

Chapel Needs Deacons

Introduction

Having established ourselves as an eldership team, we believe the next best leadership step we can make to further our vision of seeing hundreds of lives transformed would be to appoint deacons. We began to mention appointing deacons in key messages, such as the Vision Sunday preach on Acts 6:1-7, on 19th April 2020. We have prayed over a number of people and been in conversation with them through the latter part of last year, and into the early part of this year. Gaining their consent, we then sought the approval of our Trustees, another important 'office' in our church, which they gladly gave. Now we are bringing their names to the whole church family, hoping that you will all be able to get behind them fully.

Why are deacons needed?

- They're Biblical, especially as churches grow; it honours God to appoint them.
- Appointing deacons also honours faithful, servant-hearted, gifted individuals in our church; it expresses the elders' and congregation's appreciation for their service.
- Appointment empowers these individuals to serve even more effectively; they are given a title, recognition, and affirmation by the elders and the congregation (our often-unspoken support becomes much more visible); and the laying on of hands, the supernatural commissioning and empowerment by the Spirit is not to be underestimated.
- It strengthens diversity, enabling women especially to serve in a recognised position of delegated authority, in their areas of responsibility, in the church; this will give gifted women a greater voice to help us grow the Chapel.
- It reduces confusion: it shows we adopt all not just some aspects of New Testament church structure, and it gives a Biblical way of understanding what is expected from these key individuals.
- It expands our committed core to have another tier of formally recognised people in leadership; and should therefore extend the impact of the elders' ministries, reducing the chances of them burning out or being prevented from focusing on their primary callings.

What is the Biblical basis?

In general terms, a deacon assists the elders of a church in any service that supports their Word-based ministry directing of the church. It is distinguished from eldership in that it is not a governing role requiring authoritative teaching but that does not make it less important. It is a significant *leadership* role of fundamental importance in the church.

Philippians 1:1-2

“to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers [=elders] and deacons [*diakonos*]”

Diakonos clearly speaks of a church government office; known individuals are being referred to as deacons. The word can mean servant or minister but here it's set out as a distinguishable role in the church. Both overseer/elder and deacon are singled out from “all the saints” which suggests together they form a combined leadership group for the church.

1 Timothy 3:8-13

“Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. *Women* likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”

The first “likewise” suggests similarities and differences to elders. There are a number of similar character tests, but there is no requirement for the specific gift of teaching (1 Timothy 3:2). There is mention of a probationary period, deacons must “be tested first”, which is not present in the same way for elders, but we are told not to lay hands on elders too hastily (1 Timothy 5:22).

Women, not just deacons' wives, are being referred to. The second “likewise” suggests a new office not a requirement for the same office being set out, as it did with the first “likewise”. It would be odd for Paul to include requirements about a deacon's wife but not an elder's. “Husband of one wife” is more about not being polygamous, a potential danger in the culture for both men and women.

Romans 16:1

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchrea.”

The phrase “of the church” suggests that Phoebe isn't a general servant in the church but has the specific role in the church of deacon. It's probable that she was given the responsibility of delivering Paul's letter to the church in Rome and making arrangements for his intended visit.

Evidence also suggests the early church recognised women as deacons. Pliny the Younger (61 – c. 113), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – c. 215) and Origen (c. 184 – c. 253) all refer to women deacons/deaconesses.

Acts 6:1-7

The people set apart to help the apostles bring unity (and focus on preaching, teaching and prayer) through better managing the distribution of food to widows are not called deacons but they are the prototype for this ministry. A specific responsibility is given to them so the

apostles can focus on their main priorities. Note also, there is good collaboration between the leaders and led in their appointment.

[We have been greatly assisted by Andrew Wilson and John Stevens in the above.]

Who generally are we looking for?

We are looking to appoint, with the church, *individuals* (rather than generic ministry leaders) who are intentionally unifying, who destroy division and help people get fully behind Chapel's vision. We anticipate appointing men and women who fulfil the 1 Timothy 3 criteria above. They will carry significant serving responsibilities (which will typically, but not always, involve regular interaction, e.g. loving leadership or pastoral care of people in our church family) and have been faithful in doing these or similar duties for some time. They are committed to building the church God wants at Westminster Chapel, and this can be seen, amongst other things, in their attendance/engagement in services and Life Group, prayer and giving. We expect deacons to serve for three years or more and to have completed our leadership training initiatives.

Who specifically would we like your affirmation to appoint?

In this first round of appointments, we would like to recommend the following eight people (in alphabetical order): Biola and Sola Akinyose, Dave McDowell, Heather Neufville, Holly Satterthwaite, Gillian Sloan, and Mike and Becci Tan.

When will this take place?

31 Mar - Vote at online Church Family Meeting

27 June - Commissioning Service (subject to covid-19 restrictions)

Other Questions?

How long would they serve for?

We expect people to commit to serve as a deacon for three years or more (without needing to be voted in again every three years). We are also considering having an informal 6-month probation/cooling off period, if things don't work out, for both parties, for whatever reason.

What if their ministry role changes, can they still be a deacon?

Yes, if you move, within six months, to serve in another area of similar responsibility. We'd expect to prayerfully work this through together as friends in ministry.