



The Joys and Challenges of being called as a Deacon to a Congregational Church



“A good Deacon should be wise and willing. Willing to provide guidance both to Minister and Members. They should represent the church in all they do.
Being a Deacon is a privilege, but it is also a great honour.”

Introduction

This booklet is meant as a guide for those who are Deacons and those who are being called to be a Deacon. We acknowledge that all Congregational Churches are independent and that no two church situations, make-ups or constitutions will be exactly the same. We offer this booklet, which is based on the lived experience of supporting a large number of churches, as a way for those churches who wish to appoint Deacons, and those who are being called to become Deacons, to consider and define the role.

This role of Deacon is vital to the life of a Congregational Church and is undertaken by people from many different backgrounds, but who all love the Lord, have gifts to offer, and have a vocation to serve their church in this way.

Thank you to all Deacons for your commitment and service.



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What is a Deacon?

The role of the Deacon in the life of the church can be traced back to the Bible and to Acts 6, where the Apostles instructed the people to choose

“...from among you seven who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.” (Acts 6:3)

These were to be people who would look after the day to day needs of the people of God in a practical and serving way.

Still today, Deacons are people who offer their personal gifts to God in the work of his church and the care of his people. They accept the responsibility of leadership and organisation, and they work to nurture the whole people of God. Those gifts can look very different. Not everyone can stand up and speak in front of a congregation or lead a meeting, deal with correspondence or arrange rotas, visit those who are unwell or feel confident enough to pray out loud with others. This is why it needs a variety of people to be called to serve as Deacon, so that their different gifts can be used by the church in the needs of today.



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Being closely involved with the churches day-to-day witness is an important part of the role, and Deacons are called to carry this out in a gracious, caring and compassionate way. Through their own devotional life must come the maturity to think and live for others, and the fruit of the Spirit - which should be found in any Christian's life - are also vital in the Deacon.

What do Deacons do?

It must be recognised that not all who feel called to be a Deacon will be comfortable doing the same jobs. There will be many different tasks needing to be done within the overall role and an inability to do specific tasks must not be seen as a barrier to becoming a Deacon.

In some churches, Deacons may be asked to take a more responsible part in corporate worship in some of these ways;

- conducting worship,
- contributing prayers (including those for the Minister or Preacher before the service)
- distributing the elements at the Lord's supper and,
- when invited to do so, presiding at that service.

Deacons will find their attention and agendas focussing on the many routine jobs that are necessary to keep a church running:

- maintenance,
- finance,
- meetings (inside and outside the church community)
- representing the church at a wide range of church, ecumenical and community events

The main function of Deacons is to help to knit the church together and promote a family spirit. They should regularly attend, be seen and be approachable, and at any time give courteous attention to requests and complaints. Unseen, but just as important, will be their prayers and actions for the welfare of the people of the Church.



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Part of the responsibility for the well-being of the church is that Deacons have a particular duty of care to the Minister/Pastor/Leader (where there is formal leadership). This involves a great deal and requires much sensitivity. Deacons have the concern of seeing that the minister's spiritual and material needs are not overlooked.

In brief

Being a Deacon is a calling from God.

Deacons are responsible for all aspects of church life.

All have different gifts to offer.

Appointment of Deacons

The number of Deacons varies from church to church. In some there are twelve, like the biblical number of disciples, in others there are seven, as recounted in the book of Acts, or there may be a proportion of the membership serving as Deacons. Usually, deacons are appointed for three years, with a proportion of the diaconate retiring each year so that new people may come forward (as laid out in the church constitution).

However, today many Churches are struggling to find new volunteers in their midst in the face of declining numbers on each occasion. Many Churches have now changed their constitution to allow Deacons to continue to stand again after their three-year term of office has come to an end. It would be worth checking your own church constitution for details relating to your individual circumstances.

The church constitution is there as the rule book, but churches need to have an element of common sense and a realistic view. If it states there should be 7 Deacons but there are only 10 members this is not practical, and together as a church you would need to work out how to move forward. In this situation all decisions (particularly those in contradiction of the constitution) need to be minuted making reference to the constitution.

Every church must have its own appropriate method of electing Deacons. When appointed, they should be received into office by the church with special prayers for their future work. Deacons are privileged to make a particular contribution to the building of the kingdom into which Christ calls us all.

In Scottish Congregational Churches, it is the Church Meeting – in whatever voting method they decide – that elects Elders/Deacons from its membership.

In brief

Make sure you have (and are referring to) a copy of your church Constitution.

Deacons are usually nominated by church members.

Deacons usually serve a term for a specific number of years.

Deacons usually have to be church members for an agreed time before appointment as stated in the constitution (usually after at least 1 year).

Roles and responsibilities

Although the expectations of being a Deacon will be different in different churches, there are some roles and responsibilities that will be the same:

Praying for the Congregation

An important part of the role of Deacon is to commit to regularly praying for church members, adherents, and those in leadership positions. This may be as part of a prayer chain, with other Deacons, or praying for a specific portion of the congregation (as your own church decides). This might also involve some help with pastoral care, visiting those who need it and ensuring those who are unable to attend church regularly are kept feeling part of the body of Christ. Obviously, those Deacons who have work and life commitments may not be able to spend hours every week doing this, but sharing the load will help to make sure no one is forgotten.

Being involved in the day to day running of the church

In your church you may have Deacons who are responsible for particular areas of church life (like children's work, premises, room hirings, pulpit supply etc) and these are roles that enhance the smooth running of the church. However, it is likely that all Deacons will be involved in some level of day to day running of the church.

Involvement in worship

Many churches will have Deacons who are asked to help with worship. This may be ensuring jobs that need to be done before or after worship are completed, or participating in the worship itself (jobs will include putting up hymn numbers, preparing water for the preacher, welcoming people, checking technology is working, giving out hymn books, updating the notices etc). Deacons may be involved in communion services, perhaps providing and/or preparing the bread and wine and/or distributing them during the worship. It may be too that Deacons are involved in delivering the Bible reading, sharing the prayers, or even leading the whole service.

Attendance at meetings

Deacons should be regular attenders of Deacons and Church meetings and should be ready to share their prayerful considerations of the business at both. They may also be asked to represent the church on local committees (e.g. Churches Together, Christian Aid etc) and to represent the church at Congregational Federation Area or National meetings and assemblies.



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Visitors

Deacons will usually be responsible for making sure visitors including speakers/preachers, have everything they need before and during their visit. They will make sure they are familiar with the church set up and pattern of worship and are shown where everything is. Deacons will usually formally welcome them and may then also announce any notices.

Officers

It may be that in your church those who hold the positions of church officers (Secretary, Treasurer) are also Deacons. If this is the case, then other Deacons should be conscious of not overloading them with too much additional work.

Minister relationship

If your church has a minister, it is vital that the Deacons form a good working relationship with them in order for the church to run smoothly. Regular Deacons meetings, to which the minister is invited, are important to aid good communication and the distribution of information. It is also important that the relationship is open and collaborative, so that if any issues arise they can be discussed and alleviated in a timely manner.

Deacons are also responsible for Ministers' appraisals, time sheets (if used) and recording leave. They may often take responsibility for the church mobile during holidays (if you have one)!

Deacons should be aware of the needs of the Minister and ensure that they are supported within the workings of the church. This can include assessing the level of stipend paid or that the accommodation provided is suitable.

What Ministers said:

"The Deacons who I have served alongside over the years have really helped me to fulfil my calling as minister. They have offered friendship and support as well as learned counsel on manner matter and I am truly grateful for their help."

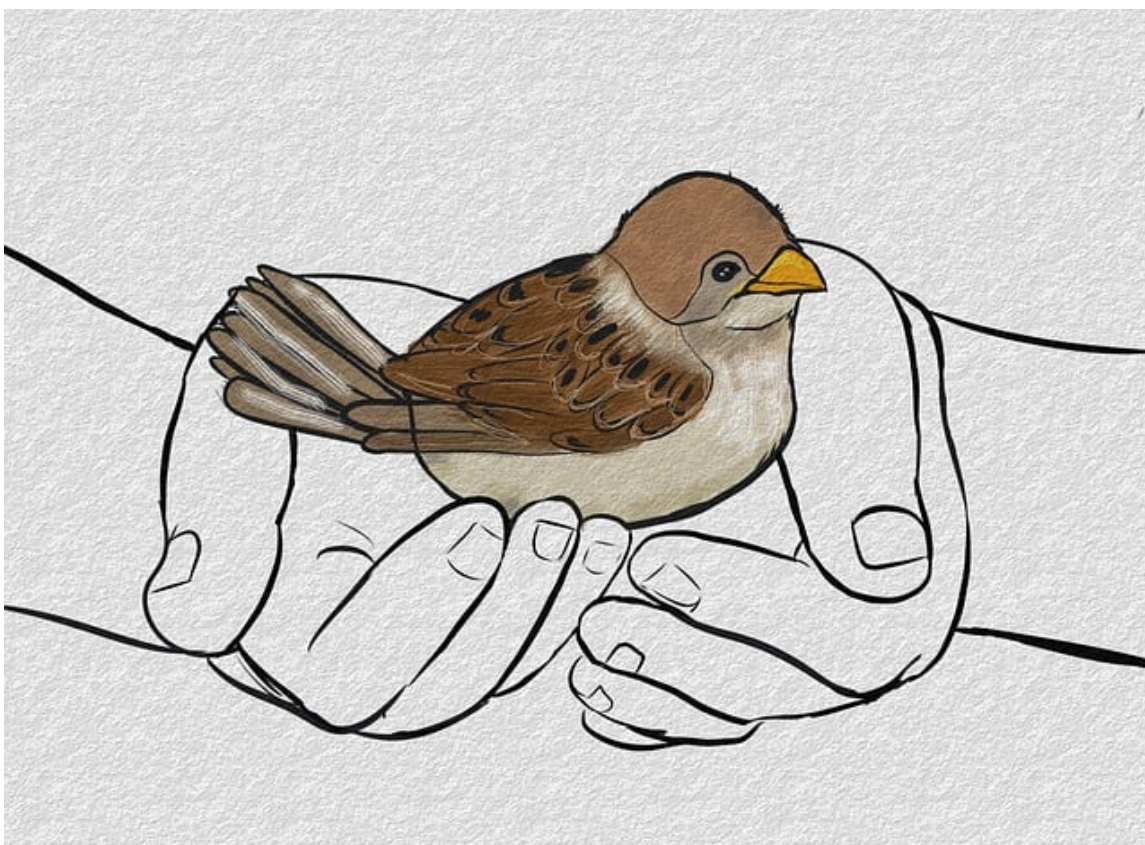
"Currently one of the Deacons is involved deeply with practical issues (preparing for church meetings, helping prepare services, liaising with contractors, etc) while another Deacon is more 'behind the scenes', guiding and supporting me spiritually."

Safeguarding

Whatever the roles and responsibilities a Deacon holds, they are seen and known as responsible, trustworthy adults. As such it is their responsibility to ensure they do everything they can to show this, improve their knowledge and keep up to date with information.

Safeguarding is one of those areas, and it is vital not to leave themselves vulnerable. The Congregational Federation advise that all Deacons have a DBS/PVG certificate and engage at least every 3 years with safeguarding training for;

- Pastoral support
- Adults
- Children
- Trustees



The Congregational Federation recommend **Thirtyoneeight** (www.thirtyoneeight.org.uk) for all safeguarding matters and regularly run free training sessions if the church does not want to book and finance themselves.

Deacons' meetings

Deacons' meetings will normally take place before a church meeting to prepare recommendations. It may be a monthly or bi-monthly, quarterly, or as required.

Emergency meetings can also be called known as extra-ordinary meetings. These are normally called to discuss particular or urgent issues which cannot wait until the next scheduled meeting.

Deacons' meetings are usually chaired by the Minister or secretary or a Deacon with gifting in this role and formal minutes should be taken of the business discussed.

As Congregationalists in Scotland are heavily influenced by their Presbyterian roots, often the Deacons Meeting takes more of a leadership role over the Congregations affairs, than would be the case within the English tradition. The Church Meeting can - and often do - delegate authority to the Elders/Deacons but as Congregationalists we must always hear the voice of the Church Meeting as all Members prayerfully consider, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In most Congregational churches, the Deacons are also the managing trustees. We recognise this isn't always true and if you are not sure please check your constitution or contact us and we will clarify for you.

Managing trustees are responsible for the day to day running of the church. They are responsible for recommendations made to the church meeting, concerning all manner of church life, and then often have the responsibility for implementing the decisions the church meeting prayerfully reaches. Often the Deacons will have had to research, pray about, and discuss these recommendations. This is right at the heart of the governance structure of Congregational churches. However, Deacons do not act alone and should always be prepared to consult others when needed. When decisions need to be implemented, this is where the various skills and talents of the Deaconate can come to the fore, as tasks should be allocated to the person with the relevant gift to make sure the decision is correctly and fully achieved.

Within Scottish Congregationalism generally, ordained Ministers are seen as Elders within the Congregation and particularly seen as ‘Office-bearers’, rather than employees. In some Congregations the Minister would be a Trustee alongside Elders/Deacons. The normative historic position most of our Churches find themselves in, is that Deacons are the Trustee body, and for those with an EU heritage (those churches who were originally in the Evangelical Union) the Elders are Trustees alongside the Deacons. It is helpful for Deacons (and/or Elders) to be made aware of their Trustee responsibilities before being elected and to recognise that they have a responsibility to God, the Church Meeting and additionally, to the Scottish Charities Regulator – OSCR. All Churches should be registered with OSCR as a charity or other such regulated body (SCIOs are becoming more common for Church bodies).

Church Meetings

Church meetings should happen regularly within a Congregational church, monthly or bi-monthly, quarterly or as required by the church. Deacons are expected to attend church meetings as well as Deacon’s meetings as often as possible.

Deacons prepare all that is needed for a church meeting, usually in cooperation with the church Secretary and bring recommendations to the meeting. Deacons will also be given permissions from the church meeting to carry out all that has been decided.

Formal minutes are taken in a church meeting.

Recommendations for new or additional Deacons can be brought to church meetings but Deacons are usually appointed along with other roles at the AGM.



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Life Deacons

The title Life Deacon is usually a privilege given to someone who has served within the Deaconate for a long time and been faithful to the church.

A Life Deacon may be a retired Deacon but is called upon by the church at specific times when needed.

Having a life Deacon is not a mandatory part of church life.

Deacons v Elders

Traditionally Congregational churches have been served by a group of Deacons elected by the church meeting. They usually serve terms of office, not for life.

A few congregational churches also have Elders. In the Jewish faith, elders were community leaders. In the early church their task was to teach and offer leadership.

The general distinction between the two is to see elders as having more of a pastoral and/or teaching role within a church, perhaps leading house groups or pastoral visiting.

Scottish Congregational Churches, particularly those from EU beginnings, often have both Elders and Deacons, in common with most Presbyterian denominations in Scotland. Elders – including the Minister, who is a Teaching Elder, others being Ruling Elders – look after the spiritual and pastoral life and outreach of the Congregation. Deacons (sometimes referred to as Manager), are called to look after the physical life of the Congregation, along with finances, buildings etc.

“Deacons can help keep things steady in times of difficulty. We are all tested, and Deacons must be aware of this. As non-conformists we all have a direct connection with God. Deacons must therefore listen for his word and, when combined with their wisdom and experience, have the strength to lead” (A Congregational Minister)

What Deacons are not ...

Deacon in name only, enjoying the title but contributing very little to the life of the church.

Deacons' Sunday

Some Congregational churches celebrate the role of the Deacon by have a Sunday devoted to the role of the Deacon. This will include the Deacons leading the service, praying for them, maybe renewing their promises, and encouraging others to hear God's call.

Some churches have a whole month of services which are led by the Deacons usually in August when it can be more difficult to find visiting preachers.

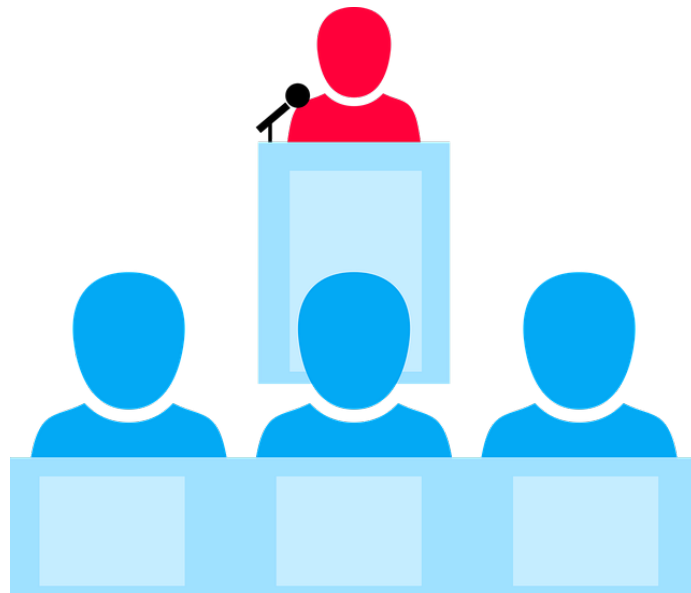


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Summary of skills that would be beneficial:

- Prayerful and open to hear God's callings
- Good communication and organisational skills
- Leadership skills
- IT skills
- Meeting skills
- Patience and Pastoral care
- Trustworthy
- Commitment to church life

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