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## Who Me, a Deacon? Why Me?

Trust me—you're going to get this call. On the far end of the horizon of your cell phone, somebody from the nominating committee wants to know if you will serve as a deacon. Can you hear me now?

After you regain consciousness, you will want to know why they selected you. Maybe their thought process went something like the following:

Someone saw this deacon calling in you. They saw it when you spotted that single mom trying to fill three plates and juggle two kids in the potluck line after church. You found her a high chair, helped her brood get settled at a table, and introduced her around.

Someone noticed how you attend to the details of worship in such an efficient, easy way, smoothing the process and soothing the people.

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Someone realized that when you say yes to a commitment in the life of the church, it is as good as done and done well.

Someone figured out that you don't wait to be asked. You take the initiative and meet the need. No fanfare or thanks needed.

Someone watched the way you led the youth group, including and appreciating each teen for his or her unique contribution to the project.

Obviously this mysterious someone "ratted you out" to the church nominating committee, prompting their call inviting you to consider becoming a deacon.

We're waiting; and your reaction to the call? That furtive look on your face, that cracked voice, that furrowed brow, that cold sweat; all scream that you are unprepared to respond. Before you launch that bogus spiel about "this is an obvious case of identity theft," take a 'time out,' will you?

Before you say no way, this little book welcomes you to consider thoughtfully and prayerfully the ancient and honorable office of Christian deacon. Instead of doing all the talking, take on the task of listening. Take a long look within; live attentively. Pay attention to the silent side of prayer.

Now, I will grant you that some churches just need "warm bodies" to fill deacon slots, complete rosters, present a full slate, and stack committees. In that case your "calling" will consist of frantic activity without much spiritual focus, busy work. In churches trying to

fill slots, the invitation to become a deacon may not mean much. But let's not go there!

Instead, consider deaconing to be your next spiritual adventure, a chance to explore who you are before God and to serve a purpose beyond yourself. Let's explore this possibility. Spiritual adventures often unfold at "hinge" moments for the soul. Hinge moments happen when we are willing to hold ourselves open to God and deeply listen to what our lives are telling us. In hinge moments the door between time and eternity swings wide open into an unexplored dimension.

I don't mean to make your calling as a deacon sound like an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. I was hoping your calling as a deacon might serve as a wake-up call. You are done mushing your way through the mundane. You are off on an adventure with God.

As you hold in your heart the possibility that God is up to something in your life, I invite you into a season of thoughtful discernment. Carve out some intentional moments of reflection. I don't mean take a thirty-day silent retreat with the Benedictines. You might be surprised at what can happen in fifteen minutes.

Ready or not, plop down in your favorite chair and light a candle to symbolize your desire for illumination. Focus your attention on your breathing and center yourself. Offer to God your intention to become open. Sometimes when the distractions of daily life are distressing you, it requires great effort to still your soul. As you give less energy to the distraction and more

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energy to being present to Christ, an almost imperceptible shift takes place. You begin to notice moments of God's presence, power, and love. In this moment, ask God what this invitation to become a deacon means at this point in your life and at this season in your lifelong discipleship. Sometimes new spiritual adventures signal the cutting edge of our growth toward Christ. Take a deep breath. As you exhale, rest at the bottom of your breath and listen to any nuance or nudge the Spirit may be offering you. Lift your gratitude to God for all that it means to even be asked to serve as a deacon. Trust the promise that where God guides, God also provides. Claim the faith that whatever wisdom necessary to make a solid discernment will be yours as you explore this call.

Discernment is about holding your life up to God, offering your gratitude for guidance, and listening as if your life depended on it, because it does! There, now you've started. That wasn't so hard after all!

#### **Attraction to Distraction in Listening for a Call**

Dealing with your inward attraction to distraction is not always easy when seeking to listen to God in prayer. The almost magnetic pull toward mind clutter and a noisy heart may be refocused by choosing to intentionally work your way through these fourteen focal factors as you process your own discernment. You may want to use them, one by one, as a resting place for your spirit.

1. Fear Factor

This is your time to exaggerate and awful-ize. Imagine your worst nightmare about being a deacon. Own up to this anxiety however dreadful, silly, or inappropriate. This is no time for being proper and polite. Know that confessing this fear begins to tame it. Often, courage is just fear that has said its prayers!

2. Unfinished Factor

New levels of spiritual responsibility have a way of jogging our psyche and surfacing unfinished business that has been buried beneath the busyness. Are there emotional, spiritual, or personal issues so unattended and unaddressed internally as to hinder my ability to effectively serve? Do I have hot button issues that blind, distort, and impair my judgment? Instead of dealing with my own unfinished soul work, do I project internal problems onto others, assuming they have the problem? What must I do to be finished with this past, so I can fully consider God's preferred future for me? Do I have any earthly idea what a positive resolution would even look like?

3. Scandal Factor

Could anything in my life create a scandal to the gospel and hand non-Christians a "free pass" to disrespect the church? If I am in the recovery process, am I recognized by my peers as being far

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enough along to guide others? Is my life in order? Are there any skeletons in my closet that would cause the church embarrassment? Of course we all have some, but this refers to public things like arrests, felonies, lawsuits, violations, and accusations that might negatively impact the church's witness. How was the matter disposed of? How long ago is "long enough" ago? Is the shadowy side of my life surrendered to the Spirit? Do I need some wise counsel? Whom can I trust to confidentially discuss these matters?

### 4. Joy Factor

Can I name the joy that leaps within when I consider this call? Sometimes a collision occurs at the intersection of your deep joy and the world's great need. This is the kind of cosmic collision that often accompanies a call. After sweeping all the dark corners of our lives for cobwebs, how delightful it is to simply acknowledge the sheer joy of being of any service to our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer God.

### 5. Devotion Factor

Have I sufficiently attended to my inner life and developed habits of the heart and spiritual practices that sustain me in tough times? Do I have anything to offer souls who are fed up, used up, burned up, burned out, and bummed out? Do my practices feed

my own soul and provide a wellspring of spiritual strength to draw upon? Do I know how to dwell in Christ? Can I sustain myself and serve others over the long haul?

6. Gift Factor

Have I discovered my own spiritual gifts? Do I even know what they are? Do I have an inkling of how they operate? Am I willing to work through a process to uncover them so I can offer them effectively in Christ's service? How might my strengths be teamed with others to complement the ministry needs of the congregation for this season of our life together as a faith community?

7. Fun Factor

God's work is not *all* deadly drudgery! What would make deaconing fun for me? Do opportunities to learn excite me? Does the prospect of spiritual growth sound like fun? Would getting to hang out with people I admire and appreciate strengthen my desire to serve? Where is the fun in this call? If you aren't drawn to a fun factor, don't do it; you'll drag the whole team down!

8. Pastor Factor

Do I have a positive personal regard for the pastoral staff? Am I open to working closely with them? Is there a sincere spirit of collegiality among us? If

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not, am I willing to do my part to heal and reconcile this key relationship? We may not have a personal friendship, but do we at least have a solid basis for mutual respect? Can I support my pastor and trust that she or he will support me? Am I willing to lead and be led by my pastor and/or pastoral staff?

## 9. Example Factor

Will I be able to deal comfortably with the expectation of being looked up to as a spiritual example in behavior and attitude? If being a role model makes me nervous, can I at least imagine myself growing into this role? Am I able to claim my own Christlikeness without resorting to false piety or lapsing into denial of the power that God has given me to offer others? Am I comfortable with my own spiritual seasoning and maturation? Do I understand the principle that people are only looking through me to Christ?

## 10. Legacy Factor

What difference might my service make for the church's coming generations? What spiritual and material resources can I offer to God in a way that provides a legacy, a gift, for the years beyond my own lifetime? Creating an example of how to move beyond success to spiritual significance for Christ in the generations yet-to-come is a powerful positive motivator. Blazing a trail for others to follow might

mean that I will need to be much more intentional about stewarding my resources to maximize future impact. Leaving a legacy requires looking for creative ways to extend the kingdom's purpose beyond my lifetime.

#### 11. Shadow Factor

Count on deaconing to bring us nose-to-nose and face-to-face with our own faults, frailties, flaws, foibles, finitude, and fragility. If we can't see them, someone else will be glad to point out all the dreadful specifics. Relax! Everybody has a shadow side to his or her personality; it's part of being human. We can't always predict the outcome when the shadow side of our soul emerges. We can, however, submit ourselves to God and surrender to the Spirit. Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was never removed, but he discovered "I can do all things through him (Christ) who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). Perhaps we have this treasure in such "earthen vessels," so the excellence of the power shining through the cracks may be God's and not a reflection of us!

#### 12. Cost Factor

King David said, "I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing" (2 Sam. 24:24). Jesus advised his disciples to count the cost before committing to follow when he said, "No one

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who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Lk. 9:62). How do I calculate the cost of being a deacon? What am I willing to pay to follow the Christ who gave his all? Two seldom-used words come to mind: obedience and sacrifice. Calculating these costs may save you some bellyaching later!

## 13. Faith Factor

Are the spiritual allegiances of my life solidly in place? Can I honestly claim the core teachings of Christianity well enough to embody them effectively in my daily life and practices? Am I knowledgeable enough to at least informally teach them? If the answer is no, then am I willing to commit to a course of spiritual learning to improve major deficiencies? Once I get beyond me, am I willing to answer the call to step out in faith and help lead the way? John said it best: “This is the victory that conquers the world, our faith” (1 Jn. 5:4).

## 14. Vision Factor

Not everybody is a visionary. (Thank God!) If I am not a seer of dreams and visions, do I at least recognize such a leader when I see one? Am I a valuable follower and contributor? Never discount the power of positive support and a can-do spirit. Can I be comfortable experiencing someone else’s vision and finding my unique part within that

framework? Do I have a personal mission statement? How does God's mission for me dovetail with the congregation's vision at this time?

I hope you will carry these fourteen factors around in your heart for a while before saying yes or no. It may become important to you that you hollow out a little more space to "walk the furrowed fields of your mind" before God. You may find it helpful to take a day retreat around these focal points along with scripture reading and a bit of reflective journaling. Some folks can't know for certain what they think until they see it written out on a piece of paper! Many active minds discover prayer-walking settles them into a quieter place with God. Sometimes, embracing and loving the question is answer enough; at other times we feel the need for something as specific as a sign. My own sense of it is that anyone who loves God enough to earnestly seek God's guidance will be found by the needed grace.

### **So Really, Why *Did* They Ask You to Be a Deacon?**

Beyond believing you would enjoy the awesome honor of serving Christ's church as a deacon, what else may have prompted the nominating committee's call?

Consider this: You may have been selected to serve as a deacon because they recognized that you already are one! I like to encourage those charged with calling out our next generation of leaders to look out across the life of our congregation and ask, who is already

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deaconing? You came up on the radar screen because you are already displaying the most critical ingredient in a deacon's heart, a serving spirit. You have already displayed and demonstrated the servant's heart of Christ to someone, or your name wouldn't have even come up.

Let's face it. Being a deacon is not like winning a church popularity contest. It's not like being named Mr. or Ms. Congeniality at the state fair! The title *deacon* is not handed out as a reward for distinguished giving. It certainly is not offered as an incentive to reactivate a member whose attendance and interest in church is somewhat lagging.

You are called to be a deacon because your life *already* bears the marks of willing service to Christ's kingdom. You *are* one! To put it bluntly what you would not even think about doing for love or money you would gladly do if obedience to Christ clearly called for that act of service. You are a devoted servant of the servant heart of Christ. This is not an "on-again/off-again, occasional, if-I'm-in-a-good-mood-and-feel-like-it" thing with you. This is no mere whim or fancy! This is your heartbeat. You are an enthusiastic, passionate follower of Christ, who *is* your life.

### ***A Few Words of Order***

Some congregations use a rotational system of deacons. A person serves for several years on the official administrative board and committees and then rotates

off for a year. A deacon can elect, if asked, to return to active service for another term. These days, many congregations have streamlined their top-heavy organizational chart. They make being on or off the administrative board a totally separate experience from continuing service as a deacon in one of the congregation's ministries. Often in such congregations, deacons are installed for a lifetime of active service and may request a sabbatical for rest, rejuvenating, and retooling for future opportunities of service. Being elected to the administrative board is no longer automatically linked to a deacon's ongoing ministry of service.

***If You Are a Returning Deacon...***

Congratulations! You are off the bench and back in the game! If, while you were on the sidelines, changes were made in the game plan, graciously try to accommodate new ways. If not, seek counsel and voice your concerns in a way that respects the fact that the church's life and ministry go on with or without us. Even how you go about inquiring and questioning can be an example of positive leadership. If your enthusiasm for previous tasks has waned, don't hesitate to step up to new opportunities or to help create new ministries. Not only what you do but the spirit with which you do it can make all the difference in your congregation. If there are new faces in leadership, get to know them. Hear their dreams, know their hearts, and find your place in this fresh season of service. As you reflect on

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previous stints of service, ask yourself, what one dumb thing do I need to stop doing that could quite possibly improve my deaconing by 80 percent?

### ***If You Are a Newly-minted Deacon...***

Congratulations! You have no idea what you have gotten yourself into, do you? Yet you have joined the ranks of an ancient and honorable order of servants who hark back to those halcyon New Testament times when the Spirit was molding Christ's body on earth and when deacons were a critical component in his work.

Your initial anxiety over whether or not you are worthy to be a deacon is completely normal. If you did not have some jitters or self-questioning, the nominating committee might not have done a thorough job in explaining your new role. You are being asked to step out of the pews, out of the rank and file, to honor Christ's body by becoming the servant of the servants of Christ. Strange as it may seem to you on the front end, the higher you are called in the church's offices, the more people you serve and carry in love. Henri Nouwen once alluded to this concept in a lecture as the inverted triangle of service.<sup>1</sup> Becoming a deacon is not so much a promotion to a "higher rank" as it is a wider opportunity to offer ministry. Nervousness will

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<sup>1</sup>Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998), 1.

soon give way to the sheer joy of getting to be present in sacred moments when people's souls are touched, comforted, and challenged. You get to help make a difference.