

Diaconate Report

from the Session

2016

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The Office of Deacon at Central Presbyterian Church

The diaconate of Central Presbyterian Church has served God's flock faithfully and with excellence for decades. Additionally, countless women have served in similar ways, although not under the title of deacon, for many generations at Central. As previously announced, your Session determined it wise to reexamine the role and makeup of this important part of our church body – including how to integrate women more intentionally into this ministry work. At the request of the Senior Pastor Search Committee, we thought it prudent during this season of Senior Pastor transition to clarify our position on what the diaconate is, how it functions, and who it is comprised of at Central Presbyterian Church.

In March of 2016, the Session brought this study and deliberation to a close with what we believe to be a healthy way forward for our church family. Our work has not always been perfect or predictable, but we approached it with open minds and a desire to honor the Lord in the process. Throughout, we sought to understand the truth as presented in scripture and we sought to honor the current diaconate and the women of our congregation. The pages that follow provide a summary of our work.



Session Discernment

Seeking to Discern the Mind of Christ for His Church at Central

One of the key functions of your Session is to discern the mind of Christ for the church. To state the obvious, this is a task to be taken with the utmost humility and awe. It is a task only possible by the Grace of God.

With much prayer and trepidation but also joy, we put our hand faithfully to the plow in pursuit of the Lord's blessing and will for his church.

For the last year, your Session has engaged in a study on the role and makeup of the diaconate at Central Presbyterian Church. What is the mind of Christ for us on this topic? To be clear, this topic of study was designed to be intentionally broad. It was bigger than the question of whether the diaconate ought to be men only. Our study included that, but it also examined other questions like:

- Should we even have a formal board of deacons?
- If so, should the deacons of that office be ordained?
- How many deacons ought to be part of such a board?
- How can we engage more people in diaconal ministry?

As we began this important work, we arrived at several early conclusions that are important to highlight.

First, we as a Session made a distinction on the study of deacon as opposed to that of elder/pastor. It continues to be exceedingly clear to us in scripture that God reserves the office of elder/pastor for men. The office of deacon, however, is not as clearly defined. There are very few texts that handle it in any form, and only two that do so clearly (1 Timothy 3:8-13, Philippians 1:1). As a result, the definition of the diaconate is in fact open to different positions, and requires wisdom in light

of the limited texts that speak to it.

Second, and most importantly, the Lord convicted us as a Session in our need to engage women more fully in the life of the church. Many women serve and lead already, but we desire to see more. In August 2015, we as a Session unanimously stated that:

"It is the Session's desire that women at Central participate fully in the ministry and leadership of the church, using their gifts in as many ways as biblically permitted."

This is a statement that is much bigger than the diaconate. In fact, to focus on that issue alone would be shortsighted. There are many opportunities throughout our church to make this statement a greater reality. We are committed to doing this.

With regard to the diaconate study specifically, we as a Session sought to make the scriptures our primary source of information. We went to extensive lengths to understand what the scriptures say about the topic, how other scholars have interpreted them over time, and how to most responsibly interpret them now.

Perhaps the most familiar scripture passage considered as relates the diaconate is 1 Timothy 3:8-13. This text sets forth qualifications for deacons, and it has been a source of guidance as well as debate for a very long time. The debate hinges largely (but not exclusively) on how one interprets the original Greek word "gunaikas" in verse 11 of 1 Timothy 3. Some interpret it to mean women, while others interpret it to mean wives. The original authorial intent is unclear, so we are left to debate which one we believe to be correct. These are the types of details that we wrestled with together.

After much study and prayer, we engaged each other in respectful dialogue and debate on the topic over a series of evening meetings. Our debate attempted to stay rooted in principles, and we tried to hold one another accountable if we felt that our debate began to be driven by fear or by cultural persuasion. Throughout our debate, we continually came back to the same question: what do the scriptures say?



Session Decision

Taking Action to Move Central Forward

Our study of the key scriptures on the diaconate revealed that there is room for interpretation. This is important, because it means that more than one view can be held. Before spelling out the specifics of our decision, it is important to emphasize that, and to clearly state the following:

It is perfectly acceptable to have differing opinions amongst us.

In light of this, we are convicted of the importance to respect each other no matter what position we happen to hold. The Session’s recently adopted “Resolutions” remind us of this principle as well.

Decision. With that important prelude, there are three key components of the recent Session action:

- 1. Condense** the size of the diaconate to a total of 4-6 deacons.
- 2. Continue** the diaconate as an ordained board of men.
- 3. Create** a new “Compassion and Service Team”, comprised of men and women, that will lead and do the work of diaconal

ministry under the oversight of the smaller ordained diaconate.

As a Session, we had varied viewpoints about the interpretation and application of the Bible to the make-up of the diaconate, but we are unified in our final decision. The primary benefit of these changes is that more of us, both men and women, will be able to more fully participate in the leadership and execution of diaconal ministry work. We are excited about this, and especially the idea of welcoming women more fully into this important work.

This action reserves the ordained office of deacon to men. We as your Session felt the gravity of this decision, knowing that there are strong opinions on both sides of the matter and freedom to hold different opinions. Collectively, we sought to both honor the biblical text and also to honor the women of our congregation. We hope and pray that these actions do both.

Timing. Condensing the diaconate will require significant planning and coordination over time. To that end, the Session approved the formation of a Diaconal Transition Commission to assume the responsibility for implementation and the many details required to move ahead. This will be done in close coordination with the current diaconate leadership and ONCC. We expect that work to begin in May 2016 and to be completed by the end of 2016, preparing the way for the ONCC process of 2017.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What biblical texts make reference to the issue of the diaconate?

A: Only a few: Acts 6:1-6, Romans 16:1, Philippians 1:1, 1 Tim 3:8-13.

Q: Why is there such diversity of interpretation around such a narrow amount of Scripture?

A: The debate hinges largely (but not exclusively) on how one interprets the word “gunaikas” in verse 11 of 1 Tim 3. Some interpret it to mean women, while others interpret it to mean wives. The original intent is unclear, thus the diversity of interpretation.

Q: If other churches within the EPC ordain women as deacons, why not Central?

A: This is a matter in which each local church is granted liberty to decide for itself. We are not required to hold one position or the other.

Q: Will the men and women on the “Compassion and Service Team” be called deacons?

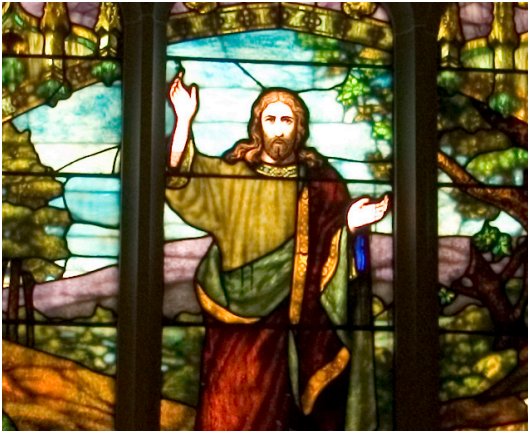
A: No.

Q: What type of work will be part of the “Compassion and Service Team?”

A: All current diaconal ministry work, plus other new ministries that the Lord may call us to. E.g. a “Stephen Ministry” or a “GriefShare Ministry.”

Q: When will the “Compassion and Service Team” be officially activated?

A: January 1, 2017.



“Finally, brothers,
whatever is true,
whatever is honorable,
whatever is just, whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely,
whatever is commendable,
if there is any excellence,
if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.”

- Philippians 4:8

Stay Connected. Be Part of the Dialogue.

This topic is an important one, and it is difficult to address completely in written form. To that end, please mark your calendars for Wednesday, May 11th at 6:30 p.m. for a Town Hall meeting. We will discuss this issue at length, and you will have opportunity to ask questions in the dialogue. Details as follows:

What? Town Hall Meeting

When? Wednesday, May 11th, 2016

Dinner at 5:30 p.m.

Town Hall to begin at 6:30 p.m.

Who? The congregation of Central Presbyterian Church

Questions?

Feel free to send an email to us at
communications@centralpres.com.