

AGENTS OF MERCY

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In the previous column on the Church Order we considered what we have agreed to as the core tasks of the shepherds (or pastors) of the congregation (i.e. ministers and elders). This time we look at Article 23 which briefly outlines the duties of the office of deacon.

Just as I mentioned with regard to elders and ministers, the adopted Form for Ordination gives a more comprehensive description than we have in the Church Order.¹ In the Form, the task of the deacons is characterized as “Ministry of Mercy,” a ministry that reflects the biblical vision that “no one in the congregation of Christ may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness and poverty.” That sounds very beautiful. But it also sounds challenging. How are they going to do that? In this article I can only highlight a few aspects.

As far as I can see, I don’t think that in our churches we have fully outgrown the mindset that if a (young) man has served well as a deacon, then, at the next round of voting, he may be promoted to the “higher” rank of elder. This ignores an important observation. Rev. Van Oene makes the comment that the office of deacon often requires more experience and wisdom than the work of an elder, and that in many instances it is more difficult to be a good

deacon than to be a good elder.² He is correct. And that makes it very valuable to have older brothers serve as experienced deacons.

DEACONS AND CONGREGATION

The pre-1983 version of our current Article 23 focused on the deacons visiting and comforting where needed, as well as collecting and distributing the collected gifts among those in need. A good change in this article is that it now also emphasizes the responsibility “to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation” and to “exhort the members of Christ’s body to show mercy.” In other words, showing mercy and helping those in need are not just the jobs of the deacons, but both are the responsibility of all the members of the congregation.

Acts 2:44–45, 4:32–35, and 1 Corinthians 12:21–27 show that a merciful attitude is simply characteristic of what the church is all about. I think it is fair to say that a lot of this is happening already in the churches, even without the deacons exhorting people to do so. At the same time, stimulating and facilitating this remains an important part of the work of the deacons. But how to do that? What is the best way to engage the congregation in this process

¹ And in this case also, several books have been written about the office of deacon, and about the work they do.

² W.W.J. Van Oene, *With Common Consent*, Winnipeg 1990, 109



of growing more and more into the community of mercy Jesus Christ wants us to be?

The most obvious way for the deacons to fulfill this task is to regularly visit all the members of the congregation. Unfortunately, when they try, deacons can still get the reply: “Why do you want to visit me? I’m okay. I don’t need your help!” The answer is, of course: “That’s great, but perhaps someone else might need *your* help.”

Apparently sometimes the deacons still have a lot of educating to do. One way to support these efforts, to create more awareness in the congregation of what the office of deacon is all about, could be distributing a semi-annual newsletter. It could be just one page with relevant information, helpful resources, etc.

DEACONS AND ELDERS

Although we picture deacons as men who collect and distribute money, sometimes money is not the greatest need in people’s lives. When individuals or families have chronic financial needs, those are often connected with other pastoral “problems” they struggle with. This illustrates the benefit of having experienced deacons who demonstrate spiritual wisdom and discernment. But more importantly, here the work of the deacons connects with the work of the elders. To make that function effectively, the brothers need to cooperate closely. As we see elders and deacons working

together, it is good to think a bit more about the relationship between these two offices in the church.

The biblical roots for both elders and deacons are outlined in the Form for Ordination. It’s interesting: we have one Form for both offices, but in the descriptions of duties and responsibilities there is not much in common. The Form clearly separates “the government of the church” from “the ministry of mercy.” Together the deacons form the “deaconry” or “diaconate,” which is a body separate from the “eldership” but not fully independent from it.

This does not only mean that the brothers cooperate where their labours overlap, so to speak, but there is also a formal aspect to this. It does not say so in Article 23, but Article 42 of the Church Order stipulates that the deacons “shall give account of their labours to the consistory.” It does not specify what such “giving account” should look like. Is it a matter of sharing some general information for the consistory to take note of? Or is it a more formal and detailed report which requires the consistory’s approval? To avoid any misunderstanding, with “more detailed” I don’t mean names, amounts, and personal circumstances of persons or families that are financially supported. The deacons have their own responsibilities which must be respected by the elders.

At the same time, Reformed church polity knows only one ruling body in the church which is the consistory, consisting of minister(s) and elders (see Art 38 CO). Christ has entrusted the government of the church to the shepherds. This implies that they have supervision, not only over the service of Word and sacrament, but also over the service of mercy. Again, this is not to micro-manage the practice of how to show mercy, or how much support is given to whom. But in the end, the general stipulations that regulate the ministry of mercy are the consistory’s responsibility. If that were not the case, we would end up with two independent bodies governing the church, which could become quickly problematic, especially in cases of differences or disagreements.

DEACONS AND CONSISTORY

This leads to another question that has triggered some debate over time. Most of us are familiar with the distinction between council and consistory, although some churches intentionally avoid the word “council,” and use the terminology “consistory” and “consistory with deacons” instead. The latter is more in line with the wording of the Church Order, but I am not arguing here about the terms as such. Whether you prefer “council” or “consistory with deacons,” the question is: what is the role of the deacons as they meet with the consistory? “Giving account of their labours”

is stipulated in Article 42. Sure, but that does not require all the deacons to be present at a meeting every month for a whole evening. What else? Does the office of deacon include governing the church? In some instances, it does. In the Church Order we have agreed that the deacons must be involved in all matters that have to do with entering into office, serving in office, as well as leaving office, for all office bearers. This is stated in ten different articles of the Church Order but the scope is actually very limited.

I cannot oversee how it works in all the local churches of our federation, but I think that in practice the deacons are often involved in everything except matters of pastoral care and discipline. Is that a good thing or not? Opinions differ. Let me share two voices.

Rev. Van Oene was convinced that it is a deplorable error that in Article 38 of our Church Order the consistory is composed of the ministers of the Word and the elders, thus excluding the deacons from the general governance of the church.³ Rev. R.D. Anderson (FRCA), on the other hand, concludes that from the beginning of the Reformation the consistory consisted of elders and ministers. At times deacons would attend, but without having any part in governing the church. He suggests a return to the original practice and to following the Church Order more closely. This means that the deacons would only join the consistory for matters pertaining to the ministry of mercy, and for the matters specifically indicated in the Church Order. Without responsibility for the general government of the church, the deacons would be able to focus more on their diaconal task.⁴

DEACONS RESTORED

In the Roman Catholic Church before the Reformation, deacons had become no more than helpers of the bishop. The Reformers restored the awareness that deacons do have an ecclesiastical office, and that they do not rank lower or higher than elders. That's why the apostle Paul addresses his letter to the Philippians to the believers "with their overseers and deacons." And that's why, in 1 Timothy 3, he can seamlessly move from listing the qualifications for elders to those for deacons. However, this does not imply that the task of the deacons includes governing the church. 



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³ Id., 176

⁴ R.D. Anderson, <https://anderson.genevanconsort.com/pdfs/deacons-and-consistory.pdf>