

# Guidelines for Benevolence

## INTRODUCTION

The “Charge to the Deacons” in the Ordination Form calls deacons to “realize that benevolence is a quality of our life in Christ and not merely a matter of financial assistance.” This charge indicates that benevolence involves a lifestyle of respect and compassion. It encompasses attitudes and behaviours that guide how we relate to people in need.

The following guidelines are intended to help deacons establish a framework for responding to people who request help.

## INSIDE THIS RESOURCE:

Values	1
Why Guidelines?	
Equipped for relationships	2
Empowering for growth	2
Coordinating your response	3
A Plan of Action: when and why	3
A sample Plan of Action	4
Deacons: Partners in Benevolence	5

## Values: preparing your heart and mind

### 1. Partner with People:

When we walk alongside people as equals in God's eyes, we create a partnership that leads to trust and growth. An attitude of judgment or paternalism will create barriers that may make us ineffective in helping.

### 2. Listen to Understand:

Being compassionate involves an effort to understand what life is like for another. Listening to understand will show genuine concern, and will help to uncover the underlying reasons for an individual's situation.

### 3. Know our Prejudices and Biases:

Showing Christ's love involves showing respect and dignity to all people. We must avoid trying to make others become “like us.”

### 4. Respect Personal Information:

Treat as confidential the information that individuals share. If you are going to share information with other deacons, elders or the pastor, ask for permission first

## Why Guidelines?

Developing “Guidelines for Benevolence” will help your diaconate focus its time and energy. Clearly defined guidelines will help you know when to spend a significant amount of time with a need or when to refer an individual/family to other community agencies. Sharing these guidelines with the church pastor, staff and elders will help all know how to respond to needs they encounter and calls they receive.

If your diaconate has already developed guidelines, an annual review of those guidelines will help new deacons understand the church's goals in benevolence. It will also allow the diaconate to make changes and updates as needed.

### Our diaconate does not have guidelines. Where do we start?

Start by seeking direction from the vision/mission of the church and the workplan of your diaconate.

Then answer the following questions:

1. Who do we want to help?

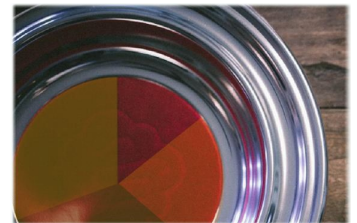
- Neighbours of the church
- “Cold calls”
- Church members
- Friends of church members

- Referrals from agencies

2. What boundaries will we set?  
Always help with \_\_\_\_\_.  
Never help with \_\_\_\_\_.

Do we want to set geographic boundaries for assistance?

3. How often will we help someone? How often per person per year?
4. Will we offer one-time help?
- Groceries/cash/gas



5. When will we encourage a Plan of Action to be completed? (see page 3)
6. To whom and how do we want church staff to refer individuals when the church is unable to respond to the need?
7. What resources do other agencies, services, and churches have to offer the community?

(continued on the next page)



(continued from page 1)

Suggestions:

- Focus your energy on helping people who are willing to both look at the reasons for the situation that they are in and also set up a plan of action with the deacons.
- Relationships will most likely be established with people who either have some connection to your church or live in an area near to 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. Communicate these boundaries to your church staff and elders so that they know where to direct requests for assistance.
- If your church has an outreach plan, you may want to intentionally focus on that target population.

Since many churches are in neighbourhoods which are rather affluent, do not use geographical boundaries as a way to hide from the materially poor. If you do not have many people who are materially poor living in your neighbourhood, partner with an inner city church or ministry.

*“When relief is merely a band-aid that alleviates the symptoms of poverty but fails to address the root causes, then it is illegitimate.”*

## DEACONS: equipped for relationships

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. Emergency assistance given when there is little potential for relationship is “band-aid” relief. Only through relationships 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, not simply manage it. To do this, deacons and churches must move beyond responding to crises with only a commodity response (money, food, clothing). Instead, deacons are encouraged to respond by establishing a relationship with the person requesting help.

## DEACONS: empowering for growth



Deacons can be instrumental in helping people who are struggling grow into 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.

See “Plan of Action” (page 3-5) as a model for how to assist people to grow and achieve their goals.

# DEACONS: coordinating your response



Once you have created your diaconate's guidelines (see pages 1-2), it is important to share them with church staff. Pastors, the administrative assistant and other staff are often on the front line of receiving "cold calls" for assistance. Through their contacts, church staff and elders also become aware of needs from neighbours and members of the congregation. Clear communication about these needs is important.

Invite church staff to meet with your diaconate. This will allow everyone to be clear about the guidelines for benevolence. Together, you can develop a clear plan for how you want these calls to be handled.

Here is an example of directions that might be given to church staff:

When a person calls for emergency assistance or walks into the church, asking these 2 questions is appropriate:

*How did you hear about our church?*

*Where do you live?*

If people have a connection to someone in the church or if they live in the geographic area defined

by the deacons, church staff should refer them to the deacons. Staff can take their information and pass it onto 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 guidelines, you might respond with something like, "I'm sorry, but we can refer you to a couple of agencies that you can contact for assistance. Here are their phone numbers."

Perhaps you will choose to respond differently, or have the deacon contact the person either way. Whatever you decide, ensure that it is clearly understood how to respond and what guidelines will govern your response.

**"...ensure that it is clearly understood how to respond and what guidelines will govern your response."**

## A PLAN OF ACTION

A "plan of action" is a tool that will help recipients of benevolence focus on specific tasks they can do to improve their situation.

### Fostering Growth Rather than Dependency

The main emphasis of creating a plan of action is to create dialogue between deacons and recipients of benevolence where goals and solutions are discussed, rather than problems.

The first step is for people to acknowledge that there is a problem and that they would like their life to be different. Once they acknowledge the problem, they will be more energized to concentrate on dreams and desires for the future, rather than focusing on the problems. This plan is most effective when complemented by the supportive accountability of caring Christians.

A "Plan of Action" is most appropriate for situations in which

- the individuals are open to working on improving their situation.
- the individuals are willing to work with the deacons or a support person over a period of time to achieve their goals.

### Preparing for a Deacon Visit

- Spend time in prayer before you go.
- Think about the most appropriate place to meet with the family or individual (some people may be uncomfortable to have deacons come to their home)
- Consider whether 2 deacons or an elder/deacon team might be more 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 compassion and an attitude of encouragement and learning.



## A SAMPLE PLAN OF ACTION

*(created through conversation between deacons and recipients of benevolence)*

### Where you want to be:

Q: How would you like your life situation to be different or improved 4 months from now?

### Strengths and Resources:

Q: What are some strengths, abilities, and resources that you have which could help you get to where you want to be?

*Help people identify action steps that are realistic and practical. They may need to take small steps so that they can experience success.*

*Help people identify some barriers to the “plan of action,” and also name together some options to overcome those barriers.*

### 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 help?	By When?
a) _____	_____	_____
b) _____	_____	_____
c) _____	_____	_____

Goal #2 \_\_\_\_\_

What specific things can you do?	Who will help?	By When?
a) _____	_____	_____
b) _____	_____	_____
c) _____	_____	_____

### 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:

*There needs to be supportive accountability for this plan to be effective. It is often helpful for deacons to identify a church member who can be an ongoing mentor or support person for the individual or family.*

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

When? \_\_\_\_\_ Where? \_\_\_\_\_

### To Note:

- Make copies so that both the individual/family and the deacons will have a copy of the “plan of action”
- Financial assistance is most helpful when geared toward accomplishing goals. It is appropriate to have the financial assistance contingent on people working toward achieving their goals.

# DEACONS: partners in benevolence

## Long-term relationships

Helping 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 relationships 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 may have great benefits, even though it is a significant commitment.

The good news is that deacons do not have to do it alone! There are several partners who may also care about the families/individuals you are working with, and may assist the deacons in their work .

## Possible Partners with the Deacons in Benevolence:

- **Former Deacons**
- **Church members** (especially those gifted in listening, encouragement and problem-solving) are a great resource to be support persons or mentors.
- **Pastors and elders** might also be involved in a supportive way with the people deacons are helping. Good communication is important to coordinate the church's assistance and care.
- **Professional Services** are available in the community. These professionals will focus on a specific area of need including mental health, employment, consumer credit counseling, and other areas. To coordinate your efforts with those professionals, you must have the consent of the involved family/individual.

*Many of the ideas and concepts referred to have been gleaned from "Benevolence: From Relief to Renewal" by Ben Vandezande and "Changing Times, New Approaches: A Handbook for Deacons" by Jay Groningen*

*"The good news is that deacons do not have to do it alone! There are several partners who...can assist the deacons in their work."*

## ABOUT DIACONAL MINISTRIES CANADA

Diaconal Ministries Canada exists to inspire, equip and encourage deacons, churches and their partners as they join in God's transforming work in communities.

We have 3 key focus areas:  
Engage Communities, Equip Deacons, Do Justice

To learn more, find us and our blog online at [www.diaconalministries.com](http://www.diaconalministries.com), or follow us on Facebook and Twitter.



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