

DEACON COMMITTEE PROPOSAL

Last Updated: 01.04.2017

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SUMMARY

There is a great opportunity for PCA churches in central Florida and across our denomination to work together in the area of diaconal and mercy ministries. In response to this opportunity, we propose a permanent Deacon Committee of the Central Florida Presbytery (CFP) be established for the purpose of elevating the office of the diaconate, championing diaconal ministry and facilitating greater awareness and cooperative action in the areas of mercy and justice in our region. What is ultimately at stake as we seek to address this opportunity is the credibility of our collective witness to the gospel in central Florida. We cannot *declare* the gospel which Jesus called “good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18) without *demonstrating* this good news in concrete actions that minister to practical needs of our community. Word and deed ministries are most powerful when they are held together not only in the lives of individuals and local churches but also at the regional, presbytery level. This is why we recommend the establishment of a CFP Deacons Committee.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to provide a rationale for the establishment of a permanent deacon committee of the Central Florida Presbytery (CFP). This rationale begins with a story, narrating the brief history of the Florida Deacons Fellowship (FDF). It continues with an explanation of the need for greater cooperation in the area of diaconal ministry and a specific proposal to address this need. Finally, this document concludes with an explanation of the biblical and confessional justification and historical precedent for the approach that is being proposed.

HISTORY

The Florida Deacons Fellowship (FDF) began in 2011 as a voluntary association of mostly PCA pastors and deacons based upon the simple conviction that we need each other. Out of a concern that there is an unhealthy tendency for deacons from different churches to work in isolation, this fellowship of like-minded pastors and deacons began meeting together.

- In 2012, FDF held its first Annual Gathering at Orangewood Presbyterian Church to discuss the issue of disaster preparedness led by Curt Moore and several other speakers.
- In 2013, the Annual Gathering was held at Reformed Theological Seminary where Randy Nabors, the MNA Coordinator of Urban and Mercy Ministries and Director of the New City Network, spoke on the topic of “connecting to serve.”

- In 2014, Mo Leveritt, founder of Desire Street Ministries, challenged the Fellowship with the biblical “mandate and model” for diaconal ministry.
- In 2015, Dr. David Apple, who has served as the Director of Mercy Ministries at the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for over 25 years, spoke to the Central Florida Presbytery before leading FDF’s fourth Annual Gathering on the topic of “Everyone’s a Deacon.” Dr. Apple underscored Jesus’ role as the Divine Deacon and Supreme Servant of the church (Matthew 20:25-28; John 13:12-17, 34-35).

While these gatherings have grown larger each year and fostered increasingly significant interaction among diaconates from multiple PCA churches, they have only scratched the surface of the need for greater cooperation among deacons throughout the CFP.

Need

We live in a culture that is increasingly suspicious of religious institutions in general and the Christian church in particular. Since the 1960s there has been a dramatic decline in the average American’s goodwill towards institutional Christianity. While many factors have contributed to this decline, one significant trend that has accompanied it has been the tendency for the church to hand over the work of mercy and justice to the state, philanthropic organizations, and parachurch ministries. As a result of this trend, very few local churches are able to respond to complex social issues like generational poverty, homelessness, mental illness, geriatric care, access to medical services, juvenile delinquency, refugee care, unemployment, drug addiction, disaster relief and other entrenched societal ills which require substantial resources and a high level of organization to address.

Compounding this problem is the fact that pastors often lack the skillset needed to equip deacons for the work of mercy ministry, due in part to the fact that most seminaries do not devote a significant portion of their curriculum to teaching pastors about the biblical office of the deacon or equipping them to lead deacons, practically speaking. Consequently, deacons themselves often lack any substantial biblical or practical training. Some of our churches do not even have deacons and many church diaconates operate on a model that is less than biblical.

As the church has gradually handed over her diaconal responsibilities to secular and para-church organizations we have lost the collective wisdom needed to seek the welfare of the city. There are, of course, important exceptions to this unfortunate state of affairs, but one thing is clear: *we are not currently cooperating as effectively as we should be in the area of diaconal ministry—especially at the regional level.* There is, therefore, a significant need for the institutional church, especially at the presbytery level, to elevate this underappreciated office, to encourage deacons, and to initiate and facilitate cooperative action in our region as only the presbytery can do.

What is ultimately at stake as we seek to address this need is really nothing less than the credibility of our collective witness to the gospel in central Florida. Because Jesus is the Divine Deacon and Supreme Servant of the church (Matt. 20:25-28; John 13:12-17, 34-35; Phil.2:6-8), we cannot *declare* the gospel which Jesus described as “good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18) without *demonstrating* the gospel in concrete actions that minister to the neediest and most vulnerable members of our community. Word and deed must be held together not only in terms of our own individual lives or local churches but collectively and strategically as the institutional church in our region.

Proposal

In response to this need, we propose a permanent deacon committee of the CFP be established for the purpose of championing diaconal ministry in our region by exploring, reporting, and advising the CFP how we may collectively elevate the office of deacon, encourage deacons and facilitate greater cooperative diaconal ministry in our presbytery. No action taken by the committee shall in any way be used to replace, substitute, or circumvent the authority and responsibility of the local church.

Indeed, some immediate benefits that will be felt in local churches as a result of adopting this proposal will include:

1. TE’s and RE’s will benefit from hearing regular updates, stories and testimonies about the state of the diaconate across our presbytery (e.g., in much the same way that we regularly hear from church planters, RUF, MNA and other ministries).
2. Deacons will benefit not only from knowing that Presbytery values and cares about them and the work they do but from shared resources that will come out of this committee. *The*

Book of Church Order says, “deacons may, with much advantage, hold conference from time to time for the discussion of the interests committed to them” (BCO 9-6). And a permanent deacon committee would help facilitate these gatherings.

3. Local church members will also benefit from a variety of trickle-down effect as greater awareness regarding the state of the diaconate is promoted and greater cooperative action in the area of mercy ministry is fostered in our region.

Potential

We believe that forming a deacon committee at the presbytery level has the potential to produce the following fruit in three key phases—short-term, mid-term, and long-term—by God’s grace and with his blessing.

Short Term:

Fellowship and Discovery Phase (1-3 years)

1. Fellowship and Encouragement

- a. Establishing a permanent deacon committee would send a very encouraging message to deacons throughout our region. By giving attention to the state of the diaconate at every presbytery meeting, presbytery would demonstrate that deacons matter. This is one basic way that we can reaffirm the importance of this under-appreciated office in the church.
- b. Creating this committee would foster greater awareness and improve communication, generate networking opportunities, and, generally speaking, be catalytic in creating a culture of diaconal community.
- c. The Florida Deacons Fellowship is currently a loosely affiliated voluntary association of pastors, deacons, and motivated lay people who are active in mercy ministry that come together at least once a year to participate in an Annual Gathering. This fellowship would be significantly enhanced by the official endorsement of the CFP (in accordance with BCO 9-6) and the practical oversight of the CFP deacon committee.

2. Regional Needs Assessment and Asset Mapping

- a. A CFP deacon committee would be in a unique position to assess the “The State of the Diaconate” in our region, identifying both strengths and weaknesses.

- b. In addition to identifying these strengths and weaknesses, the committee would provide a context for pin-pointing the most acute community needs in our region (e.g., homelessness etc.)

3. Regional Information Sharing

- a. This committee's quarterly reports to presbytery would serve as the starting point for sharing information and provide a baseline for presbytery's collective knowledge.
- b. Beyond quarterly reports, the committee could facilitate the sharing of information resources relevant to deacons, including best practices, diaconal policy papers, referral services, church listings, and contact information via a website or other tool. The Florida Deacons Fellowship already has an active Facebook page. A domain name has also been purchased for the purpose of creating a FDF website.

Mid-Term:

Networking and Project Partnership Phase (3-5 years)

1. Regional Training Workshops

- a. Because there are countless social ills that the church is called to address through mercy and justice ministries, there is a perennial need for ongoing training and education. The establishment of this committee would facilitate opportunities for diaconal workshops to address specific issues.

2. Regional Joint Service Projects

- a. The committee would be a natural communication hub for joint service opportunities. For example, adopting a church plant. Larger and more established churches may adopt younger and newly forming churches that lack deacons and seek to serve their members and their community.
- b. The committee may sponsor a planning meeting on disaster preparedness in coordination with MNA.

3. Regional Deacons Fund

- a. Following the example of other regions like the Tennessee Valley Presbytery, which has established a regional mercy fund, the deacon committee could oversee the collection and manage the disbursement of funds for regional mercy ministry needs (cf. Acts 11:27-30; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9). For more details on how

this could potentially work, see Appendix A: “Manual of Operations for the Permanent Committee on Mercy of the Tennessee Valley Presbytery.”

Long Term:
Major Development Phase (5-10 years and beyond)

1. Full-time Deacon called by the Central Florida Presbytery

- a. As our cooperative efforts expand, it would be advantageous for the CFP to call a full-time deacon to serve our region under the oversight of the deacon committee. This relationship would be analogous to the way presbyteries currently oversee RUF ministers. Since presbytery committees are inherently limited by the busy schedules of their members, a full-time deacon, dedicated to coordinating cooperative mercy ministry at the regional level, would not only be able to accomplish administrative work on behalf of the committee but would be freed to support and connect deacons and churches throughout central Florida. This deacon would be in a unique position to serve the servants of the church as the point person for mercy ministry in our area.

2. Central Florida Diaconal Facilities

- a. As diaconal ministry within our presbytery becomes increasingly active and interactive there will be greater opportunity to leverage resources and invest in permanent mercy ministry facilities. These facilities could be used not only to provide office space for diaconal ministry but also to address a variety of regional community needs (e.g., homeless shelters, transitional housing units, food banks, employment and financial counseling centers, medical clinics etc.).

3. Sharing Knowledge with other Presbyteries

- a. If the Lord blesses our cooperative diaconal efforts the lessons we learn could be shared with other PCA presbyteries to promote and enhance diaconal ministry throughout the denomination.

Justification

Ample justification for the establishment of a deacon committee for the purposes outlined above is found in (1) Scripture (2) the *Westminster Standards* and (3) the PCA's *Book of Church Order*.

Scripture

The Bible requires individual Christians to care for the poor through private acts of generosity and justice.¹ But the Bible also calls Christians to come together and care for the poor *collectively*, through strategically organized works of public generosity overseen by the institutional church at the local, regional and global level.²

During the Old Testament period, the Law of Moses included a vast array of different requirements which officially codified God's special concern for the poor. And this vast array of laws was organized in such a highly systematic fashion that it constituted the first social welfare system in human history. For example, in addition to commanding individual Israelites to be generous to the needy (Deuteronomy 15:7-8), the Law of Moses included a variety of rules and requirements that were given in order to provide for the destitute and protect the vulnerable from falling into social and economic ruin. These laws included generous, interest free loans and securities (Exodus 22:25-27; Leviticus 25:35-38; Deuteronomy 23:19-20; Deuteronomy 24:6, 10-13, 17); the sabbatical year and the Jubilee year of release (Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-7, 18-22); gleaning and scrumping rights (Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 23:24-25; 24:19-22); and the triennial tithe for the poor (Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 26:12-13), to mention some key examples. When taken together with the general requirement of private charity, these laws gave official legal expression to God's desire for there to be "no poor" among his people (Deuteronomy 15:4; cf. Acts 4:34).

Similarly, in the New Testament we learn that the earliest Christian communities never limited their works of mercy ministry to their local fellowships. From the outset, the earliest Christian communities looked beyond the needs of their own immediate congregations to regional and even international concerns. For example, Luke tells us in the book of Acts that when believers in Antioch heard of the famine that was about to hit Judea, the church in that region responded by taking up a collection for the church in Judea.

"Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one

¹ See for example: Deuteronomy 15:7-8; Psalm 37:21; Proverbs 3:27; 11:25; 14:31; 19:17; 29:7; 31:8-9; Micah 6:8; Matthew 5:42; 6:3-4; 23:23; Luke 3:11; 6:30-31; Romans 12:13; Ephesians 4:28; 1 Timothy 16:17-19; Hebrews 13:16; 1 John 3:17

² See for example: Deuteronomy 14:28-29; Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37; 11:27-30; Romans 15:25-28; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9; Galatians 6:10; 1 Timothy 3:8-13; 5:3-16; James 1:27.

according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.” (Acts 11:27-30)³

Thus, early in his ministry, the elders of the church at Antioch asked Saul (i.e., the Apostle Paul) with Barnabas to deliver this relief fund. And in Galatians 2, Paul later recounts the common concern for the poor that he also shared, not only with the leadership at Antioch, but also with the “pillars” of the church in Jerusalem. According to Paul, this common concern of the early church’s leadership was a natural outworking of their shared understanding of the gospel.

“...when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave me the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.” (Galatians 2:9-10)

It is remarkable that the only concern that the *leadership* of the early church wanted to single out for specific emphasis when they met together with Paul was “to remember the poor” and that Paul says this was “the very thing” he was “eager to do” (Galatians 2:10). But it is perhaps even more remarkable to see how Paul actually went about working out this commitment to “remember the poor” through the Great Collection that he organized for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem (Acts 24:17; Romans 15:25-28, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 and 2 Corinthians 8-9). As Jason Hood has observed,

“For Paul, care for the poor cannot be pitted against ‘gospel ministry.’ The return to Judea to deliver the collection takes priority over Paul’s visit to Rome. As he explains in Romans (Rom. 15), this visit was to be the great launch of gospel ministry in the western half of the Empire all the way to Spain. We do not know if Paul achieved this mission, but we do know that he delivered the collection. *The collection was so vital that its delivery was at that moment a more urgent matter for Paul than his desire to evangelize and plant churches on the missionary frontier.*”⁴

Given the fact that Paul commands us to “join in imitating” him (Philippians 3:17),⁵ it is reasonable to conclude that God would have us find similarly strategic ways to *collectively* care for the poor in

³ We find the same *geographically expansive* expression of compassionate concern codified in Old Testament passages like Deuteronomy 15:7-8 which says “If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.” Notice that the Israelites were not only responsible to care for Israelites in their own home town but in “any of your towns within your land.”

⁴ Jason Hood, “Theology in Action: Paul and Christian Social Care”, in Jamie Grant and Dewi Hughes eds., *Transforming the World: The Gospel and Social Responsibility* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 134.

⁵ See also 1 Corinthians 4:16-17; 11:1; Philippians 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12; Hebrews 13:17.

our own day. Moreover, given the fact that God has established and ordained the office of the deacon to care especially for people's practical needs (Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 3:8-13; 5:3-16), it is reasonable to conclude that they should have a significant leadership role in the organization and execution of these efforts.

Finally, we should note that while a clear priority is placed on caring for the needs of fellow believers throughout Scripture, our works of mercy should not be limited to Christians. Mercy is to be extended to all people (Proverbs 3:27; 25:21-22; Romans 12:9; Galatians 6:10; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 5:15). As Jesus himself taught us in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the question we should ask is not "Who is my neighbor" but "For whom will I be a neighbor?"

Westminster Standards

According to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*,

"Saints by profession are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offers opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus." (WCF 26.2)

Notice that the Confession of faith not only emphasizes the *spiritual* communion of the saints but also their *financial fellowship* and *practical partnership*. That is, communion in "outward things, according to their several abilities." Moreover, according to the Confession, this financial fellowship and practical partnership is not to be limited to local congregations but is to be "extended unto... every place."

The Book of Church Order

"It is the duty of the deacons to minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress. It is their duty also to develop the grace of liberality in the members of the church, to devise effective methods of collecting the gifts of the people, and to distribute these gifts among the objects to which they are contributed. They shall have the care of the property of the congregation, both real and personal, and shall keep in proper repair the church edifice and other buildings belonging to the congregation. In matters of special importance affecting the property of the church, they cannot take final action without the approval of the Session and consent of the congregation. In the discharge of their duties the deacons are under the supervision and authority of the Session. In a church in which it is impossible for any reason to secure deacons, the duties of the office shall devolve upon the ruling elders." (BCO 9-2)

"Deacons may properly be appointed by the higher courts to serve on committees, especially as treasurers. It is suitable also that they be appointed trustees of any fund held by any of the Church

courts. It may also be helpful for the Church courts, when devising plans of church finance, to invite wise and consecrated deacons to their councils.” (BCO 9-5)

“The deacons may, with much advantage, hold conference from time to time for the discussion of the interests committed to them. Such conferences may include representatives of churches covering areas of smaller or larger extent. Any actions taken by these conferences shall have only an advisory character.” (BCO 9-6)

The presbytery has the authority “To devise measures for the enlargement of the Church within its bounds; in general, to order whatever pertains to the spiritual welfare of the churches under its care” (BCO 13-9.g).

Precedent

APPENDIX A: