, have special responsibility for diaconal ministry. Paul addressed his letter to the Philippians to "All the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons." This greeting makes clear that the office was established early and that it stood in close relationship to the office of "bishop" or "elder."

In I Timothy 3:8-12, just after a challenge to "bishops," Paul sets forth qualifications for the high office of "deacon": "Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for gain; they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons. The women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be married only once, and let them manage their children and their households well; for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith which is in Christ Jesus."

I Timothy 3 reveals that elders and deacons must share many qualities. Significantly, the elder must be "apt to teach," a quality not required of the deacon. The deacon, on the other hand, is not to be "double-tongued, not greedy for gain," qualities appropriate for all Christians, including elders, but specifically mentioned with regard to deacons. Deacons must exercise special mastery over their tongues. Hear James: "And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell." Not extreme language in the light of damage done to us and by us, by words improperly spoken: lies, exaggerations, inuendo, gossip, betrayal. The deacon is not a teacher; basically that is elder's work. But the deacon is going to be involved in the lives of people, intimately involved; so he had better have his tongue under control.

These special qualifications give us insight into the nature of deacon's work. If all there is to being a deacon revolves around flowers and fruit baskets and the quick drop-off and pick-up of sermon tapes, these characteristics do not have

special importance. But if indeed the deacon is going to meet people at their deep levels of need, if he is going to know people who hunger, thirst, who long for a friend, who need help of all kinds, then he needs special control of his tongue (and his ear) and special sensitivity with regard to money.

The duties of deacons in Presbyterian and Reformed churches are often derived from Acts 6. During the earliest church development (Acts 1-5) the apostles had maintained direct oversight over all the church's life, and done so under authority from the Lord himself. At Chapter 6, however, some believers with Greek background felt that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food among the needy Christians. The Apostles gathered the Christians and urged them to pick seven of their number, so that (1) this duty might be properly done and (2) the apostles might be free to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Deacons today should expect therefore that their task is (1) to help people with various kinds of needs and (2) to relieve elders of these and other tasks that detract from their concentration on "prayer and the ministry of the Word." If, as a matter of fact, deacons did the task well, many sessions might find themselves with shorter agendas. Perhaps sensing that "risk," elders, "teaching" and "ruling" may be reluctant to allow deacons to fulfill their own high calling.

After the deacons had been appointed, the apostles continued to have active interest in ministry to the poor, the widows and others with needs (Acts 11:30). No Christian, not even an apostle, can give away his or her responsibility for the poor and the needy, the deprived and the dispossessed. You can't give it to your denominational headquarters or to your local board of deacons. Deacons therefore have an important responsibility in today's accelerated world. They must organize the ministry of mercy. They must become God's channel for mobilizing the members of his church to minister in the lives of others. When deacons see their role as that of activating the ministry of mercy by all the people of God, by the whole church, they have taken the first step toward multiplication of blessing in the lives of extended multitudes of suffering people.

The deacons also had high interest in other aspects of the gospel ministry after their appointment. Appointed in Acts 6 as a deacon, Stephen dies in Acts 7, the first Christian martyr. Philip, also one of the original seven, was "Philip, the evangelist," engaging in personal and mass evangelism (Acts 8). Today's deacon can trace his roots back to rich blood, some of which flowed in sacrificial service.

The office of deacon is a high calling under Jesus Christ. It is not a training ground for elders, although some deacons later become elders. It is not a secondary office; it is not unimportant. It is absolutely critical to the life of the church, in spite of often being ignored. The framers of the Westminster Confession of Faith discussed for months the duties of elders and the power of presbyteries, but concluded the subject of deacon in one day. Some Presbyterian churches today have disbanded their boards of deacons or reduced them to roles of money-gathering and grounds-keeping. What a tragedy that

in a world filled with desperate people the church has so often lacked alert, creative, devoted deacons to challenge it and drive it by example and vision to responsive love.

J.K.S. Reid has written an article entitled "Diakonia in the Thought of Calvin," in a book called **Service in Christ** (London: Epworth Press, 1966). Reid affirmed: "It is difficult to imagine any single thing that would by itself do more to revive the church today than a recovered sense of this emphasis so typical of Calvin, that ministry means ministry. The legalism that formalizes ministry into a rank and neglects its essential character of service infects all churches." Reid makes clear that it was not the unimportance of the "care of widows" that caused it to be delegated; it was in fact its critical role in gospel ministry. The apostles simply did not have time or energy for two necessary and demanding ministries, the ministry of the Word and the ministry of mercy. To denigrate the high office of deacon is practical heresy.

The low estate of the office of deacon today is what we brought upon it, not what God intended. "When during World War II the Netherlands were occupied by Germans the deacons of the Dutch Reformed Church assumed the care for the politically persecuted, supplying food and providing secret refuge. Realizing what was happening, the Germans decreed that the elective office of deacon should be eliminated. The Reformed Synod on 17 July 1941 resolved: 'Whoever touches the diaconate interferes with what Christ has ordained as the task of the church . . . Whoever lays hands on *diakonia* lays hands on worship! The Germans backed down' (Frederick Herzog, **Service in Christ**, p. 147). And we relegate our board of deacons to the past or to trivial roles, hardly essential to the kingdom ministry! The time is always proper to challenge deacons to their high calling; no time is better than right now.

We have seen that (1) Jesus demonstrates diaconal ministry uniquely, and that he also requires Christians to express diaconal love and concern. We have found that (2) the New Testament refers to specific officers in the church, called deacons, with necessary qualifications for office and tasks to fulfill. And we have learned that (3) deacons ought not to define their duties too narrowly and certainly ought to have the highest regard for the significance and importance of their office in God's plan for service and ministry in a needy and dying world.

What, then, does the deacon do? He ministers in the name of Jesus among lonely, sick, elderly, orphaned, widowed, dying, poor and deprived people. Some Christians have maintained that the board of deacons only has responsibility under God to minister to needy people within the church. There is, of course, pharisaic danger in even raising this question. The lawyer asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" which, being interpreted, is "To whom should I show love?" or "How big should my neighborhood be?" "What are the geographical, physical limits for love?" The lawyer asked a question that rabbis had difficulty answering. Were they to love only other pharisees, or pious Jews, or all Jews, surely not Samaritans, not gentiles, certainly not

enemies. But Jesus made clear that the critical issue is whether or not his would-be disciple is himself a neighbor to any with whom he or she comes into contact.

Churches whose board of deacons is charged with ministry only among its own people should at least note the warning of W. A. Whitehouse, "... a self-contained expression of diaconal service within the fellowship of the church has no witnessing power and is spoiled in its very character by a taint akin to incest." Perhaps the prevailing poverty among the early Christians demanded that special attention be directed to the pressing needs of brothers and sisters. Boards of deacons who believe that their field of ministry is within the limitations of the church can have rich and useful ministry, as they identify intimately with the needs of their congregation and begin to learn from Christians in neighboring communities who may be able to teach them how to minister to racially oppressed or poverty-burdened members of God's family.

So what does the deacon do? The specific answer is determined by the nature of the neighborhood. As Christians emerge from the protective comfort of their churches, they may find lonely people in boarding houses; poor people without food; young people with absentee parents; nursing-homed people without visitors (one nurse estimated that eighty per cent of the people in Pittsburgh's nursing homes never receive a visit from anyone); confused people without hope.

The board of deacons ought to seek involvement of the entire congregation in the ministry of mercy. A board of deacons, functioning properly, will give creative attention to the neighborhood in which it is called of God to function, but it will bring the same kind of creativity to the devising of a plan to give every member of its congregation clear opportunity for ministry to others. The apostles, even after the appointment of the "seven," continued to minister to people in need. How tragic to withhold that privilege from many Christians who simply wait for direction.

In our complex society the church, or at least individual Christians, must give attention to the "large" problems. Poverty will not diminish until its causes are mollified. Food for a hungry person is a necessary ministry, but the grain fields that have become dust bowls need attention also. The Reformers sought to aid hungry beggars, symptoms of an ailing society, but they also took aim at the basic problem. "Calvin . . . took the initiative of suggesting the setting up of the silk industry at Geneva to absorb surplus labor and to make possible the ending of begging" (G. W. Bromiley, *Service in Christ*, p. 111).

The problems of our cities need study, reflection, prayer. What Alan A. Brash (*Service in Christ*, pp. 206-207) wrote of Asian cities might be said of our cities also: "The churches have not really grappled seriously with the problems of the city. They have passed out their resources in sideline acts of organized mercy which, however commendable, have not touched the heart of the matter. Such charitable service has made little or no impact on the

shape of the city itself, nor on its hectic rush to shame or glory. The dimensions of the problem have frozen the church into inaction." The disfavor that many of us have toward the pronouncements and postures of many church bodies on varied political matters ought not to prohibit us from seeking wisdom for positive contribution in world affairs when survival is at stake. (At the very last the board of deacons might ask for authority to sponsor the annual drive for funds for hunger, in an effort to bring that offering above the level of a collective pittance.)

And what happens when deacons fulfill their biblical mandate, when a church becomes a functioning community of service? For one thing, Christians become bound to one another as never before. John Calvin said, "The ministry of men . . . is a principle bond by which believers are kept together in one body" (IV, iii, 2).

A second result of an active diaconal ministry will be that we will have given the proper response to Jesus' diaconal ministry on our behalf. He served: we serve. Really, he serves through his body, the church, us. Without the ministry of mercy, the body is so incomplete. As though without an arm, a leg, the church seeks to stand, walk, run, but falls in confusion and uncertainty. In diaconal ministry we work out the salvation of the Lord with fear and trembling, until we see how that great gift touches everything and everybody that we touch. At every point of contact with his body the world sees and senses the love of God in Christ Jesus, love which commends and commands a ministry of mercy, diaconal ministry.

A third result is that we shall remove hypocrisy from our intercessory prayer. We shall be delivered from praying for the needs of others, while ignoring opportunities to minister to those in need. Our deeds to men will be brought into conformity with our words to God. Perhaps it should also be said at this point that the deacons might be specialists in intercessory prayer, not only praying themselves, but sharing with the congregation situations calling for prayerful attention.

A result hardly mentioned so far is that people will be helped. The evidence that Jesus offered to John's disciples that he was in fact the Christ was that the blind were seeing, the lame walking, lepers being cleansed, the deaf hearing and the gospel being preached to the poor. People were "being ministered unto," which is what he came to do. People were being helped, physically and spiritually, which is what it's all about for him and for his body.

"Deaconing" is a great Christian vocation. Under Christ's Lordship we can serve as successors of those who had the high privilege of ministering to him. After Jesus' temptation, "the angels came and ministered (deaconed) to him." After Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law, "she rose and served (deaconed) him." High, holy privilege; to serve Jesus in person. At the cross stood women watching, "There were also many women there, looking on from afar, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering (deaconing) to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and

mother of the sons of Zebedee." What blessed opportunity, to serve Jesus himself.

How tragic when the church does not heed the opportunity, respond to the call, to minister to Jesus in person, to serve the Lord himself. Christians, don't give up your birthright, your right by birth, the heritage of highest service. Deacons, don't retreat from God's high calling.

Biblical Basics For Diaconal Ministry

The Mandate for Mercy Ministry

(A Biblical Survey)

I. The Creation

Adam is charged to subdue and have dominion over all of nature (Gen. 1:28). He is, therefore, to subdue both spiritual and material creation to the rule of God. God's servants are to be as concerned to subdue physical disorder and meet physical needs as to subdue spiritual disorder and meet spiritual needs. Both ministries are basic to covenant service of the Lord.

II. The Fall of Man

When Adam sins, nature is no longer our willing servant. Sickness, death, hunger, exposure, etc., enter our existence (Gen. 3:17ff. - "cursed is the ground . . . painful toil . . . to dust you will return"). Immediately after the fall we see the need to "clothe the naked." Both ministries are basic to covenant service of the Lord.

III. The Patriarchal Period

Job knew that God required mercy to the poor and needy (Job 29:15-16; 31:16-23). Sodom was destroyed for its unwillingness to care for the poor (Ezek. 16:49). Joseph "blessed the nations" (Gen. 12:3) by carrying out massive hunger relief as a civil magistrate (Gen. 47:53-57).

IV. Early Israel

God intends that there be no permanent poverty in his covenant community. (Deut. 15:4-5 - "there will be no poor among you . . . if you obey the voice of the Lord your God.") God legislates:

- A. Social relief laws. The ordained ministry is to distribute tithes to the poor (Deut. 14:28-29). Individuals are to give to their poor

kindred (Lev. 25:25) and neighbors (Lev. 25:35-38) *until their need is gone* (Deut. 15:8, 10). This is not just spot relief.

- B. Economic development laws. When a slave is freed from debt he was to be given tools and grain to become self-sufficient (Deut. 15:12-15). Every 50 years all land was to return to the original family allotments, so as to continually give the needy the "capital" to become self-sufficient (Lev. 25).
- C. Social structures and institutions were established to protect the poor. The sabbath year cancelled all debts every seventh year (Deut. 15:1ff). The jubilee law (Lev. 25) returned land. Fair wages and business practices were regulated by law (Lev. 19:13, 35-37).

V. Later Israel

The prophets condemned Israel for neglecting the laws that protected the poor (Isa. 5:8-9; 3:11-26; Amos 6:4-7). The prophets taught that true heart religion is always marked by sensitivity to the poor (Isa. 1:10-17, 58:3-11).

VI. The Coming of Christ

- A. Jesus sees the proof of his Messiahship in his healing of the sick and preaching to the poor (Matt. 11:1-6).
- B. Jesus calls all his followers to be "deacons." *Diakones* means to meet the humblest, most basic needs of others (Luke 22:24-30). It means to meet physical needs in Matthew 25:44; 27:55; Luke 8:3. On judgment day, the reality of our faith will be tested by our deaconing of the poor (Matt. 25:44-46), since mercy is the natural response to the grace of God (Luke 6:35-36).
- C. Jesus associates and involves himself with the diseased and the outcasts. When confronted with these associations he calls people to the ministry of mercy (Matt. 12:7).

VII. The Church

The social righteousness demanded of the new Covenant community exceeds even the social legislation of the old.

- A. We are to give to the poor till his need is gone (I John 3:16-17 echoes Deut. 15:7-8).
- B. Ordained officers ("deacons") distribute to the poor as did the priests (Acts 6:1-7, see v. 7).
- C. Wealth within the community is given away to the "leveling" of lifestyles of all Christians (II Cor. 8:13-14 and Acts 4:32-37).

VIII. Summary

- A. Jesus is the true Adam (Rom. 5:15-21) who is subduing all creation to God (Eph. 1:9-10). So we are co-workers in bringing all nature into subjection to Christ (Matt. 28:18-20).

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- B. Jesus is the true High Priest (Heb. 4:14-16) who shows mercy to the needy. So we are royal priests (I Peter 2:9-10) whose deeds of mercy are sacrifices to God (Heb. 13:3-16).
 - C. Jesus is the great Deacon (Rom. 15:8) who identifies with the poor (II Cor. 8:9) and pours himself out in costly service (Mark 10:45). So we are deacons, who wash each others feet in humble service (Matt. 20:26-28; Gal. 6:10).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. "The activity of 'deaconing' includes both an attitude and an action." Define that statement biblically.
2. Does your church "look down" at sins of personal unrighteousness (adultery, drunkenness) but overlook sins of social unrighteousness (greed, a luxury-loving spirit, etc.)? What attitude did the prophets have about those two categories of sin?