



Deacons' Handbook

Diocese of Virginia



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Introduction

“Deacons empower others to name, claim and engage the work God gives us all to do. They interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world. Through baptism, all Christians are called to make Christ’s redemptive love known through servant ministry. Deacons are ordained to exercise this ministry, particularly to the poor, the weak, the sick and the lonely. Deacons model servant ministry in their daily life and work and are icons of servant ministry through their roles in worship. At all times, by their life and teaching, deacons are to show Christ’s people that in serving others they are serving Christ himself” (Diocese of Virginia Website).

Deacons are normally assigned to a parish and serve to connect the parish to the world around it. Deacons generally are called to ministries addressing a variety of issues such as justice, racial reconciliation, hunger, access to medical care, and addiction, to name but a few. Deacons often work directly with people challenged by issues, some systemic in nature, including, but not limited to, homelessness, incarceration, aging, and disability. Whatever their call, deacons work most effectively by calling the Church to respond to the needs, hopes, and concerns of the world around it.

Deacons serve directly under the bishop and report directly to her or him (Canon III.7.1). Deacons will communicate annually with their bishop (Canon III.7.4.b). While deacons do serve directly under their bishop, deacons also work with rectors, vicars, and other clergy as clergy colleagues in the community to which deacons are assigned.

Purpose of the Handbook

The contents of this document are intended as guidelines for deacons, priests, and others as to the role of the deacon. The Handbook draws from the Book of Common Prayer rubrics and from canons to articulate the ministry of the deacon as understood by the Episcopal Church. While some aspects of the ministry of the deacon are clearly stated, we also recognize that the ministry of the diaconate is flexible, and the Church continues to live into its understanding of the diaconate today.

The Handbook is designed to address the diaconate in a broad sense and is not designed to address every specific situation encountered by a deacon. Local customs are to be taken into account.

In drafting this work, we consulted with the customaries and handbooks from the Dioceses of Alabama, Maryland, Rhode Island, and Western North Carolina. We are grateful for their work.

Deacons in the Diocese of Virginia

1. Background

In 2004 the 209th Council of the Diocese approved the formation of the order of vocational deacons. The Committee on the Diaconate was named to develop and implement all aspects of diaconal formation, education recruitment and deployment. The first class of deacon postulants were called in 2009 and entered the Diaconal Formation Institute (DFI) in September of that year. Three classes were formed through the DFI with the first class ordained in February 2011. Beginning in January 2014, deacons were trained and formed through The Deacons' School, a joint effort of the Dioceses of Southern Virginia, Southwestern Virginia, and Virginia. Three classes were formed through the Deacons' School, with the first class being ordained in April 2016. The current formation program, St. Phoebe School for Deacons, enrolled its first class in Summer 2020. St. Phoebe students take online classes through the Center for Anglican Learning and Leadership (CALL) at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific (CDSP). As of September 2023, 36 deacons have been ordained in the Diocese of Virginia.

2. Relationship between Bishop and Deacons

The deacon serves directly under the bishop. All deacons are expected to bring to the bishop's attention any issues or changes in life circumstances that significantly impact their ministry as a deacon. At the bishop's annual retreat with the Community of Deacons all deacons are encouraged to seek the bishop out for personal guidance as needed. When a problem arises, and it cannot be addressed in community or requires immediate individual attention, the deacon should schedule a meeting with the bishop. Each deacon shall write a letter, describing their ministries, spiritual condition, and any other items deemed important, annually in Epiphany to the bishop who oversees deacons. (Canon III.7.4(b)).

3. Annual Diocesan Convention

Deacons are expected to attend the annual Diocesan Convention. Deacons will have seat, voice, and vote at the Annual Diocesan Convention. Parishes to which deacons are assigned shall provide necessary funds for deacons to attend Annual Convention. Deacons assigned to non-parochial assignments should request funds from their assignments. If not available, the deacons may request funding from the Diocese.

4. Employment and Church Pension Fund Eligibility

Deacons serve as non-stipendiary ministers of a congregation. However, beginning January 1, 2022, parishes with deacons are to pay deacons \$25 a month, and make the necessary contribution to the Church Pension Group (CPG). This allows access to modest retirement benefits and other support offered by CPG.

5. Expense Reimbursement

The Letter of Agreement (LOA) will detail how and when parishes will reimburse expenses incurred by the deacon. When a deacon is serving on behalf of the diocese (for example, on a Diocesan Task Force), the diocese should reimburse from the budget of such a group for all reasonable expenses incurred by the deacon.

6. Participation in Community of Deacons

The deacon shall participate actively in the Community of Deacons of the Diocese of Virginia and shall attend the annual retreat with the bishop. Deacons are also encouraged to attend other informal gatherings which occur from time to time throughout the Diocese. Deacons not able to attend the annual retreat may be excused by the Bishop.

7. Participation in Gatherings for the Clergy

As clergy of the diocese, deacons are invited to and encouraged to attend all local and diocesan level gatherings to which all clergy are invited.

8. Continuing Education

Deacons are expected to participate in continuing education annually (Canon III.7.5). Participation in the gatherings of diocesan clergy or other diocesan events may meet continuing education obligations. The Letter of Agreement for deacons assigned to parishes should include an amount paid by the parish for a deacon's continuing education.

9. References to the Order of Deacon

The deacon is to be referred to as "deacon" rather than "vocational" or "permanent deacon." A deacon in the process of ordination to the priesthood should be referred to as a "transitional deacon." This should be the normal usage in all diocesan and parish documents.

10. Titles and Forms of Address

The title of address for a deacon closely mirrors the convention for addressing other members of the clergy. In narrative cases, the word "Deacon" parallels "Father/Mother" or Mr./Mrs. or Bishop.

Example: Father Johnson opened the vestry meeting with a prayer.
 Deacon Grimes opened the Bible study with a prayer.
 Bishop Dean confirmed my grandson

For deacons in the Diocese of Virginia, the preferred title is The Rev. Jane Smith, Deacon. This follows the style guide of the Episcopal Church.

11. Vesture and Clerical Dress

Deacons may wear the clerical collar at their discretion when they engage in the public ministry of the church.

When part of the altar party, the deacon is normally vested in alb with stole, or alb, dalmatic and stole. When vested but not part of the altar party, the deacon may wear cassock, surplice, and stole, or alb and stole.

When "choir dress" is called for, deacons may wear cassock and surplice with tippet and appropriate academic hood.

12. Vocation to the Priesthood

The diaconate is a complete order with its own discernment process. If a deacon subsequently discerns a call to the priesthood, he or she will discuss this call with the bishop. If the bishop recognizes the call, the deacon will follow the necessary discernment and ordination process for the priesthood.

13. Resignation at Age 72

All clergy in the Episcopal Church must retire at 72 (Canon III.7.7). Any deacon who reaches the age of 72 while the Letter of Agreement is in force must submit his or her resignation to the diocesan bishop. At the bishop's discretion, the deacon may be licensed to serve on an annual basis.

14. Archdeacons

The Diocese may have up to three Archdeacons, with functional titles. All archdeacons are appointed by the Bishop with consent of the Standing Committee. Archdeacons will assist the Bishop in oversight of deacons, diaconal formation, and diaconal assignments.

15. Diaconal Placements

Deacons are assigned to parishes, faith communities, or other communities by the Bishop. The archdeacons shall assist the Bishop in recommending placements, as requested by the Bishop. All deacons shall have a Letter of Agreement signed by the Bishop, the deacon, and the rector. In the case of non-parochial assignments, the LOA will be signed by the Bishop, the deacon, and the supervising clergy. In the absence of supervising clergy, the LOA may be signed by the supervisor.

16. Letter of Agreement

All deacons who serve in a parochial or non-parochial setting shall have a Letter of Agreement. The Letter of Agreement provides a clear understanding of the role of the deacon in the community and the responsibilities of the community to and for the deacon in its midst.

Deacons in the Parish

1. Relationship between Deacons and Rectors/Priests in Charge/Vicars

The relationship between a priest and deacon is envisioned as that of a colleague. In a parish setting, the priest is in charge of liturgical, pastoral, and organizational responsibilities. The deacon fulfills their roles liturgically and, in agreement with the rector, assists pastorally and organizationally as well.

The priest and deacon should meet as needed and take necessary steps to develop effective and timely communication. The priest and deacon are to be aware of rubrics concerning the deacon's role. They should also be aware of the particular responsibilities of the deacon as they interpret the Good News of the church to the world and the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world to the church. In all instances the relationship and responsibilities of priest and deacon should be transparent.

2. Review of Ministry

The deacon is encouraged to hold a mutual review of ministry annually with the supervising rector or priest in charge. The review of ministry is an opportunity to reflect on the past year, to plan for the coming year(s), to allow the deacon to share their vision and call to ministry in the community, to facilitate communications, and, if necessary, to revise the letter of agreement. Issues or conflicts that cannot be addressed through this review process should be brought to the attention of the bishop and/or the archdeacons.

3. Preaching

A deacon, unless specifically prohibited by the bishop, is licensed to preach in any congregation when invited to do so by the rector, priest in charge, or vicar.

In a parish setting, the rector, vicar, or priest in charge is to be the normal preacher. Deacons, as an interpreter of the needs, hopes, and concerns of the world to the church, are expected to preach periodically throughout the year. This may be a fixed schedule (e.g. once every four weeks) or on a more flexible schedule. Other clergy, seminarians, and other preachers at a congregation must also be taken into consideration.

4. Deacon as Supply Clergy

Deacons generally do not function as supply clergy in the Diocese of Virginia. If asked to serve as supply clergy, deacons shall be compensated at the supply clergy rate. Deacons may, on occasion, lead Morning Prayer in the absence of the rector, vicar, or priest in charge. However, deacons assigned to a parish should only lead services if a supply priest is not available.

5. Examples of Diaconal Ministries

An important component of the deacon's ministry is to call and to support lay ministers in their ministry in the world. Deacons should direct and assist with Eucharistic Ministers and Visitors (Canons III.4.6-7). Based on the nature of their call, deacons may work with outreach and/or social justice ministries within the parish. Deacons should work alongside lay leaders and lay chairs of these ministries.

The following is a representative list, although not exhaustive, of ministries of deacons in the Diocese of Virginia: prison ministry; hospice ministry; ministry with the elderly, including nursing homes; ministry with the sick; ministry with the homeless and hungry; ministry with both urban and rural poor; community organizing and advocacy for social justice; advocacy on behalf of children at risk.

6. Reimbursement of Expenses

When a deacon serves on behalf of a parish, the parish shall reimburse reasonable expenses incurred in the course of ministry. Areas for reimbursement and expenses shall be addressed in the Letter of Agreement. Such expenses may include travel, continuing education, registration for Diocesan Convention, etc. All requests should be submitted prior to the expenditure.

7. Vestry Attendance

Deacons may be expected to attend vestry meetings of the parish to which they are associated. They will not have a vote in vestry business but may be given a voice to bring the needs, hopes, and concerns of the world to the vestry's attention.

8. Discretionary Fund

It is appropriate for deacons to have a discretionary fund in order to render assistance to those in need. Guidelines for a discretionary fund can be found in the Manual of Business Methods in Church Affairs. (https://episcopalchurch.org/files/full_manual_updated_012815_0.pdf)

9. Role in Parish Interim Periods

A deacon's Letter of Agreement automatically expires when the rector, priest in charge, or vicar of the assigned parish resigns or leaves the parish. An interim agreement must be executed between the deacon, senior warden, and bishop if the deacon wishes to continue in the parish.

Deacons do not normally serve as interim clergy in charge in parishes involved in a search process, unless so directed by the bishop. A deacon may also be assigned by the Bishop to serve in a parish during an interim period in some capacity other than clergy person in charge.

10. Role in Parish When a New Rector, Vicar, Priest in Charge is Called

When the parish calls a new Rector, Vicar, Priest in Charge it is the responsibility of the deacon to be a part of the smooth transition for the new priest in charge, vicar, or rector. Once the new priest is in place, the deacon is encouraged to take a sabbatical from active ministry in the parish for a period of time to be established in consultation with the Bishop and archdeacon(s).

Once a sabbatical is taken, the deacon, the new priest, the bishop and the archdeacon(s), will take the opportunity to discern where and how best the deacon will be able to fully live out their call to ministry.

11. Leave Taking

When a deacon leaves a parish, either through retirement or re-assignment, it is proper for the community to acknowledge this leave taking within the context of liturgy. This will give the priest, the deacon, and the congregation an opportunity to celebrate the diaconal ministry of the deacon and to affirm the end of the diaconal relationship to the congregation.

It is important for the deacon to model appropriate boundaries after leave taking. The deacon should not maintain relationships with members of former congregations nor minister to them.

Deacons in the Liturgy

In the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), liturgical functions are explicitly designated as appropriate to various orders of ministry. The premise for these guidelines is articulated in a section of the Book of Common Prayer titled, “Concerning the Service of the Church.”

In all services, the entire Christian assembly participates in such a way that the members of each order within the Church, lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons, fulfill the functions proper to their respective orders, as set forth in the rubrical directions for each service. The leader of worship in a Christian assembly is normally a bishop or priest. Deacons by virtue of their order do not exercise a presiding function: but, like a lay person, may officiate at the Liturgy of the Word, whether in the form provided in the Daily Offices, or (when a bishop or priest is not present) in the form appointed at the Eucharist. Under exceptional circumstances, when the services of a priest cannot be obtained, the bishop may, at discretion, authorize a deacon to preside at other rites also, subject to the limitations described in the directions for each service. (BCP 13)

The following liturgical norms should be followed in the course of the deacon’s ministry. However, latitude should be given for deacons in the course of their diaconal ministry. For example, a deacon who is serving a homeless population may be asked to preside at the funeral or memorial service of the community he or she is serving outside the walls of the church. This should be seen as an extension of the deacon’s ministry in the world. Situations arising that require consideration should be discussed with the supervising priest first.

The liturgical roles of a deacon are a reflection of their call to servant ministry and to ministry in the world. If a deacon is present, these roles should be performed by a deacon and not by priests or laity. It is also important that lay members not perform as a deacon in liturgy (e.g. setting the table).

1. Holy Eucharist

Deacons function in important and symbolic ways at the Holy Eucharist. The rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer are explicit about the functions of a deacon during the Eucharist. The rector or priest in charge and the deacon should work as colleagues to establish the deacon’s role in the liturgy based on the rubrics and the practice of the parish.

- A. Proclaiming the Gospel* - The deacon proclaims the Gospel (BCP 322, 354). The deacon may carry the Gospel Book in procession, place it in a prominent place on the altar, and incense the Gospel Book where it is the custom of the parish.
- B. Prayers of the People - The deacon may lead the Prayers of the People. If it is the parish’s custom to have a lay person lead the prayers, the deacon may participate in this ministry by saying an invitatory sentence for the prayers, by writing the prayers according to the requirements found on page 383 of the BCP, and/or by assisting in gathering the special prayers and thanksgivings of the community.

- C. Confession - The deacon invites the congregation to Confession (BCP 330, 358).
- D. Serving at the Lord's Table* - The deacon serves at the Lord's Table (BCP 354):
 1. The deacon receives the people's offerings of bread, wine, money, and other gifts (BCP 333, 359).
 2. The deacon prepares the Table for the celebration, preparing and placing upon it the bread and cup of wine. It is customary to add a little water to the wine. The deacon may be assisted by other ministers (BCP 354, 407). The deacon may perform the ablutions following Communion.
 3. The deacon assists in the distribution of Communion to the people (BCP 322, 354). When the celebrant is assisted by a deacon, another priest or lay Eucharistic Minister, it is customary for the celebrant to administer the consecrated Bread and the other administer the Chalice. When several deacons or priests are present, some may administer the Bread and others the Wine (BCP 408). Deacons should be aware of the customs of the parish about and uses of Eucharistic Ministers.
- E. Dismissal* - The deacon dismisses the people at the conclusion of the service (BCP 339, 366). The inclusion of "Alleluia, Alleluia" in the dismissal is meant to be used only during the season of Easter through the day of Pentecost.

* When a deacon is officially part of a congregation, they will generally assume the roles indicated by asterisk. Additional diaconal roles suggested by rubrics are also described.

2. Special Days

- A. **Ash Wednesday** It is appropriate and recommended for the deacon to read the Invitation on page 264 of the Book of Common Prayer and to assist in the imposition of ashes.
- B. **During Lent** When it is used, it is appropriate for the deacon to read the Exhortation. It is also appropriate for the deacon to chant or say the Great Litany (BCP 148) at any time it is used.
- C. **Palm Sunday** If the deacon is one of the ministers on Palm Sunday, the deacon shall proclaim the Gospel in the Liturgy of the Palms (BCP 270). It is traditional but not necessary to have the deacon act as the narrator if the Passion Gospel is read or sung in parts.
- D. **Maundy Thursday** If a deacon is one of the ministers on Maundy Thursday, the deacon should participate in the washing of feet according to the local custom of the parish.
- E. **Good Friday** If a deacon is one of the ministers of the Good Friday liturgy, the deacon shall read or sing the biddings included in the Solemn Collects (BCP 277), tailoring them as appropriate.

- F. **Easter Vigil** If a deacon is one of the ministers during the Easter Vigil, it is the deacon's prerogative to lead the procession, to carry the Paschal Candle in procession, and to chant or say the Exsultet (BCP 284).

3. Public Distribution of Reserved Sacrament in a Church

Deacons are not permitted to perform the administration of the reserved sacrament in a parish in the absence of a priest unless there is an urgent need and the bishop has given approval. The Book of Common Prayer provides rubrics on pg. 408 concerning this service. The deacon shall not say the Great Thanksgiving or any portion of the Great Thanksgiving under any circumstance.

4. Holy Baptism

When present and another clergy will perform the baptism, deacons shall vest and participate as ministers at Baptism.

The deacon shall:

- Read the Gospel
- Read or be responsible for the prayers for the candidates(s)
- Assist the celebrant by pouring the water into the font, holding towels, oil stock or Prayer Book, and lighting candles from the Paschal Candle.

Deacons may also baptize candidates (BCP 307). However, deacons may not bless the waters of baptism nor make the sign of the cross with chrism oil on the candidate's forehead. In the Diocese of Virginia, deacons are not customarily the sole officiant at baptisms, and must have the Bishop's permission to do so in each case.

Deacons are permitted to administer Baptism in a genuine emergency or as requested by their rector (BCP 313-314). Examples include when a person is in extreme circumstances in a hospital or at the scene of an accident. A deacon may also officiate at public baptism when the services of a priest cannot be obtained, and with the authorization of the Bishop, as part of the Easter Vigil, on the Day of Pentecost, on All Saints' Day or the Sunday after All Saints' Day, and on the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord (the First Sunday after the Epiphany) (BCP 312).

5. Bishop's Visitations and in Diocesan Eucharists

All of the Customary above applies when the Bishop is the celebrant. In addition, the Bishop's chaplain should be a deacon, if possible. If two deacons are available, it is appropriate that both attend the Bishop.

In procession, the deacon(s) precede the Bishop. If it is the custom for the Gospel book to be carried in the procession, the Deacon of the Word should carry the Gospel Book, in keeping with the deacon's role in proclaiming the Good News. The Bishop is always last in procession.

It is important that deacons observe and match the Bishop's piety. This is also true when standing at the altar.

For the Bishop's Visitation the Bishop's Chaplain is on the bishop's left. The Chaplain will hold the bishop's crozier and miter, and the chaplain will also assist with the Altar Book. The deacon

will perform the diaconal roles. In the absence of a Bishop's Chaplain, a deacon may serve as the Bishop's Chaplain. The deacon will review their role with the Bishop prior to the service.

At all diocesan services, the roles of deacons shall be filled by deacons unless for good reason.

6. Daily Office

Deacons may publicly officiate the Daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, the Order of Service for Noonday, the Order of Worship for the Evening, and the Order for Compline.

7. Officiating at a Marriage

Deacons typically do not preside at either a Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage or at the Blessing of a Civil Marriage. However, a deacon may deliver the charge, ask for the Declaration of Consent, read the Gospel and perform other diaconal functions at the Eucharist when celebrated within the context of a marriage (BCP 422).

In cases where the deacon may have a special relationship to the couple being married, and when the services of a priest or bishop are not available, the deacon may request permission from the bishop to preside at a wedding where there is no Eucharist. If the wedding is to occur in a parish, the deacon must also have the consent of the rector or priest in charge of said parish.

Deacons, as validly ordained ministers, are legally qualified to perform weddings in Virginia. All clergy must register with the Clerk of Circuit Court in the jurisdiction in which they live in order to perform legally valid marriages. All marriage rites must conform to the Book of Common Prayer or other marriage rites authorized by General Convention.

8. Reconciliation of a Penitent

The Reconciliation of a penitent is normally reserved to a bishop or priest. However, another Christian (including deacons) may hear a confession (BCP 446). The deacon must explain to the penitent that the deacon cannot pronounce absolution but may provide a declaration of forgiveness (BCP. 446).

If a priest is not available and a deacon hears the confession of a penitent, they should follow the rubrics on page 446 of the BCP and must use the form of Declaration of Forgiveness found on page 452 of the BCP.

Deacons shall maintain the confidentiality of a confession. This confidence is morally absolute for the person hearing the confession and must under no circumstances be broken (BCP 446).

9. Ministration to the Sick

Visiting those unable to attend services due to illness is a traditional role for the deacon. Deacons should consider bringing communion from the Sunday service to those who are unable to be present. A deacon may lead the service of the Word in the service of Ministration to the Sick (BCP 453-455) and may anoint the sick using oil that has previously been blessed by a bishop or priest (BCP 456). Under the direction of the rector or priest in charge, a deacon may assist in anointing at healing services.

10. Burial of the Dead

A deacon may preside at the Burial of the Dead when the services of a priest cannot be obtained. The Eucharist should be omitted as well as the blessing of the people. Deacons do not bless or consecrate graves.

11. Blessings

Deacons are not ordained to pronounce God's blessing. Deacons, however, may ask for God's blessing, using language such as "May God bless you and keep you". Deacons shall not say any words or make any motions that indicate or imply the pronouncement of a blessing. If there are directions in the bulletin for communion, it is advisable to include language that invites those who do not wish to receive the Eucharist to come forward to receive a blessing from the priest or a prayer from the deacon.

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