

# The Ministry of Deacons at the Layton Avenue Baptist Church

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## Introduction

Deacon ministry takes a variety of forms among Baptists. We cite similar biblical references to define the origin and function of the office, but differ in how we interpret and apply a scriptural “model” to our particular setting. This is true not only between congregations but even within congregations, especially those like Layton Avenue with a diversity of backgrounds and previous church experiences among its membership. Our bylaws *intentionally* offer general guidance for implementing deacon ministry. This gives the church flexibility as its membership evolves and changes over time. How deacons are selected and serve are matters of ongoing scrutiny, evaluation, and preference.

## What our bylaws say (and don't say)

Section II.2 of our bylaws begins with a general, scriptural definition of the kinds of people deacons ideally ought to be:

In accordance with the New Testament origin and function of the office, deacons are to possess the heart of a servant and to demonstrate moral and ethical integrity, as indicated in such passages as Acts 6:1-7; and I Timothy 3:8-13. Moreover, they are to be mature believers and exemplary in their churchmanship, as demonstrated in their consistent tithing, worship attendance, Bible study participation, and involvement in the ministry and mission of the church.

This statement is intended to capture the essence of the two scriptures cited. No “official” interpretation of them is offered, in keeping with Baptists’ distaste for prescribed thought.

Taking their cue from Acts 6:1-7, many Baptists historically have seen deacon service as an elected office. Such is the case at Layton Avenue according to Section II.2 in our bylaws:

The church shall elect deacons by ballot at a regular or called business meeting. The optimal number of deacons shall be a ratio of one deacon per ten resident families, with a deacon’s normal term being three years. The deacons shall serve on a rotating basis, with approximately one-third of the deacon body changing annually. In cases where a deacon’s term is unfulfilled, the church may choose to elect another deacon to fulfill that unexpired term. After serving a three year term, a deacon shall be eligible for re-election only after the lapse of one year. Thus elected, deacons shall be ordained by the church except when already ordained by this church or another church of like faith and order.

*Electing* deacons is of primary importance with no procedure for electing them prescribed. Practical considerations about ratios, terms of service, etc. are based upon what has seemed to work best in churches like ours. The requirement that a deacon not serve for one year, for example, having completed a three-year term, is intended to allow new deacons to be elected, lest the church continually re-elect someone rotating off the active deacon body.

## **The practice of deacon service**

In some settings, deacons function in more of an administrative or “elder” role. As a group they’re charged with making decisions on behalf of the congregation usually, but not always, in consultation with the pastor.

At Layton, the administrative, decision-making processes of the church are distributed across a number of ministry teams. The mission team, for example, makes decisions regarding the church’s support for new church plants. The church as a whole, however, is responsible for decisions in which everyone needs to have a say such as the calling and/or termination of a pastor; adopting a budget; real estate transactions, amendments to the constitution or bylaws; and the election of church officers.

Deacon ministry at Layton follows a model based upon the passage cited above (Acts 6:1-7) in which deacons are described as spiritually mature and fit for focusing upon meeting the needs of others, especially those in crisis and/or at the edges of congregational life. Each deacon is assigned a segment of families in the church to offer care in times of crisis or need, and to connect with in other meaningful ways. Due to their maturity and demonstrated record of service, deacons assist the pastor in assessing the spiritual health and welfare of the congregation, and in responding to situations requiring confidentiality. The deacons and pastor together share mutual spiritual accountability; moreover, the deacons have responsibility for personnel matters related to the pastor.

## **Thinking about biblical qualifications**

Acts 6:1-7 and I Timothy 3:8-13 mention qualifications for deacon ministry related to spiritual maturity, and to moral and ethical integrity.

- 1) Full of the Holy Spirit
- 2) Full of wisdom
- 3) Full of faith
- 4) Worthy of respect
- 5) Sincere with a clear conscience
- 6) Not overindulging in wine
- 7) Not pursuing dishonest gain
- 8) Experienced or “tested”
- 9) Husband of one wife
- 10) Manages children and household well

Likely you’ve known deacons who seemed to epitomize the role according to these high standards. We should remember, however, that only one perfect person ever walked the earth. Someone “full of wisdom” makes an unwise decision occasionally or has an unruly teenager who does something embarrassing to his or her family. Hopefully we wouldn’t rush to render an otherwise qualified deacon or deacon candidate as unfit for service based upon an isolated incident or circumstance.

How we *interpret* the Acts and I Timothy passages is of paramount importance for our perspective on deacon ministry. If one takes a literalistic approach, then might these requirements disqualify Paul from deacon service? He wasn't married and had no children. Furthermore, if we take the requirements with no effort to grasp the larger meaning of the text, do we consider Paul's list comprehensive? Would a person who frequents gambling establishments be qualified for deacon service? Would morbid obesity preclude one from deacon service? Neither gambling nor gluttony is mentioned in Paul's list.

The two questions that seem to arise most often from Paul's list are: 1) Does divorce disqualify one from deacon service, and 2) Can only men serve as deacons? Many see the statement in I Timothy 3:12—"Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife"—as a definitive "yes" to both questions but stop short of seeing the statement as excluding single men from deacon service. No effort is made to consider the intention of Paul's statement within its first century social context. Some in Roman society may have practiced forms of polygamy, but Paul's concern more likely centered upon "serial" polygamy, i.e., the practice of men capriciously and callously casting aside their wives in favor of younger, more compliant mates to better suit them. More than anything else, Paul is advocating for candidates who hold the institution of marriage in the highest regard.

Consider this: Does an ironclad prohibition against divorced deacons mean that a man who murders his wife has a better chance of serving the office than a divorcee? Let's say the murderer pays his debt to society, repents of his sin, mends his ways and accumulates a track record of Christian devotion and integrity. A divorcee, however, can *never* undo the result of a broken marriage. Taken to its logical conclusion, rigid, wooden literalism sometimes yields absurd, unavoidable conclusions.

Those who say "the husband of one wife" means that women can't serve as deacons must account for the specific identification of Phoebe as a deacon in Romans 16:1. Some at this point abandon literalism and say that what Paul meant was that she was a "servant," given that the Greek term, *diakonos*, is sometimes translated this way in other New Testament passages. We cannot know with utter certainty what meaning Paul had in mind.

"What then do we say to these things?" to borrow a phrase from Paul. We say that...

- 1) A case can be made either way on the divorce and gender questions.
- 2) It thus behooves us to wear humility on our sleeves with our points of view.
- 3) Others who love the Lord and his Word may have an opinion different from ours.
- 4) A thoughtful and prayerful congregational process is needed for electing deacons

### **Selecting deacons**

Consider the following process, paying close attention to the roles of current deacons, the pastor, and the congregation at large.

- 1) Over a period of two Sundays at a time determined by the current deacon body, a deacon nomination ballot will be distributed and collected during morning services.

Members will be asked to nominate no more than the number of persons (men or women) needed to fill vacant slots (for example, two candidates for two vacancies).

- 2) The pastor and deacons will meet with a number of nominees equal at least to the number of vacancies + 1. Two current vacancies, for example, mean that the top three nominees will be interviewed. Should a nominee wish not to serve or to prove unqualified to serve, the next nominee by number of nominations will be interviewed.
- 3) Once the nominees are announced, any church member with an objection to a nominee may do so in writing to the pastor no later than the week following the announcement. The pastor will meet with the nominee to review the objection. If necessary, the pastor will reconvene the current deacon body to review the objection.
- 4) In the event that the above process yields a number of nominees equal to or less than the number of vacancies, those nominees will appear on the ballot with members asked to vote “yes” or “no” for their selection. A two-thirds majority in the affirmative of votes cast will be required for their election.
- 5) The deacon election will be held on a Sunday morning with ample prior notification. The number of nominees (equal to the number of vacancies) receiving the most votes or the required affirmative votes (see #4 above) will be elected to serve as deacons.