

Chapter 13 | Deacons

For more information, contact GBHEM's Director of Deacon Ministry, Provisional Membership and Certification at deacons@gbhem.org or (615) 340-7375. See also www.gbhem.org/deacons.

“Within the people of God, some persons are called to the ministry of deacon This ministry exemplifies and leads the Church in the servanthood every Christian is called to live both in the church and the world. Those called to the ministry of deacon are called to witness to the Word in their words and actions, and to embody and lead the community's service in the world for the sake of enacting God's compassion and justice.” (§305)

“Deacons are persons called by God, authorized by the Church and ordained by a bishop to a lifetime ministry of Word, Service, Compassion and Justice, to both the community and the congregation in a ministry that connects the two. Deacons exemplify Christian discipleship and create opportunities for others to enter into discipleship. The work of deacons is a work of justice, serving with compassion as they seek to serve those on the margins of society. In the congregation, the ministry of the deacon is to teach and to form disciples and to lead worship together with other ordained and laypersons.” (§329)

NOTE: Unless otherwise stated, the term “deacon” in this chapter applies to both ordained and provisional deacons.

Deacon Ministry

The office of deacon, like the office of bishop, extends back to New Testament times. In the middle of the 20th century, an ecumenical movement called for the restoration of the ancient form of the diaconate, a leadership role (associated closely with the bishop) that embodied the servant ministry of the baptized and led the church in acts of compassion and justice. The United Methodist Church eliminated the medieval expression of the diaconate (as a process step toward elder) and reclaimed the ancient form in 1996.

DUTIES

- The ministry of a deacon is characterized not by a specific job but by compassion and justice leadership and commitment to the ordained relationship to the church. “Ordination confers a new identity in the life of the church, as well as authority for ministry Ordination has to do with who the person is in the life of the church, as well as what the person does in ministry.” (Services for the Ordering of Ministry in The United Methodist Church, The United Methodist Publishing House) Whether appointed primarily to a congregation or primarily outside the church, the deacon holds leadership in both, connecting the people of God to the needs of the world.
- Duties while serving in a congregation
 - Lead, in some manner, the people of the congregation into ministries outside the walls of the church
 - Teach, form and equip the people to love God and neighbor
 - Proclaim the Word
 - Assist pastors in worship and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion
 - May lead in a specialized ministry
 - Conduct weddings and funerals

- Duties while serving in ministries beyond the local church
 - May be appointed to a setting outside the church, such as a social service agency, a school, a mission agency, an institution or other settings
 - May lead ministries that care and advocate for the marginalized and vulnerable, organize or serve in mission work, raise funds for justice and compassion ministries, teach, empower, advocate, counsel, coach, serve as chaplains, develop new ministries, serve church-related institutions and agencies and much more
 - Fulfill secondary responsibilities assisting a congregation to participate in compassion and justice ministries
- Sacramental Authority
 - Assists elders in the administration of the sacraments
 - May provide and preside at the celebration of the sacraments “when contextually appropriate and duly authorized” by the bishop of the Annual Conference where the deacon is appointed. This is done “for the sake of extending the mission and ministry of the church and offering the means of grace to the world.” The deacon requests this authorization directly from the bishop. (§328)
 - It is fitting that deacons (or laypeople trained by deacons) extend the gathered community’s communion table, in a timely manner, to those unable to attend due to infirmity, illness or similar conditions. *This Holy Mystery* details this practice (pp. 22-23).

Appointments and Reporting

LOCATION

- The location of an appointment is a place where a deacon provides servant leadership, fulfills his or her call, establishes a clear distinction between the work to which all Christians are called and the work for which deacons are prepared and authorized and where supervision, goals and evaluation of the deacon’s work is acceptable to the bishop, cabinet and BOM. (§331.3, §331.4)
- May be appointed to congregations where they lead in equipping Christians for service and lead the congregation’s mission to the world
- May be appointed to settings beyond the local church; for example, church agencies, schools or institutions, ecumenical agencies or organizations that extend Christ’s love in the world and connect the church with the most needy, neglected and marginalized

APPOINTMENT PROCESS

- The deacon, bishop, District Superintendent or an agency requesting service may initiate an appointment, but the bishop appoints deacons and provisional deacons.
- Suggested questions to determine appropriate appointments beyond the local church:
 - How will the deacon fulfill the vows of ordination to Word, Service, Compassion and Justice in this setting? How would the deacon be a representative of God’s love in this setting?
 - How does the proposed ministry setting provide an opportunity to maintain a relationship and accountability with the Order of Deacons and the structure of the church?
 - How is the proposed ministry congruent with the church’s ministry to the world?
 - Does the person possess the gifts, training, education and experience required for the proposed ministry?
 - How will the deacon lead others into ministry through this appointment?

- What are the accountability structures in this setting? What structures would the cabinet and BOM recommend?
- If the bishop and cabinet determine an appointment is not in the best interest of the church, the bishop may choose not to make the appointment. The bishop consults with the deacon and the BOM. The deacon shall proceed in one of the following ways (§331.6c)
 - Seek another appointment
 - Request a personal leave of absence, a transitional leave or another voluntary leave of absence
 - Relinquish his/her credentials
 - Is terminated. Involuntary termination shall follow the procedures for fair process in administrative hearings (§361, §331.6c) (See Chapter 26, BOM Handbook.)

SECONDARY APPOINTMENTS

- For deacons whose appointments are beyond the local church
- Requiring a secondary appointment helps a deacon serving beyond the local church connect ministry in the community and ministry in the congregation.
- It is important to keep the ministry of church-based deacons and community-based deacons unified and retain the connection between ministry in the community and in the congregation. Deacon ministry is “a lifetime ministry of Word, Service, Compassion and Justice to both the community and the congregation in a ministry that connects the two.” (§329)
- Requesting a secondary appointment
 - The bishop, District Superintendent, pastor or deacon initiates conversation to determine how the deacon’s gifts may be used in a local church as described in §331.1. Consideration is given to how much time the deacon can give, how the deacon will lead in the worship and ministry of the congregation and what the appropriate lines of accountability will be. It is appropriate for the Pastor/Staff-Parish Relations Committee to consult on the proposed secondary appointment.
 - The deacon proposes the secondary appointment in writing to the area bishop (and to the bishop of the deacon’s home conference if serving in another Annual Conference), sending a copy to the District Superintendent and pastor. The request must explain how the proposed secondary appointment fulfills the ministry of the deacon.
 - The pastor in charge confirms his/her agreement with the proposed secondary appointment.
 - When the resident bishop decides upon the appointment, the bishop informs the deacon, the pastor and the bishop of the conference where the deacon holds membership
 - If the deacon is a member of another Annual Conference, the bishop making the appointment completes the Official Record of Appointment of Ordained Minister of another Annual Conference.

Membership of Deacons

MEMBERSHIP RESPONSIBILITIES

- Serve as members in full connection with all the responsibilities, rights and privileges accorded to all full clergy members of the Annual Conference
- Have voice and vote in the Annual Conference where membership is held
- Eligible to serve as clergy, including as an officer, and on boards, commissions or Annual Conference committees.
- Eligible for election as a clergy delegate to General, central or jurisdictional conference; right to vote for clergy delegates to these conferences

- Required to attend Clergy Session and Annual Conference
- Votes on matters of ordination, character and conference relations of clergy
- Participates as a member of the Order of Deacons after ordination
- Provisional deacons serve as provisional members of the Annual Conference, with the same rights and responsibilities as provisional elders

ANNUAL CONFERENCE MEMBERSHIP

- Deacons may be appointed in conferences other than where they hold membership.
- When deacons receive appointments to a different conference, they maintain membership in their home conference.
- In this case, the bishop of the conference where membership is held makes the appointment in consultation with the bishop of the area in which the appointment is located.
- Deacons submit annual reports to both bishops.
- Deacons retain their home conference membership if appointed to another denomination.

CHARGE CONFERENCE MEMBERSHIP

- Charge conference membership provides conference clergy connection and accountability to their Annual Conference (the charge conference is a recipient of the deacon's annual report).
- Deacons appointed to congregations, charges or cooperative parishes shall be members of that charge conference.
- Deacons appointed beyond the local church shall designate a charge conference within the bounds of the Annual Conference in which they hold membership. This charge conference is likely to be the deacon's secondary appointment.
- Deacons appointed to settings outside their Annual Conference shall establish an affiliate relationship with a charge conference in the Annual Conference where the appointment is located with the consent of the pastor in charge. This may be the location of their secondary appointment.

Accountability

Accountable to the Annual Conference and the bishop for their ministry and leadership and the fulfillment of their ordination vows. Serve under appointment by the bishop. Accountability can be provided by a board connected to the ministry or by a church related to the ministry (§331.4)

APPOINTMENT COVENANT

- “A covenant is a mutually created commitment to ministry ... that binds the parties in a mutually agreed-upon process to see that particularly segments are done and reflected upon.” (Gwendolynn Purushotham, *Watching Over One Another in Love*)
- Clarifies the appointment and avoids misunderstandings
 - Specifies the ministries the staff person is responsible for in an appointment (primary or secondary) and helps to avoid misunderstandings
 - Couches the deacon in the church's specific mission goals

- Describes how the Pastor/Staff-Parish Relations Committee will support the staff person in accomplishing the mutually agreed upon ministry goals
- Specifies reflection and feedback, as well as benefits and termination procedures
- Increases likelihood of a successful ministry by creating a mutually agreed upon covenant
- The District Superintendent should also be a party to the development of the covenant because deacons are also accountable to the cabinet and the bishop.
- Sample covenants are available at www.gbhem.org/deacons.

ANNUAL EVALUATION

- Deacons and elders who serve congregations undergo a process of annual evaluation with the District Superintendent.
- Deacons appointed beyond the local church
 - Have an annual conversation with their District Superintendent about their ministry
 - Appointment settings should include supervision with goals, evaluation and accountability acceptable to the bishop, the Cabinet and the BOM.
- A personal and professional six-month and in depth assessment (§349.3) shall take place every eight years for all clergy under appointment.

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE DEACON

- Completed by all deacons every year
- Includes a copy of their performance evaluation from their employer
- Available for download from <http://www.gbhem.org/forms-library>
- Deacons in chaplaincy, pastoral counseling or coaching ministries may pursue endorsement from the United Methodist Endorsing Agency (UMEA). They may submit the annual report as their UMEA report.
- Sent to the recipients listed on the form
- This is a requirement of accountability and connection and helps the general church maintain accurate records that can benefit the deacon.
- The BOM should be sure to make the forms available and remind full and provisional deacons to complete the form annually.

Leaves between Appointments

- Deacons in good standing who are between appointments may request a voluntary leave of absence. (§353)
- Transitional Leave (§353.2c) is now limited to 12 months.
- If the market does not/is unlikely to allow a deacon to find appointable employment within 12 months, a deacon may request Personal Leave (§353.2a) or an appointment to a volunteer role through which the deacon ministers in Word, Service, Compassion and Justice.

Less than Full-Time (§331.7) and Non-Salaried Appointments (§331.6d)

- Deacons may receive a less than full-time or non-salaried appointment at their own request.
- Less than full-time appointments
 - Require the consent of the cabinet and the BOM
 - The deacon shall provide a written request, at least 90 days prior to the Annual Conference at which the appointment is made to the bishop, District Superintendent and the BOM, including a rationale for the request.
 - Reappointment to less than full-time service must be requested annually. At the deacon's request, the bishop may make midterm appointments to less than full-time service, with the recommendation of the BOM Executive Committee.
- Non-salaried appointments – Intended to express the church's concern for ministry among the poor and for advancing emerging needs of the future

Termination Guidelines for Deacons Serving in Local Churches (§331)

- The District Superintendent and bishop must be consulted before a church terminates a deacon's employment, because the Bishop makes appointments for deacons.
- Termination procedures must allow time for deacons to seek a new appointment because they are not guaranteed an appointment. Notification of dismissal must be made at least 90 days prior to final termination of employment, except for causes listed in (§2702).
- The deacon and the Pastor/Staff-Parish Relations Committee, the District Superintendent and the bishop must consult before the dismissal of a deacon. (§331.10e)