

Guidelines for Benevolence

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide some useful guidelines for deacons so they may be more effective in their work of benevolence with those with needs in the community. Deacons face a variety of needs and requests for assistance that may be challenging.

These guidelines are intended to help deacons decide whom they are best equipped to assist. These guidelines help establish a framework for helping a person change and grow through a focused, meaningful relationship.

This handbook is divided into **three** sections. Each section will address issues that deacons face.

1. Considerations in benevolence

- a. *Questions to answer.*
- b. *Deacons: equipped for relationships.*
- c. *Coordination in diaconal work*

2. A 'plan of action'

- a. *Growth rather than dependency.*
- b. *A dialogue for growth and change..*
- c. *Action steps, barriers and follow-up.*

3. Partners in benevolence

- a. *Partners with the deacons in benevolence.*
- b. *The ministry of supportive relationships.*

The Deacons' Calling

The 'Charge to Deacons in the Ordination Form' calls deacons to "*realize that benevolence is a quality of our life in Christ and not merely a matter of financial assistance.*" This charge indicates that benevolence involves a lifestyle of respect and compassion. It encompasses attitudes and behaviors that guide how we relate to people in need.

Partner with people who have needs.

When we walk alongside people as equals in God's eyes, we create a partnership that leads to trust and growth. Having an attitude of judgment or paternalism will create barriers that can make us ineffective in our helping.

Listen to understand.

Being compassionate involves an effort to understand what life is like for another person. Listening to understand will show genuine concern and help to uncover the underlying reasons for an individual's situation.

Know our biases and prejudices.

Showing Christ's love involves showing respect and dignity to all people. We must avoid trying to make others become 'like us'.

Respect personal information.

Treat the information that individuals share with us as confidential. If you are going to share information with other deacons, elders or pastors, ask for permission to share that information.

1. Considerations in Benevolence

Developing 'Guidelines for Benevolence' will help deacons focus their time and energy. Clearly defined guidelines will help the deacons know when to spend a significant amount of time with a need or when to refer an individual/family to other community agencies. Sharing these guidelines with the church pastor, staff and elders will help all know how to respond to needs they see and cold calls they receive.

a. Questions to answer

If the deacons have 'Guidelines for Benevolence', an annual review of these guidelines will help new deacons understand the church's goals in benevolence. It will also allow the diaconate to make changes and updates as needed. If no clear guidelines are in place, the **following questions** may help the deacons get started.

1. Whom do you want to help?
 - neighbors of the church?
 - 'cold calls'? -church members?
 - friends of church members?
 - referrals from agencies?
2. Will you offer one time help?
 - groceries/cash/gas money?
 - other monetary help?
3. Do you want to set geographic boundaries for assistance?
4. Do you want to seek some direction from the vision/mission of the church and the workplan of the diaconate?
5. How often will you help someone? How often per person per year?
6. Always help with_____.
Never help with_____.
7. When will you request a Plan of Action be completed? (see page 6)

8. To whom and how do you want church staff to refer individuals when the church is unable to respond to the need?
9. Name the activities of 'other groups' (agencies, service clubs, churches) that respond to needs in the community.

Suggestions to note:

Focus your energy on helping people who are willing to look at the reasons for the emergency they are in and who are willing to set up a plan of action with the deacons. Emergency help may be appropriate, but unless they address the reason for the crisis, they will repeat it.

Relationships will most likely be established with people who either have some connection to your church or live in an area near your church.

Defining a geographical area in which you will respond will help in determining which needs you will consider and which ones you will refer elsewhere. Tell these boundaries to your church staff and elders so they know where to direct requests for assistance.

If your church has an outreach plan, you may want to especially focus on that target population.

Since many churches are in neighborhoods which are rather affluent, do not use geographical boundaries as a way to hide from the poor. If you do not have many people who are poor living in your neighborhood, seek out people in need. Partner with an inner city church or ministry. You could also contact a low-income apartment complex or social service agency to find ways to minister to the poor.

b. Deacons: equipped for relationships

Deacons become aware of needs and receive requests for assistance from people in a wide variety of ways. Requests may come from church members. Other requests come from people who live in the neighborhood of the church. Requests may also come from people traveling through the area. Some of these requests come from people who are calling many places to get help. Deciding what deacons should focus their attention on can be difficult.

When you think about what needs deacons and the church are best suited to meet, you realize that the church can uniquely offer supportive relationships and programs that offer hope and growth. Churches by nature have great potential to develop relationships with people in need. Emergency assistance given where there is little potential for relationship is band-aid relief. Only through relationships can we effectively show Christ's love to others.

In her manual, *Establishing a Church-based Welfare-to-Work Mentoring Ministry*, Amy Sherman writes, "When relief is merely a band-aid that alleviates the symptoms of poverty but fails to address the root causes, then it is illegitimate. Such assistance merely helps people to manage their poverty rather than to escape from it." We want to help people leave poverty and not just to manage it.

To do this, deacons and churches must move beyond responding to crises with only a commodity response (money, food, clothing). Deacons are instead encouraged to respond by establishing a relationship with the person requesting help.

"Deacons can be faced with a perplexing set of circumstances. How do they decide whether a need is legitimate? One rule of thumb is that most people who 'cold call' a church/pastor (i.e. appear at the church door) are probably part of that 10% of the poor that are "pros at working the system. A diaconate needs to decide whether it wants to get into this kind of emergency relief. Keep in mind that most persons who are poor are not poor persons. But their situation is such that a simple act of relief won't help for more than a few days. A diaconate then has to decide whether it's in it for the longer haul." (*Benevolence: Relief to Renewal* by Ben VandeZande)

Empower for Growth

Deacons can be instrumental in helping people who are struggling to grow to their God given potential. Jay Van Groningen, in his book *Changing Times, New Approaches, A Handbook for Deacons*, writes, "The church also uses limited amounts of aid to supplement the resources that people already have available to help them achieve their life goals. Aid that is not directed toward recipients' goals will only create dependency." Deacons can help to empower people to make positive changes in their lives.

The information on pages 5, 6, & 7 of this booklet on developing a Plan of Action is a model for how to assist people to grow and to achieve their goals.

c. Co-ordination in Diaconal Work

Once you have ‘Guidelines for Benevolence’, sharing these with church staff is important. Pastors, church secretaries, and other staff are often on the front line of receiving “cold calls” for assistance. Church staff and elders also become aware of the needs of the congregation’s members and neighbors through the contacts they have. Clear communication about these needs is important.

Inviting church staff to meet with the deacons will allow all to be clear about the ‘Guidelines for Benevolence’. Together you can develop a clear plan of how you want these calls handled. The following ideas are a place to start in giving direction to your church staff.

Guidelines for Church Staff:

When a person calls for emergency assistance or walks into the church, asking these two questions is appropriate.

- *How did you hear about our church?**
- *Where do you live?**

If people have either a connection to someone in your church or they live in the geographical area defined by your deacons, refer these people to your deacons. You can tell them that you will take their information and pass it onto the appropriate deacon, who will contact them.

If the person has no connection to your church and does not live in the area defined by the policy, you can respond with something like, “I’m” sorry but our church does not offer emergency assistance. I can refer you to a couple of agencies that you can contact. Here are the phone numbers.”

The deacons should give the church staff a list of the main referral resources in the area/community.

Communicating Requests:

The church staff can use the following form/questions to document requests for assistance and then pass the information on to the deacons.

Request for Support Form

(for staff and deacons)

Date: _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone contact #: _____

How did you hear about the church? _____

Request: _____

Notes/future suggestions: _____

2. A ‘Plan of Action’

a. Growth rather than dependency.

The ‘Plan of Action’ form on page 6 is a tool for deacons to help people focus on specific tasks that they can do to improve their situation. Its purpose is to encourage growth rather than foster dependency. **The main emphasis of this ‘Plan of Action’ is on discussing goals and solutions** rather than problems.

Having people write down their dreams, goals and action steps on the ‘Plan of Action’ form is helpful. The first step is for the people to acknowledge that there is a problem, and that they would like their life to be different. Once they acknowledge the problem, it is more energizing to concentrate on dreams and desires for the future than to focus on the problems. This plan is most effective when complemented by the supportive accountability of caring Christians.

When to do a ‘Plan of Action’...:

This ‘Plan of Action’ is most appropriate for situations in which:

- The individuals are open to do some things to improve their situation.
- The individuals are willing to work with the deacons or a support person over a period of time to achieve their goals.

There are certain situations where this ‘Plan of Action’ process will not be helpful. These situations include:

- * Where there is ongoing substance abuse. An active alcoholic or drug abuser has great difficulty focusing on goals and action steps. They must address the addiction first.

- * In some cases of mental illness. If mental illness is an issue, you will benefit from having the person sign a release of information so that you as deacons can speak with his or her therapist. Discuss with the therapist appropriate ways the deacons can work with this person.
- * When people are essentially satisfied with their life. We may think that people should do things differently in their lives, but they are satisfied with things the way they are. They just want help on occasion to maintain their lifestyle.

Preparing for a Deacon Visit...:

Below are some suggestions about preparing to meet with a person that may be helpful.

- * Spend time in prayer ahead of time. Ask God to bless the person you are meeting with, to give you wisdom, and to bless your visit.
- * It is helpful to think about the most appropriate place to meet with the family or individual. Some people may feel uncomfortable having you come to their home. Other options for the first visit include meeting in a room at church, a local library or coffee shop.
- * Consider whether two deacons or an elder/deacon team would be most appropriate to do the visit. If the person in need is a single woman, a woman deacon is the most appropriate person to participate in the visit.
- * Go with an attitude of encouragement, compassion and learning. Our desire is to encourage people to grow in their personal lives and grow in their relationship to God.

b. A dialogue for growth and change

A. Where you want to be:

How would you like your life situation to be different or improved 4 months from now?

- 1) _____
- 2) _____

B. Strengths and Abilities:

What are some strengths and abilities that you have that could help you get to where you want to be?

C. Things you can do: (Goals that will move you to where you want to be)

Goal #1 _____

What specific things can you do?	Who will do it?	Do this by when?
----------------------------------	-----------------	------------------

- | | | |
|----------|-------|-------|
| a) _____ | _____ | _____ |
| b) _____ | _____ | _____ |
| c) _____ | _____ | _____ |

Goal #2 _____

- | | | |
|----------|-------|-------|
| a) _____ | _____ | _____ |
| b) _____ | _____ | _____ |
| c) _____ | _____ | _____ |

D. Support from the church and deacons:

How can the deacons or other church members help you get to where you want to be?

- a) _____
- b) _____

Would you be willing to have a support person/mentor encourage you in your goals? _____

E. Follow up:

When can we get together to check how things are going?

When? _____ Where? _____

c. Action steps, barriers and follow-up

Instructions:

The individual/family and the deacon should both have a copy of the 'Plan of Action'. Have the family write down their answers and plans on their form. The deacon copies what the family member writes or uses a photocopier.

Though the focus is on the future, all must agree that there are problems with the present situation. If the person or family is really satisfied with the ways things are then this 'Plan of Action' process will probably not be helpful.

Helping people identify action steps that are realistic and practical is important.

Helping people identify some barriers to the 'plan of action' may be helpful as some of the difficulties have then been identified. Naming together some options to overcome these barriers may be beneficial.

The number of action steps depends on what the deacon/support person thinks can realistically be done to make changes in their life. Some people may need to take one or two baby steps at a time. This will help them to prove to themselves that they can actually make progress and experience success. Once they take small steps, they can then identify more action steps.

Follow up sessions are very important. There needs to be supportive accountability for this plan to be effective. Identifying a church member who can be an ongoing mentor or support person for the person or family is often helpful for the deacons. This volunteer would meet with them regularly to encourage them in accomplishing their goals.

Financial assistance is most helpful when geared toward accomplishing goals. It is appropriate to have the financial assistance contingent on whether the person is working on achieving the goals.

More helpful questions for the completion of the 'Plan of Action':

The following are some other questions the deacons could ask the family/individual if it is difficult to come up with ideas for the 'Plan of Action'.

A. Where you want to be:

What goal could you set that would be helpful to get you to where you want to be?
What would it take for you to better meet your family's needs in the future?
What will life look like when the problem you are having is not there anymore?
What will you be doing differently at that time?

B. Strengths and abilities:

What resources do you and your family have that could help make these changes?
What are some ways you have solved this difficulty in the past?

C. Things you can do:

What is one thing that you can do differently that will help you get where you want to be?
What is the first step you can take to start getting to where you want to be?
What other things could you do to improve your situation?

D. Support from the church and deacons:

What assistance would help you accomplish the action steps you just mentioned?
What helps you to take action in your life?
How could the deacons support you in reaching your goals?

3. Partners in benevolence

Long Term Relationships

To help people make long term sustainable growth and change in their lives is a process which takes a long term commitment. It is usually easier (and therefore tempting) to provide temporary relief rather than long term relationships and assistance. But, temporary relief often has the impact of creating dependency whereas coming alongside someone in an encouraging relationship creates growth and change. The combination of being in a relationship with someone and encouraging that person to develop and accomplish a goal oriented plan of action can have great benefits.

Ongoing Supportive Relationship
+ *Goal-Oriented Plan of Action*
= *Long-Term Sustainable Change*

a. Partners with the deacons in benevolence

God is our ever present help and is active in our lives. God has a deep concern and heart for those who are poor and struggling. Pray regularly that God will give you wisdom in your work of benevolence. Pray also that he will bless the family's or individual's efforts to grow and change.

There are several partners who may also care about the families/individuals you are working with and can assist deacons in their work. These partners can complement what deacons do when they all work together.

Gifted church members are great resources and can be asked to be support persons or mentors to people who are struggling. Some church members are especially gifted in listening, encouraging and problem-solving.

Former deacons, those trained in Stephen's Ministry, and those identified through a 'Discover Your Gifts' workshop are good people to challenge to help in this ministry. These partners can encourage people in their 'Plan of Action' and hold them accountable for accomplishing the goals they have identified.

Pastors and elders also could be involved in a supportive way with the same people deacons are helping. Good communication is important to coordinate the church's concern and assistance.

Professional services are available in the community. These professionals can focus on a specific area of need including mental health, employment, consumer credit counseling, and others areas. To coordinate your efforts with those professionals, you must have the consent of the involved family/individual.

Other Resources

Many of the ideas and concepts in this booklet have been gleaned from "Benevolence: From Relief to Renewal" by Ben Vandezande, Ontario Regional Home Missions Director and "Changing Times, New Approaches, A Handbook for Deacons" by Jay Van Groningen, CRWRC.

b. The ministry of supportive relationships

Linking a person in need with a caring church member in an ongoing supportive relationship can be an excellent way that deacons can do their ministry. Below is an example of this kind of relationship

Meet Doug:

Doug is in his late twenties and is married with two children. When the deacons receive a call from him, he needs food and housing.

The deacons provide food for a week and ask Doug if he would be open to having a person from the congregation help him. Doug agreed, and got to know Tim who is quite gifted in listening and problem solving.

Doug clearly wanted to make a new start for himself and his family. He had misused drugs and alcohol in the past. His work-habits were irregular. Finances were often a problem because of buying binges, especially by his wife.

Tim and the deacons were able to locate a supportive housing situation for the family. The deacons paid the first and last month's rent.

Doug agreed to join AA and enroll in a local job-training program. His wife went for budget counseling.

The job program and the friendship with Tim did wonders for Doug's self-esteem. He found temporary work while training to be a produce manager in a grocery store. Tim often invited Doug over to his house to work on projects together.

Things were going well until one day Doug called to say he and his wife had separated. It left him in shambles emotionally. Doug and his wife had a long history of conflict. Tim was at a loss. "Just when we were making such good progress," he thought. He shared his frustration with the deacons. Tim met with a therapist in his congregation and the pastor. They provided some

advice and a short list of people that could offer counseling.

Doug and his wife went into therapy for six months. During this very difficult time Tim met with Doug once a week. The purpose of these visits was to encourage Doug, keep him focused and to listen. During the conversations Doug talked about "feeling dirty" and that his parents never thought much of him.

Tim talked about the gift of forgiveness and especially forgiveness by God. This gave Doug the opportunity to address several issues that had bothered him for a long time. Tim urged Doug to join a support group of Christians. He was hesitant. After two years the journey continues....

For discussion:

1. How did the deacons and Tim make use of the variety of gifts available?
2. Notice that Tim invited Doug to help him do projects. Why was that important for their relationship?
3. How do you think Tim felt when Doug and his wife broke up? Why?
4. What is Tim's role over this 2-year period? In what ways is his caring Christian?

(Example from *Benevolence: From Relief to Renewal*, by Ben Vandezande)