

Tools for Benevolence

Introduction:

The purpose of this handbook is to provide a few useful tools for deacons so they can be more effective in their work with benevolence and community call needs. Deacons face a variety of needs and requests for assistance that can be challenging. Tools presented here are intended to help deacons decide whom they are best equipped to help. These tools help establish a framework for helping a person change and grow through a goal oriented, meaningful relationship.

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

1. Establishing a Benevolence Policy

- ◆ Concepts to address in a benevolence policy.
- ◆ Needs that deacons are best equipped to address.
- ◆ Coordinating diaconal work with church staff and elders.

2. Using a Plan of Action

- ◆ Encouraging growth and change rather than fostering dependency.
- ◆ A Plan of Action.
- ◆ Completing a Plan of Action.

3. Partnering with Others

- ◆ The deacons' partners in the ministry of mercy.
- ◆ Promoting supportive relationships between people in the church and people in need.

The Deacons Calling

The charge to Deacons in the form for ordination calls deacons to “*realize that benevolence is a quality of our life in Christ and not merely a matter of financial assistance.*” This charge implies that benevolence involves a lifestyle of caring, 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 really understanding what life is like for that person. Listening to understand will show genuine concern and help the deacon understand the underlying reasons for the individual's situation.

◆ Know our biases and prejudices.

Showing Christ's love involves showing respect and dignity to people who grew up in a different cultural setting or are of a different color than we are. We must avoid trying to make others become like us.

Developing a Benevolence Policy

Developing a benevolence policy will help deacons focus their time and energy. A clearly defined policy will help you know when to spend a significant amount of time with a need or when to refer it to other community agencies.

Sharing this policy with the church pastor, staff and elders will help them know how to handle needs they see and the cold calls they receive.

Your Church's Guidelines:

If the deacons have a benevolence policy in place, a yearly review of this policy will help new deacons understand the church's benevolence goals. It will also allow the diaconate to make changes and updates as needed. If no clear policy is in place, the following questions will help the deacons get started.

Questions to ask:

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?
- other monetary help?

3. Do you want to set up **geographic boundaries** for assistance?

4. **How often** will you consider helping someone? How often per person per year?
5. Always help with _____.
Never help with _____.
6. When will you request a **Plan of Action** be completed? (see page 6)
7. When and how to you want church staff to refer cases?

Suggestions to Deacons:

◆ 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.

Where Should Deacons Focus Their Time?

Establish Relationships

Deacons become aware of needs and receive requests for assistance from people in a wide variety of ways. Some requests come from people who live in your church's neighborhood, and some are from people just traveling through. Requests also come from church members.

Some are “cold calls” from people who are calling many places to get help. Deciding where deacons should focus their attention 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 relationship 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 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” (from *Benevolence: Relief to Renewal*).

Encourage Goals and 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 6, 7, & 8 of this booklet on developing a Plan of Action is a model for how to assist people to grow and achieve their goals.

How to Coordinate with Church Staff

Communicate

Once you have a benevolence policy in place, **sharing this 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 needs of congregation 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 you to clarify your benevolence policy. 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 on to 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 your area. Your Diaconal Conference can help you identify these resources.

IF it seems like the persons do not like these options, you can then refer them to _____. Please say something like, “I can also refer you to _____. They do not provide any emergency or financial assistance, but they can refer you to other resources. You can reach them at _____.” If you do this, please make a quick call to _____ to inform them about the person and need so he can prepare to respond with appropriate resources.

Communicating Requests

The church staff can use the following form/questions to document requests for assistance and then pass this 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:

Developing a Plan of Action

Why a Plan of Action?

The plan of action form on page 8 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 tool 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 supportive 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 really satisfied with things the way they are. They just want occasional help in maintaining 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 restaurant.
- ◆ 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.

Plan of Action

Working Together 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?
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a) _____	_____	_____
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b) _____	_____	_____
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c) _____	_____	_____
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Goal

#2 _____

a) _____	_____	_____
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b) _____	_____	_____
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c) _____	_____	_____
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D. Support from the church and deacons:

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

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

Follow up

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

When? _____

Where? _____

PLAN OF ACTION

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 copier.

- ◆ Though the focus is on the future, all should agree that there are problems with the present situation. If the person or family is really satisfied with the way 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.
- ◆ The number of action steps depends on what you think can realistically be done to make change 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 to feel some success. Once they take small steps, they can then identify more.
- ◆ 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 more often 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.

Alternative Questions for the Plan for Action form:

The following are some other questions the deacons could ask the family/individual if they have trouble coming up with ideas for the Plan of Action.

A. Where you want to be:

- What goal could you set that would 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 then?

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 to 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?

Developing Long Term Relationships: An Example

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 *Relief to Renewal*, by Ben Vande Zande)

HOW TO PARTNER WITH OTHERS

Longer 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 relationship 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

Who Are Your Partners?

There are several partners who may also care about 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.

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 benevolence work. Pray also that he will bless the family's or individual's efforts to grow and change.

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 Stephens 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 need including mental health, employment, consumer credit counseling, and other areas. To coordinate your efforts with those professionals, it helps to have the family/individual sign a release of information:

Holland Deacons' Conference: A Resource to YOU

The Holland Deacons' Conference is available to help you. An HDC representative or designated resource person will meet with your diaconate to help you make a start. HDC can help you set goals, assist in developing a Benevolence Policy, consult with you on difficult needs that you face, and help develop a Plan of Action with someone in need. **Please feel free to call the HDC office (616-494-6050).**

Other Resources

Many of the ideas and concepts in this booklet have been gleaned from *Benevolence: from Relief to Renewal* by Ben Vande Zande, Diaconal Ministries of Eastern Canada and from *Changing Times, New Approaches, A Handbook for Deacons* by Jay Van Groeningen CRWRC.

NOTES: