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Answering Your Question: Elder and Deacon Training

Abstract

"We make assumptions that elders and deacons know how to call on the sick, distribute help to the poor, and administer the sacraments."

Posting about training church leaders from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/answering-your-question-elder-and-deacon-training/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Answering Your Question: Elder and Deacon Training

 [inallthings.org/answering-your-question-elder-and-deacon-training/](https://www.allthings.org/answering-your-question-elder-and-deacon-training/)

Liz Moss

Following Christ's resurrection and ascension, God has given the church apostles, prophets, and teachers, deeds of power, gifts of healing, forms of assistance and leadership.

The Reformed tradition believes God calls and empowers deacons, elders, and ministers of Word and sacrament. Deacons and elders are called to serve as Christ served. They are people of spiritual commitment, exemplary life, compassionate spirit, and sound judgment. Deacons are called to serve the people, providing a ministry of mercy, service and outreach. Beyond gathering the offerings, deacons work to care for the gifts faithfully and distribute them to persons in need, working to advance God's kingdom on earth. Elders are called to a ministry of caring for the church through oversight of all the members, administering the sacraments, and ensuring the Word of God is proclaimed and taught. Both of these roles should be taken on in a serious and respectful manner. Both of these offices are vital in caring out the ministry of Christ's church on earth.¹

With that in mind, a reader of in all things asked a question concerning training and teaching resources for those called to serve as elders and deacons.

I am on the leadership of a church plant that is now organizing and hope to do some teaching on the role of elder and deacon (though we are not using these titles.) Do you have any thoughts/resources for helping to instruct on leadership in the church for those who do not really have a church background or who have been hurt by the church in the past?

-Norma

Unfortunately, I fear too often adequate training is not given to newly elected elders and deacons in the church—especially for those who have not spent their entire lives in a community of faith called the church. And, we believe the Holy Spirit calls and equips leaders to serve, so we make assumptions that elders and deacons know how to call on the sick, distribute help to the poor, and administer the sacraments. The body of Christ—the people of the church—elected the women and men into these offices, already showing leadership abilities prior to election, so they should already know how to provide spiritual leadership to others.

This is not necessarily true.

I once heard a story from an elder who was newly elected to serve in his church. He arrived at his first governing board meeting (sometimes called consistory, council, or session) and was asked what visits he had made to those on his care list that previous month. He felt ill-equipped, never having made a visit to someone in need of spiritual care. He fully knew his role as elder and what his "job description" was, but no one ever walked him through what a visit entailed—bring your Bible, have passages chosen before you arrive, take off your coat, sit down, pray with them. These are simple details but all too often are overlooked in training.

I have heard other stories—a story from a deacon who didn't realize her role could be so much more than collecting the offering or balancing the budget—although both very important tasks. She didn't enjoy her role as deacon until she realized deacons were commissioned to care for the physical needs of the poor. Deacons can organize food drives, shingle patchy roofs, and drive the sick to doctor appointments.

Imagine a church where elders and deacons were trained and well equipped to understand the roles to which they are called to serve. Imagine a place where elders properly cared for the members of the church and deacons truly served with a sense of outreach and love for others in need.

A consistent theme I heard from pastors who provide training to new elders and deacons—both in established congregations and new church plants—is the concept of mentorship. Mentorship is a personal developmental relationship in which a more experienced or more knowledgeable person helps to guide a less experienced or less knowledgeable person. In this situation, a mentor relationship is created between an elder or deacon who is completing their term in this leadership role, or someone who is experienced in serving, with the individual who is new to this office. The more “experienced” elder or deacon meets regularly with the emerging leader, sharing insights on their role but also clear tips on how to serve in their position most effectively. The emerging leader will go with the elder or deacon on spiritual care visits or will assist him or her with administering communion or will sit with them in governing board meetings.

Sometimes people do not know if they are equipped to serve until they are actually in the position. One church gives a new elder and deacon a three month “grace period,” giving time for them to find a place in their new leadership role in the church while working with a mentor to ask questions and to be assisted in finding ways to best serve according to their personality and gifts. If, after this three month time, they do not feel equipped to serve, they can ask to be removed from the role as elder or deacon, allowing them to find other places within the church to serve.

Some congregations do provide actual training. One pastor I asked introduces the positions of elders and deacons looking for biblical qualifications in the ministry roles and how they will live out their roles in their particular context. They discuss how they identify a leadership calling and what new leaders need (both personally and communally) to lead the church well. Following the new leader training, they have leadership retreats through the year and ongoing leadership formation teaching and training in elder and deacon meetings.

Readers of **in all things**, what stories do you have from how you were trained or not trained well to serve as an elder or deacon in your church? What advice would you give Norma as she works to train and equip emerging leaders in the new church development? Please leave your comments below.

Dig Deeper

The [Reformed Church in America](#) and the [Christian Reformed Church in North America](#) provides great online training resources for elders and deacons.

The Consistory Center: providing resources for elders, deacons, and ministers, as well as church treasurers and administrators.

Effective Church Leadership: A training tool to help congregations, pastors, and other church leaders effectively work together to accomplish God's mission.

The Network: making connections in the nuts and bolts of ministry.

Footnotes

1. adapted from [The Order for the Ordination and Installation of Elders and Deacons in the Reformed Church in America](#) (2000). ↩