**JBU FAITH & ORDER COMMISSION**

**THE MINISTRY OF DEACONS: STUDY VERSION**

**Introduction**

The office of Deacon exists in many Church communions, but there are varying understandings of the role and functions of Deacons both between and within denominations. The differences range from the Roman Catholic Church example, in which the Deacon is an ordained Minister in the permanent Order of Deacons; the Anglican, where the Deacon is the lowest in the church’s ministerial hierarchy; through the Baptist where he/she is elected and ordained or commissioned to serve, to the Pentecostal Church where chosen persons are viewed as special servants for a definite period, functioning under the authority of the Elders. The common factor is that in every experience in the Christian faith community, committed service is at the core of the Deacon’s function and an exemplary, Christ-centred life, the overarching qualification.

In a paper published in 2012, the Jamaica Baptist Union’s (JBU’s) *Faith and Order Commission* presented a broad discussion of the “Ministry of Deacons” in which several themes related to that ministry are highlighted. That paper makes the point that although the ministry is generally acknowledged to have begun with the Early Church’s selection of “The Seven” (Acts 6: 1 – 6), “the evidence is certainly not available to associate the origin of the Diaconate” [[1]](#footnote-1) with that recorded event. It tracks some of the history and development of the ministry, showing divergencies of understanding and practice between and within denominations. It also outlines those of the Baptist faith community and concludes that regardless of the differences shown in the Church’s vision of the ministry, the fundamental servant nature and usefulness of the Diaconate are constants in that vision.

The intention is that this Study be undertaken in groups with the objective of bringing participants into a greater appreciation of Deacons as servants in kingdom-building as they seek to fulfil Christ’s command to love, serve and share the faith. It is in four parts:

1. The Nature of the Ministry of Deacons
2. “The Golden Years”, the Decline and the Resurgence of the Diaconate
3. Selection/Election of Deacons in the JBU
4. Conclusion

**NB: Lessons will include activities. Whenever “Group discussions” are proposed, the group should be divided into two or more sub-groups which will discuss the subject and select a reporter who will present the sub-group’s views/findings. “Round robin” conversations give each individual an opportunity to comment or seek clarification and give responses as the case may be. “Research and Report” generally requires preparation beforehand, for presentation at the relevant session.**

**Lesson 1 : The Nature of the Ministry of Deacons**

**The 2012 Paper - Section entitled “New Testament Witness”- should be read in conjunction with this lesson.**

In Christian tradition, the appointment of the seven men by the Early Church was generally viewed as the origin of the Ministry of Deacons, even though “The Seven” are not called Deacons anywhere in the New Testament. However, what is unquestionable is that the Seven were appointed to serve and their role facilitated the growth of the Church. Their service freed the Apostles to focus on preaching, teaching and praying, while they took care of the needs of the rapidly increasing community of believers. This growth challenge had the potential to spiral out of control if it were not for the timely response of the Apostles. The division of labour resulted in what Acts 6: 7 reports as follows:

*“And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”*

The role of “The Seven” was not limited to serving tables or managing the church’s resources for the good of the membership. They could be called to any area of service or sacrifice, even the ultimate as in Stephen’s case, as long as they submitted to the Holy Spirit’s leadership. They could be used of God in diverse forms of evangelism and ministry like Phillip (Acts 8:4-8), or Stephen whose death forced thousands of disciples to begin to implement the “Great Commission” and also impacted Saul (Acts 8:1), who later became Paul the Apostle. The example of Nicolas (founder of the cult of the Nicolaitans referenced in Rev. 2:6 and 17) warns the Church against following leaders whose belief and actions do not align with the word of God.

The heart of the role of “The Seven” was service and the basic meaning of the word “deacon” (from the Greek word ‘diakonos’) is “servant”, which includes actions such as serving and caring for others and administering resources or implementing policy. Jesus’ example of servant-leadership is applicable to every leader in His Church. The Lord made it clear that “*whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come* ***to******be******served****,* ***but******to******serve****, and* ***to*** *give His life a ransom for many.”* (Matt. 20:26-28) This was part of His response to the self-centred desire of the sons of Zebedee (James and John) to sit at Christ’s right and left in Glory, after He had reminded His disciples of His impending crucifixion and resurrection.

**The Epitome of Greatness in Ministry**

Jesus set the bar for His disciples on greatness by reminding them of His ministry and how He would fulfil it through service. The life of Jesus is an example for us as we do ministry; the ministry and mission of the church must reflect His example. In Mark 10:45, Jesus shares three thoughts with His disciples that we ought to remember as we offer ourselves for ministry:

1. **Who are we?** – In Matt 3: 17, God declared Jesus as His “beloved Son”. In Matt. 16: 16, Peter identified Jesus as “The Christ, the Son of the Living God”. In Mark 10: 45, Jesus called Himself the "Son of Man" who “came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (The title “Son of Man”, found in Daniel 7:13 and the Gospels, was used by Jesus primarily to identify Himself as the Messiah.) Despite His identity as the Son of God and the Messiah Jesus did not flinch from His purpose to serve humanity (Phil. 2: 6 – 7). Jesus’ statement in Mark 10:43 that “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” also made it explicit to His disciples (then and now) that true greatness requires servanthood.

2. **What are we called to do?** - Jesus reminded his disciples that His purpose was to serve humanity; always thinking of Himself last while placing God's mission and ministry first. Recall too His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane “Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42)

3. **Why are we doing what we are doing?** We do what we do in order that many might be saved. We often underestimate the power which lies in service. The life of Jesus teaches us that when He served others it always had a far-reaching impact on their lives. Service then can be understood as life-giving and life-transforming and is essential for ministry.

**Character and Role of Deacons in the New Testament Church**

In the first verse of his Letter to the Philippians, Paul recognized the “bishops and deacons” of that church. This is the first direct reference to the presence of deacons, or “servants/ministers” in the Early Church. However, the point should not be lost that Paul’s first greeting was *“to* *all the saints in Christ Jesus”.* The bishops and deacons existed, under God, to provide servant-leadership to the church, or as Peter wrote- not to be lords over the church, but as examples to the flock.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The 2012 Paper outlines the New Testament’s foundation for the Deacons’ calling, and the nature of their role can be inferred from the characteristics they must portray. A closer look at the list of qualities in 1 Tim. 3:8-13, shows that they can be grouped in three areas of a person’s life: character, spirituality and family:

1. **A Deacon should be a person of Sound Morals (verse 8):** dignified, not double-tongued, not a drunkard, not greedy for money. He could therefore be trusted with the administrative, financial and logistical affairs of the church.
2. **A Deacon should be a person of Spiritual Maturity (verses 9-10):** firm in the faith, with a life which reflects that faith; blameless both in terms of personal reputation and track record in the church. His exemplary behaviour is founded on knowledge and application of the word. He can counsel and encourage others along the Christian journey, as he plays his part in building the Church.
3. **A Deacon should be a person of Skillful Home Management (Verse 12):** Faithful to his spouse and must be a good father and spiritual leader at home. This characteristic would help him to carry out tasks such as benevolence and home/hospital visits.

A comparison of the characteristics shows four significant differences between the roles of Pastors/Bishops/Overseers on the one hand and Deacons on the other. The former were expected to extend hospitality and to teach (1 Tim. 3:2) and to govern the church (verse 5) (while Deacons were not); while Deacons were called to serve the welfare and other needs of the church (verses 10 and 13, read in conjunction with Acts 6: 2-4). However, the Deacon was required to “*hold to the mystery of the faith with a* clear *conscience”* (verse 9)*.* While his was not the duty to preach or teach, he was expected to know, understand and live in accordance with the Gospel. His conscience should be free from the guilt of sin.

Deacons “*must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons”* (verse 10)*.* He should not be a novice in the faith and would have already proven to be morally strong.

Paul underscores the value of the Deacon’s faithful service: *“For those who have served well as deacons are acquiring for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.”* (verse 13) These two rewards are both external and internal and are progressively obtained as a result of the Deacon’s committed service. Not only does his good reputation become well-known, but as he experiences Jesus Christ through his service, his faith and Christian witness become stronger.

**Women in the Diaconate**

The text under consideration, 1Timothy 3:8-13, begs the question of whether or not women should be Deacons, as verse 11 has long been the source of controversy. The 2012 Paper indicates views on both sides of the controversy and opines that on a scriptural basis, the question remains unresolved and is subject to varying interpretations of the relevant Bible verses.

Those who believe that Paul clearly meant the *wives* of Deacons, point to his assertion that a Deacon should be *“the husband of one wife”* (verse 12)*.* He was simply stating the requirements for a Deacon’s wife so that she could support, rather than hinder, his ministry. Further, they cite Paul’s instructions in 1 Tim 2:11–12: *“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.”* Paul also made clear in Titus 2: 3 – 5 the limitations placed on teaching by women (the older women to teach only the younger women and children). In 1 Cor. 14: 33-35, Paul’s opposition to women speaking in church was strongly stated: *“It is a shame for women to speak in the church”.*

Those supporting the view that Paul meant *“female Deacons”* point to the Apostle’s affirmation that “*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are* ***all one in Christ Jesus.” [[3]](#footnote-3)*** They argue that having made that declaration, Paul could not have been contradicting this vision of a united body of Christ by discriminatory stipulations. The above-cited statement about women learning in silence and not teaching men, they opine, must be understood in its historical-cultural context. Very few women were literate in Paul’s day. Additionally, Paul was instructing Timothy for his role as Bishop in the Ephesian church which still suffered from the residue of the historically strong role of women in the worship of the goddess Diana. The huge temple to Diana (Artemis in Greek) had only priestesses. Paul wanted to make sure that this pagan tradition did not carry over into the Church. Similarly, his command to the Corinthian church should be understood in its proper context. The negative instructions responded to the specific problem of the residue of idolatry and ought not to be viewed as an enduring mandate.

**ACTIVITIES**

1. Group Discussion: What is our attitude to service in the church? Are the ministries of the church there for our needs? Are we a part of the church to serve in its ministries?
2. Group Discussion: Consider Mark 10: 44-45 and the related questions and comments in the lesson. What aspects of servanthood should Deacons seek to emulate?
3. Group Discussion: Review carefully 1Timothy 3:8-13 and the section of the lesson titled “Character and Role of Deacons in the New Testament Church” and answer the following question: Are the characteristics which Paul outlined as requirements for those who would become Deacons still relevant and sufficient for today?
4. Two Volunteers to Research and report at the following meeting: Compare the role of Deacon in your church with your understanding of (a) Paul’s guidance to Timothy in 1Timothy 3:8-13, and (b) the ministry of “The Seven” in Acts 6:1-6.
5. Group Discussion: There is a view that churches which accept women Deacons are acting in the permissive, not the perfect, will of God, since this contravenes 1 Tim. 2: 11 – 15. How do you respond to that? Include research on Romans 16:1: Who was Phoebe? (Permissive will: God allows our choice, even though it is not His best for us, as in Genesis 16: 2-4. Perfect will: God’s plan for His people. See 1 Samuel 8 and Romans 12:2b.)
6. Round Robin Conversation: *On “Communion Sunday” at the Straight Street Baptist Church there was a section of persons not being served as all the Deacons were otherwise occupied. Pastor Brown asked another member to serve communion to that section. After service, some persons complained that the pastor used a non-Deacon to serve communion; while there were others who said nothing was wrong. What is your opinion of Pastor’s action?*

**Lesson 2: “The Golden Years”, the Decline and the Resurgence of the Diaconate**

**Please read the relevant sections in the 2012 Paper annexed hereto.**

The period in the history of the Diaconate, called the “Golden Years”, follows the New Testament period and runs up to the Fifth or Sixth Century. It is during this time that the role of Deacons became prominent and influential. The 2012 Paper provides proof of this drawn from several extra-Biblical sources, beginning with a manual of church discipline known as the *Didache,* dated as early as about AD 96. It also draws on epistles written by leaders in the Church of Rome in the 1st and 2nd Centuries AD which illustrated the significant service rendered by Deacons in their role as assistants to the Bishops.

In these so-called golden years, the Church developed a pattern of ministry in which Deacons held office for life and were third in the hierarchy after Bishops and Elders. Their wide-ranging functions excluded the celebration of the Eucharist, the granting of absolution (from sin) and the pronouncement of blessings.

As the role of the Deacons became more prominent, tension might have developed between them and the priests. This, plus the growing perception of the Diaconate as a preliminary stage to the priesthood, could have caused the decline in the prominence of Deacons by about mid - 6th Century.

Nonetheless, it would appear that service needs of the Church retained the Diaconate as a constant feature of its ministry, but Deacons were not allowed to perform the liturgical rites as they had during the golden years. Their place was clearly ranked lower than the priests.

Resurgence of the Diaconate began in the 20th Century as the 2012 Paper outlines in the experiences of several denominations including the **Roman Catholic Church,** the **Anglican Church** and the **United Church.** Though not referenced in the 2012 Paper,it is interesting to note that in Jamaica, the **Methodist Diaconate** came into being in 1997 when the “Connexional Conference” of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas (MCCA) determined that there was only one ordained ministry in two forms: presbyterate (the priesthood) and diaconate. “*The two forms are to be equal in status with certain differences in focus and  function. By stating that there was one ministry with two forms the church was affirming that the presbyter and the deacon would be equal in all ways and would differ only in how they function in the church.”[[4]](#footnote-4)* The MCCA stresses the general responsibility of every Christian to serve as a reflection of Christ in them, but Deacons are called to specialized forms of service to church and community. Both men and women may be ordained to the Diaconate, which is not considered an intermediary step to the presbyterate.

**The JBU Experience**

Baptist history began with John Smyth who founded the first Baptist Church in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, in 1608/9. Smyth believed that Jesus Christ had established two types of ministers: “*pastors, teachers or elders, who administer the word and sacraments, and others who are called deacons- men and women- whose ministry is to serve tables and wash the saints’ feet”.[[5]](#footnote-5)* In some parts of the world, a three-fold pattern of ministry through Pastor, Elders and Deacons is still practised, while in others the eldership has morphed into a “one-person ministry” supported by Deacons.

The Jamaica Baptist Union’s **Guide to Church Membership (1973)** states that “*The function of the Deacon today is more like that of an elder. He must be a man greatly respected for his faith, behaviour and leadership. He has a ministry to the fellow members and is responsible for oversight, particularly in his area, but also in the fellowship as a whole. He is elected by the members, then ordained”.[[6]](#footnote-6)* The **Guide** asserts that despite the obvious gender bias of the language, both men and women may become deacons.

In the JBU experience, an Order of Deaconesses existed briefly. According to the JBU website, in 1959 the Women’s Federation, “*in partnership with the then Calabar Theological College and the Jamaica Baptist Union trained two women as Deaconesses (Blanche Ennis and Claire Maddix).”* Mrs. Maddix was the only person to have been commissioned to the Order which existed to serve especially needy women and the home-bound. It is not clear when or why this Order disappeared, but though the 1981 JBU Constitution refers to “Deaconess” (Article V), there is no such reference in the 2004 and subsequent revisions.

As with other denominations, the shortage of ordained Pastors has served to increase the scope of the Deacons’ ministry. The similarity between the role of the Deacon of today and that of the elders of the apostolic era, as witnessed in the **Guide**, appears to have evolved more by necessity than pre-determined by policy change.

Neither the **Guide to Church Membership** nor the **2012 Paper** provides a definitive list of duties for Deacons. Generally, though, the circuits and churches have a similar expectation of the duties to be undertaken by their Deacons in support of the Pastor, in accordance with their perceived giftings and experience. Some Deacons are therefore included on the preachers’ list; and may assist the Pastor in the conduct of Bible Studies, devotional leadership, congregational edification and the maintenance of unity (especially as leaders of Small Groups, Classes, or Cells) and in Members’ Meetings. They may also offer ministry direction, or are appointed as leaders of counselling, benevolence, enquiries’ class and other specialized ministries; or church administration, property management and finance. All Deacons are expected to be involved in the church’s visitation ministry, serve communion to the sick and home-bound members and assist the Pastor during communion service, in worship services, evangelism and missions outreach. As a Board, or as members of a Church Council, Deacons generally participate in decision-making on all aspects of the life and ministry of the church.

Deacons generally comprise the “Search Committee” when churches/circuits seek to fill pastoral vacancies. In practice, this has had both positive and negative effects. On the one hand there was the temptation of “bossism” among some Deacons who had strongly supported the call of the pastor. On the other, those who had been less enthused more easily became less supportive of the pastor.

A small group of Deacons serve on the Pastoral Care Committee established in a number of churches. They are concerned with the welfare of the Pastor and his/her family, as they seek to promote his/her availability for ministry and study and teaching of the word. Even where there is an established committee, all Deacons ought to be concerned for the Pastor’s welfare and should maintain spiritual support for him/her through prayer and encouragement.

The Rev. Karl Henlin, Pastor of the Gregory Park Circuit of Baptist Churches, underlines the importance of Deacons’ encouragement to the Pastors as follows:

*“Pastors are human. Pastors deal with humans. Humans are not easy to deal with all the time. Moses had his troubles, both from the people and his relatives, and even from his own self. He was often discouraged. At one time two faithful leaders had to hold up his hand (Exodus 17:12). Various studies show that pastors are often more discouraged than they appear to be, and the same studies show that the job of pastor is among the five most stressful jobs today. Because of their gift and call to watch over the souls of the congregation (Hebrews 13:17), they have insight about some things which others in the congregation either may never notice, or notice but not be disturbed. Because of the pastor’s calling and insight, he/she may not be able, as others might, to dismiss some matters; instead, he/she holds them in his/her thoughts, and carries the burdens. Pastors therefore need the unswerving encouragement of the deacons*.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

A healthy relationship between the Pastor and the Diaconate is essential for the unity and spiritual growth of the church and in this, as “Under-Shepherd”, the Pastor must take the lead by reflecting Christ in his/her approach to the Deacons. The Pastor sets the tone for the relationship and also for the Deacons’ leadership and utilization of their gifts in the church. Colossians 3: 12 – 17 is a trustworthy guide in this respect. The temptation for Pastors to become dictatorial and for Deacons to believe the Council or Board must call the shots could be better resisted if all saw themselves and each other as a team working for the glory of God. Both Pastor and Deacon are called to be servants of God and of the church. There should be mutual respect and recognition that as parts of the body of Christ, each is called and gifted to serve in different ways for the edification of the church. As stated by the Apostle Paul,

“*There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.* *There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.**There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good*.” *[[8]](#footnote-8)*

How disagreements between the Pastor and a Deacon or Deacons are treated ought to reflect Christ and must not cause divisions or cliques in the church. On both sides there must be a readiness to admit and redress wrongs and seek/grant forgiveness leading to reconciliation. A heart-understanding of what it means to be a servant leader is necessary on both sides[[9]](#footnote-9). Accountability is essential in the relationship within the leadership, as well as between them and the church membership. Leaders who are not accountable risk failure. Most importantly, accountability is required in their relationship with the Lord.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Deacons must be alert to their duty to support the Pastor, their leader under God, through regular prayer, faithfully carrying out their ministry, supporting his/her wellbeing, providing counsel from the Holy Spirit (not being sycophants or “yes men”), promoting unity in the church and being available to serve as the need arises. They should follow the Pastor’s example, as he follows Christ .[[11]](#footnote-11) They should respect the office of the Pastor, remembering the warning: "*Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm."[[12]](#footnote-12)* They should remember Paul’s advice to the Thessalonians “*to acknowledge those who labour among you and preside over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them most highly in love because of their work”.[[13]](#footnote-13)*

**ACTIVITIES**

1. Volunteer to research and report: In practice, what are the primary differences between the Diaconate in the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Baptist Churches?
2. Round Robin Conversation: Can you justify the evolution in the ministry of deacons beyond the example of “The Seven” (Acts 6: 1 - 6) and the Pauline advice to Timothy (1Timothy 3:8-13)?
3. Round Robin Conversation: Titus 1: 5 – 9 is about the selection of elders. How is this passage relevant to this discussion about Deacons?
4. Group Discussion: What do you think could cause tensions in relations between Deacons and the congregation or Deacons and the Pastor? Provide specific examples and suggest how those situations be avoided or resolved?
5. Group Discussion: *Brother Harry and his wife are never at church together at the same time. As the Deacon who leads their cell group, you take the initiative to find out why this is so. Brother Harry responds by saying that they both can’t come to church at the same time because one has to stay home to protect the family business. How do you respond to his answer?*

**Lesson 3: Selection/Election of Deacons in the JBU**

Neither the **2012 Paper** nor the JBU **Guide to Church Membership** treats with the manner of the selection or appointment of deacons, their tenure and the way they are “set-apart” in their churches. Thus, it is considered useful that this study should look at the process for the selection of Deacons, which varies within the denomination. In some circuits, candidates are nominated by the existing Deacons (over which process the Pastor presides), prior to election by the membership after a period of prayer. In some other circuits, nominations from the membership are considered by the Church Council which then presents a list for election by the membership. For others, the Pastor begins the process by submitting names for consideration by the Church Council which then issues recommendations for voting or ratification by the membership. Another variant sees Deacons nominated by the Pastor and ratified by the membership.

Given the autonomy of the churches which comprise the JBU family, the diversity in practice is to be expected. However, if the Early Church’s selection of “The Seven” is accepted as a guide for the election of leaders in today’s Church, how do these methods compare with that guide? A closer look at that guide shows that[[14]](#footnote-14):

* the Apostles called the entire membership together;
* they stipulated the number of persons to be selected;
* they also stipulated the criteria to be used in the selection;
* the membership chose “The Seven” and presented them to the Apostles;
* the Apostles then prayed for “The Seven” and laid hands on them (commissioned them for service).

Nigel G. Wright puts it this way:

“*The criteria for making the choice were determined by the apostles but the actual selection was made by the church. How exactly this was done is not recorded. We do know that the apostles left the decision to the church, who confirmed and worked with it once it was made and that as a consequence the church increased all the more”* He states further that : *“This is an example of congregational decision making in relation to the crucial matter of appointing leaders. The situation was delicate because of the potential divisions, but the decision was wise. Those chosen were all Greek-speaking and would command confidence from the part of the church which felt neglected”[[15]](#footnote-15)*

Patterned from this example, it is essential that the membership be involved in the selection process. This helps foster greater support for and understanding of the ministry of Deacons. However, the point must be made that the selection process is not a popularity contest. The membership must spend time in both corporate and individual prayer for God’s guidance so that the choices made accord with His will.

The Pastor has a unique role in the process. His/her gift of discernment (assumed) and the probability that he/she might be privy to confidential information may provide a significant perspective for verifying whether candidates are ready to assume the office. He/she must be alert to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, bearing in mind especially His work in calling persons into Christian service (for example Acts 13:2- the Holy Spirit’s designation of Paul and Barnabas). Also to be borne in mind are his/her responsibility to care for the flock (Acts 20: 28) and the importance of employing the Holy Spirit’s gifting for the edification of the church (Ephesians 4: 11). He/she also has the liberty to strategically interview candidates to test their readiness and willingness to serve, before the membership is asked to elect the Deacons. Nonetheless, the Pastor should resist the temptation to simply present a list to the membership for their ratification.

When Deacons are to be elected, it is the Pastor who normally advises the membership of the need for additional Deacons, or for filling vacancies created by whatever means. This is usually discussed either in meetings with existing Deacons or in the Church Council. Ideally, the Pastor explains to the membership the reasons for the election, as well as the criteria used for the nomination of candidates. Though not always done, the Pastor should ensure that the membership understands what is expected of the Deacons (spiritual), their role in carrying out the vision for the church (functional) and their linkages within the church (relational). Both the Pastor and the membership should remember the warning issued by Paul in 1 Timothy 5: 22, against hastily “laying hands” on anyone being considered for service.

The **Guide** states that Deacons are ordained after their election, but there are variations from this within the JBU churches and circuits, as some of them “commission” Deacons into service. Using the JBU practice with regard to the ordination of Pastors and the commissioning of Probationer pastors as examples, it would appear that the ordination of Deacons recognizes their life-vocation and that they would retire at an appropriate age, perhaps the same age as Pastors. While a few churches have a fixed retirement age (70) for Deacons, in others, the Deacon serves for as long as he/she is physically and mentally able so to do. In some churches the Deacons are commissioned to serve a specified period and may or may not be re-elected for a new term of service.

Unlike in some denominations, in Baptist churches generally, there is no emphasis on ongoing training for Deacons, despite the availability of useful courses in the JBU Mission Agency’s “Training in Discipleship and Ministry”. Some circuits or Parish Associations have also taken the initiative of arranging seminars for their Deacons. Perhaps the School of Ministry could also offer biennially a few dedicated courses prepared especially for Deacons.

Despite the many variations in the way Deacons are selected, their tenure of service and their functions, there is consensus that:

1. the office of Deacon is Biblical; (1 Timothy 3: 8 – 13 and Philippians 1: 1);
2. Deacons must know and live in accordance with the word of God; (1 Tim. 3: 9 -10);
3. the Deacon must be of impeccable character, including in their family and professional life and be respected in the community; (1 Tim. 3: 8, 10, 12);
4. the Deacon ought not to be a new or recent convert, but must first prove to be a reliable and faithful steward and servant of God and the church; (1 Tim 3: 10);
5. there is no gender bias in the selection of Deacons, who are called to serve in accordance with the Holy Spirit’s bidding; (Galatians 3: 28; Joel 2:29; Romans 3:22);
6. the fundamental reason for the Diaconate should be service (the very meaning of the Greek word from which Deacon is derived) to the church to the glory of God; and that,
7. the Deacon maintains a supportive role vis-à-vis the pastor’s ministry (as in Acts 6: 1 – 7).

Vacancies within the diaconate result from migration, re-location, physical or other incapacity, death, resignation or rarely- dismissal. There does not appear to be any agreed procedure for dealing with disciplinary concerns, which, for the most part, are handled confidentially by the Pastor. Anecdotal evidence suggests that where a Deacon’s belief, action, or conduct makes him/her unfit to continue in that office, he/she is requested to resign. In case of conflict, Jesus’ guidance on conflict resolution[[16]](#footnote-16) should be followed.

**ACTIVITIES**

1. Round Robin Conversation: How best can the Diaconate serve the Church?
2. Group Discussion: There is a clamour for youth to be in the leadership of the Church. How should they be selected, prepared and helped to become effective Deacons?
3. Volunteer to research and report: Should there be a timeline for the service of Deacons? Give reasons for your position.
4. Group Discussion: Is the selection/election of Deacons in your church in accordance with Scripture? (Acts 6: 1-6)

**LESSON 4: CONCLUSION**

In this review of the Diaconate in the JBU experience, it would appear that there is general agreement on the essentials, as indicated at the end of the previous lesson. Perhaps the differences are not great enough to cause confusion, but streamlining the approach to, and conduct of, the ministry of Deacons could be very beneficial.

As pointed out in the 2012 Paper:

*“There seems to be an ever-increasing need for… guidelines noting what seem to*

*be disagreements of a divisive nature concerning such matters which are becoming more and more evident in our midst. Such guidelines among other things will protect against arbitrary decision- making…, preserve the integrity of the office [of Deacon] and reflect the corporate will of the church under the guidance of the Spirit.”*

The guidelines would clarify and streamline various issues, including the following:

1. Method for electing Deacons- to be based on the only recorded election in the New Testament (the election of ‘The Seven’).
2. Qualifications- as for ‘the Seven’ (Acts 6:3) and as outlined in 1 Tim. 3: 8 -13.
3. Tenure: lifelong ordination or commissioned for a specified period?
4. Role: Utilization of gifts for the church’s edification, support of the Pastor’s ministry and general participation in effecting Jesus’ mandate to the Church. Pastor, Deacons and Church membership should be clear on role of Deacons.
5. Code of conduct and disciplinary issues
6. Relationships within the church between Deacons and Pastor and Deacons and Congregation
7. Deacons and Pastoral Care
8. Ongoing training of Deacons- to assist them in their spiritual development and build their capacity to function more effectively in their various roles.

**For Discussion**

1. Group Discussion: Give your reasons for or against: “The JBU ought to adopt guidelines for the Ministry of the Diaconate”.
2. Round Robin Conversation: What do you consider as priorities in any such guidelines?
3. Group Discussion: What is the significance of “ordination” versus “commissioning” of Deacons. Which of these two rites would you advocate, and what are your reasons?
4. Round Robin Conversation: What advice would you give to your Church Council on this matter of establishing guidelines?
5. Round Robin Conversation: How useful has this study been to my understanding of the Ministry of Deacons within the JBU family?

1. Papers Produced by the Faith and Order Commission 2012; p. 10; Paper annexed. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 1 Pet. 5:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gal. 3:28 NIV [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wesley Diaconal Community-MCCA [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Papers produced by the Faith and Order Commission 2012; p.16; Paper annexed. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Guide; p. 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Unpublished Paper on “Deacons- Role and Function”; 2010. Courtesy of Author. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 1 Cor. 12: 4-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Matt 20: 25 -28 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Col. 3:23 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 1 Cor. 11: 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ps. 105: 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 1 Thess. 5: 12-13 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Acts 6: 2-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. N.G Wright: “Free Church Free State”; Paternoster, London, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Matt 18: 15 - 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)