

BUC GUIDELINES

C18 Help I'm a Deacon (11/2008)

These notes are offered as guidelines by The Baptist Union Corporation Limited to provide information for Baptist churches.

These notes can never be a substitute for detailed professional advice if there are serious and specific problems, but we hope you will find them helpful.

If you want to ask questions about the leaflets and one of the Baptist Trust Companies are your property trustees, you should contact them. They will do their best to help.

If your church property is in the name of private individuals who act as trustees they may also be able to help.

WHAT IS A DEACON?

Each Baptist church will have its own understanding of what it means to be a Deacon.

The 2003 Model Constitution says

"Deacons shall, with the Minister(s) (if any), be responsible for the leadership of the church, the fulfilment of its purpose, the pastoral care of its members and its day-to-day management and administration"

This definition will form the basis for this leaflet. For convenience we will use the word Deacon although we realise that individual churches will function differently and have different priorities for their Deacons.

Some churches will have Elders as well as Deacons and the ways in which Elders and Deacons relate to each other and their Minister (if any) will vary.

Some churches have a 'Leadership Team'.

Just to add one more piece of jargon – sometimes the word Diaconate is used to mean a group of Deacons, or a group of Deacons and Elders, or the Deacons, Elders and the Minister working together as leaders of the church.

Confused? Read on we will try to help!

BECOMING A DEACON

Each church will have its own rules about appointing deacons. Some will match those contained in some of the standard Baptist documents used by churches nationally, some will have been prepared locally. These rules often state that a deacon will serve for a term of three years and many provide for deacons to retire in rotation, to avoid a complete change every three years.

In some churches the Church Secretary and the Treasurer are selected from among the deacons. In other churches the Secretary and Treasurer are chosen from among the whole membership and then serve automatically as Deacons because of the tasks and position they have been given.

The number of Deacons will vary between churches.

There are some core elements that will apply to the appointment of all Deacons. They will be selected from among the existing church members. There will be an open selection process, usually involving nomination and voting. This ensures that Deacons have the support of the church members. Members have the opportunity to choose suitable people to help lead the church and deal with 'day to day' administration. It is possible to introduce new people to serve as Deacons because the possibility of change is built into the process.

THE TASKS – WHAT ARE EXPECTED OF A DEACON

It is not easy to provide a definitive list of responsibilities. However, the following paragraphs give some idea of the things that are generally expected.

Deacons are servant-leaders

The word Deacon comes from the Greek '*Diakonos*' meaning servant. Deacons are servants in the church using their leadership gifts and skills to help the church and promote its growth. Although they are servants they do have authority. They should not dominate, but they should lead so there is a delicate balance here.

We are all accountable to God personally and individually. Deacons are also accountable for the way they do their work, to the other Deacons, to the church members meeting - that is the group of people who recognised their skills and gifts and chose them for this role in the first place!

Deacons are expected to make decisions

Taking decisions is part of being a church leader. Deacons, acting together after prayer and consultation, are expected to give a lead to the church. Whilst they should not be dictators they would not be fulfilling their responsibilities if they avoided making decisions entirely. On important or strategic matters it would be normal to consult and obtain support from the church members' meeting.

Occasionally an individual Deacon may need to take urgent action to overcome a problem. Normally all the Deacons will consider matters of policy, and decisions about expensive purchases, or new initiatives together.

The church meeting is the right place for testing all major proposals affecting the church's life together and future plans. Deacons should communicate openly and clearly with the church members. Leading is not just about decisions. Good communication and a willingness to listen to others in shaping new ideas is essential.

Deacons need to work well together

Good relationships among church leaders are essential. The Deacons, and any other members of leadership groups should be committed to one another as well as to the whole church. Deacons meetings and church members meetings must be a priority.

Relationships grow as people spend time together and learn to work as a group. Good communication is easier to achieve if everyone attends meetings regularly.

It is also very useful to meet together sometimes without a list of topics for discussion so that there is more time for prayer and worship. Time is needed to form close working relationship so that it is possible to have in-depth discussions on important areas of concern. Trust needs to grow. This basis of trust is especially important when there are problems to overcome - together.

Deacons should ensure that church life is well organised

The Deacons should be like a body with each part playing its own part for the good of the whole. (Ephesians 4:16). The Deacons should ensure that the time, effort and money of those in the church is not wasted because of carelessness or inefficiency.

Is that all?

Probably not!

Deacons may say that the main 'extra' task is to attend Deacons meetings. In practice there is usually more to it than that.

In some churches, each Deacon has a specific responsibility reflecting their specific skills and gifts (eg property, finance, youth-work, outreach etc). This may involve them working with a team of church members, but reporting back to the whole Diaconate at regular intervals.

A Deacon with a particular responsibility may be asked to give a report to a church members meetings. In many churches the formal annual church members meeting is a time when the overall work of the church is reviewed.

Many churches expect Deacons to take their turn in routine tasks such as opening and closing the building, visiting applicants for membership, serving Communion and leading in prayer before a service. These tasks can seem trivial, or a burden, but they can be the best way of keeping in contact with members of the church and congregation, as well as finding out about the church's activities and identifying problems before they become serious.

One of the most important things you can do as a Deacon is to be a good example and an encouragement to others - 1 Timothy 3 is a good passage to look at to discover the qualities of a leader. It is also important that Deacons are leaders in fulfilling the normal responsibilities of church membership such as attending worship and church meetings regularly as well as supporting the church financially and practically.

MANAGING TRUSTEES

Baptist churches are charities and, as such, are subject to the general requirements of charity law, the main provisions of which are brought together in the Charities Act 1993. Although, in a Baptist church, the church meeting has ultimate authority with regard to any decisions taken by the church, when it comes to the law the church's leaders are held responsible for the church's decisions.

This is because the law regards the people who actually have the general control and management of the administration of a charity as the 'managing trustees'. In the case of a Baptist church, these Managing Trustees are usually the Minister and Deacons. If the church has Elders then they are included as well. If the church has a 'Leadership Team' instead of Deacons and/or Elders, then this group would be regarded as the Managing Trustees.

Managing Trustees should at all times act:

- with integrity;
- in the best interests of the church;
- without regard to their personal interests.

More information can be found in the BUC Guideline leaflet "*C17 Help! I'm a Managing Trustee.*"

It is vital that you read that leaflet alongside this leaflet to make sure that you understand your responsibilities as a Managing Trustee.

This leaflet is about Deacons – it is not a complete guide to all your responsibilities.

The other leaflets in this series are:

C17 *Help I'm a Managing Trustee*

C19 *Help I'm a Church Secretary*

C20 *Help I'm a Church Treasurer*

The Baptist Union Corporation produces a number of guideline leaflets on a range of subjects that are of interest to churches. These are available from The Baptist Union Corporation.

AVAILABLE FROM BUGB PUBLICATIONS

Nothing Spiritual about Chaos

by Rachel Tole

A practical guide for Baptist church secretaries and administrators

This is a very helpful book. It is packed with useful information that would help anybody involved in the leadership of a Baptist church.

If you have access to the internet you can order this on-line at www.baptiststore.co.uk

If you do not have access to the internet please contact our publications department (there are lots of materials available to help your church and its mission in your community)

To order this item from our publications department please contact:

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This is one of a series of *Guidelines* that are offered as a resource for Baptist ministers and churches. They have been prepared by the Baptist Union Corporation Limited and are, of necessity, intended only to give very general advice in relation to the topics covered. These guidelines should not be relied upon as a substitute for obtaining specific and more detailed advice in relation to a particular matter.

The staff at the Baptist Union Corporation, at Baptist House (or your regional Trust Company) will be very pleased to answer your queries and help in any way possible. It helps us to respond as efficiently as possible to the many churches in trust with us if you write to us and set out your enquiry as simply as possible.

The Baptist Union Corporation staff also deal with churches that are in trust with the East Midland Baptist Trust Company Limited, the North Western Baptist Association (Incorporated), and Yorkshire Baptist Association.

If your holding trustees are one of the other Baptist Trust Corporations you must contact your own Trust Corporation for further advice. A list of contact details has been included.

If you have private trustees they too should be consulted as appropriate.

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