A Summary of Synodical Reports and Decisions Concerning the Delegation of Deacons to Major Assemblies

1. French Reformed churches seated deacons alongside elders and ministers at the broader assemblies. Summons to attend Synod of Dordt included the possibility of deacons being delegated by the provincial synods –in fact it was permitted for those who held NO office.
2. Our own debate commences in 1962 – in 1965 the revised CO began to refer to the general consistory and the restricted consistory (although BC article 30 speaks of the Council, consisting of ministers, elders, and deacons. Also, Article 37 changed the language of (previous) article 35 – ‘where the number of elders is at least four, a distinction may be made between the **general consistory**, to which all office bearers belong, and the **restricted consistory**, in which the deacons do not participate. (p.ii) Significant because what used to be an exception now became a general rule. Gave the deacons a much larger role than they had had up to that point in time.
3. De Ridder: the CO provides for delegates to the broader assemblies to be chosen from the ministers and elders, making no mention of the deacons or the way the offices do or do not function on those levels. (p.iii)
4. De Ridder: “repeated overtures calling for diaconal representation at the level of classis and synod were made to the synods and called forth significant reports prepared by study committees. To date (1982) no change has taken place. The deacons are repeatedly reminded that they are not to do elders work. **By what warrant the elders so the work of deacons in the assemblies is not raised**.” (p.iii)
5. De Ridder: “the time in which we live provides almost unlimited opportunities for the development of the office of deacon. **It would be a severe loss to the church if the diaconal office is further subsumed under that of eldership.**” (p.iii)
6. First instance of a deacon seated at Classis was in 1861
7. Acts, 1962: request by Classis Chatham to consider admittance of deacons to classis and synod as official delegates and to make this a general rule
   1. Grounds:
      1. the office of deacons forms an integral part of the work of the church in carrying out a ministry of mercy. **Diaconal work is the work of Christ and therefore the work of Christ’s church as a whole.**
      2. **\*\*\*** Since this is the work of the church it **should be kept within the jurisdiction and authority of the church** and not be entrusted to conferences etc which have no ecclesiastical authority
      3. Diaconal work has become more complex and therefore requires the engagement and cooperation of the whole church

(note that the stated clerk was John Cooper Sr.)

* 1. DECISION of 1962: declined on the grounds that **‘insufficient scriptural evidence has been adduced to warrant a change in the CO’**

1. **Acts 1963:** Once again Chatham overtures synod to reconsider its 1962 decision since the biblical grounds it had in fact made, was for some reason not available to synod. The overture now includes biblical and theological justifications as follows
   1. God’s word does not speak about ‘classes and synod’ as we now have them and so it is not possible to mention ‘texts’ to prove that deacons should be delegated - in other words, there are no ‘proof texts’ BUT scripture does speak of the unity of offices and the importance of diaconal work and “on that ground deacons should not be excluded from our major assemblies wherever the work and office of deacon are involved.”
   2. A case is made for the essential unity of the offices since Jesus Christ is *the* office-bearer who delegates his work (not his authority) to the offices of the church; further, the offices were once united in the Apostolate
   3. Differences in office: there is *progress* in the establishment of three offices as the apostolate recedes and the these three (minister, elder and deacon) come to the fore. Acts 6 is cited as the origin of the diaconal office. Furthermore the threefold offices of the church are analogous to the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest and king – with deacons fulfilling the priestly function.
   4. Summary: “the essential unity of the three offices as collectively representative of Christ’s work must be recognized and maintained and at the same time must each office come **to its full right and development** as individually representative of the ministry of Christ.”
   5. “the office (of deacon) representing the priestly work of Christ must, as the other offices, come into its full right and development. The diaconal office is not an office of a second or third order. In importance, in worthiness and in glory, it is to be valued as equal to the office of Minister of the Word or Elder
   6. Claim is made to CO article 37 and to B.C. Article 30….”in this connection we wish to bear in mind that there are a number of weighty matters in church life upon which a consistory may not make decisions without the deacons – such matters as calling a minister, the election of elders and deacons; and ‘censura morum’”
   7. Reference is made to the emergence of diaconal conferences and CRWRC and synod’s plea for classis to cooperate with these entities. In fact it is offered as evidence of synod’s own admission that classes do not have sufficient diaconal representation.
   8. “we are therefore of the opinion that if the diaconal work of the Church is to be properly executed, deacons should be officially represented at the major assemblies of the church…. We are of the opinion that it is to the detriment of the importance, the worthiness, the glory, the proper functioning of the diaconal office that this office is not represented at the authoritative and official assemblies of Christ’s Church. And that this matter is also to the hurt of the church itself, causing it to fall short in glorifying its King and Savior by being deficient in service e intended to make manifest his mercifulness as our Great High Priest.”
2. **Decision of 1963**
   1. **Recommended that the church study this matter because ‘the church is not ready for this innovation at the present time”**
   2. **Synod appoint a committee to study this further and report to 1965** (doesn’t happen until 1966)
3. **Synod 1966, Study Committee Report**
   1. **Biblical References:**  the report cites Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:3-13, and concludes that “inferences from qualifications stated to task implied are limited and give **little aid in differentiating the task of deacon from the task of elder in the church**
      1. **Interesting note: this report states that Acts 6 is not explicitly about deacons, and to the extent that it concerns the diaconate it is at most about ‘the origin of the office and not its full development.’**
   2. **Does the Office of Elder preclude Diaconal representation?** Having decided that biblical passages do not offer much help in clarifying the issue, this report asks whether scripture teaches us enough about the office of elder so that we can see “whether the authority and task granted this office necessarily precludes participation by deacons in the assemblies of the church.” They name three functions of elder: government, instruction, and pastoral care, focusing on ‘government’ as that which might shed the most light on the authority which might exclude deacons
      1. Re: “rule” (proistemi) they conclude that “authority of the one who so ‘rules’ is inseparably bound with his responsibility to serve.
      2. Study of the concept of office: here they conclude that the word most commonly used for office in the church is ‘diakonia” meaning service or ministry. The term is not limited to the special ministry of the deacon. It is also used to designate the office of apostle. **It is the definitive New Testament word for office.** (p.116)
      3. **“….it can be concluded that the authority of any office does not exist independent of the responsibility to serve; nor is the responsibility given without authority.”**
      4. “This interdependence of authority and service in the New Testament concept of office in the Church is important for the question before us. In the mind of the church the two are sometimes separated: the elder is one who exercise authority and the deacon is one who serves. The New Testament envisions all offices in the church as assigned service (ministry) including the requisite authority to fulfill that assignment…..**It cannot be concluded that elders have an authority because of their position which precludes any diaconal authority in the church. This conclusion is neither new nor strange in light of Reformed creeds and the church order. The creeds and the Church Order assign some governmental responsibilities and authority to deacons and permit or even require a much wider governmental responsibility in certain circumstances…. etc. (p.118)**
      5. “Much explicit scriptural evidence cannot be given since in these matters Holy Scripture offers hardly any specific data. Indeed this is not the purpose of Holy Scriptures. The Apostles and evangelists have given us only general principles and these should be sufficient for us
      6. The report goes on to ask whether the “present structural organization of the church is adequate to fulfill the demands of this ministry” (p.119) Referencing once again the threefold office of Christ, as did the Chatham overture, this report goes onto say that while recognizing the distinctive analogies of the *munis triplex* in minister, elder and deacon, nevertheless “none of these special offices of the church can be limited to one aspect of this three-fold office…. Each of the offices of the church must be seen as representative of the whole Christ
      7. Crucial question is raised: Does the office of deacon fulfill the priestly aspect of the ministry of the church when it is limited in its function to (only) one of the three assemblies of the church. The report observes that the principle by which deacons participate in church governance at the congregational level is not applied at the classical or synodical level: “this careful regulation to maintain the balance between the unity, distinctiveness, and equality of the offices in relation to both the task and authority of the offices does not obtain, however, in the other assemblies of the church….**concretely this means that when many matters which are distinctively the responsibility of the diaconal office are considered at major assemblies, the other two offices of the church must function in its stead. ….not only are these distinctive diaconal tasks performed by the other offices at the major assemblies, but every deliberation concerning the ministry of the church has a priestly as well as a prophetic or Kingly aspect**
      8. CONCLUSIONS of 1966: the following considerations lead your committee to the conclusion that some change should be made to our present method of delegation to major assemblies
         1. The biblical recognition of the authority of all ecclesiastical office, including that of deacon
         2. the importance of the priestly aspect of the church’s ministry as represented primarily by the deacons
         3. the large number of mattes considered at the major assemblies which are primarily the concern of deacons
         4. the recognized principles of the equality and unity of the offices

This report also drew attention to the limitations of diaconal assemblies as inadequate to compensate for diaconal participation in the higher assemblies. In particular they noted that the emergence of diaconal assemblies and CRWRC in parallel with classis and synod would result in **“dual ecclesiastical assemblies within one church body”. Such a possible development has been aptly described as a ‘two-headed monster.’**

* + 1. **RECOMMENDATIONS**
       1. **Synod declare that in the light of Scripture and Reformed confessions, it judges that there are no lawful objections to the delegation of deacons to the major assemblies of the church**
       2. **Synod recommend to the churches that one minister, one elder and one deacon be delegated to classes and synod and that these 3 be delegated with identical mandates and credentials**
       3. One of the grounds here was that so doing would help to put CRWRC in proper relation to the major assemblies and on par with the other agencies \*\*\*
    2. **Acts of Synod:**
       1. **Referred back to the study committee to answer a series of questions and referred to the churches for input.**

1. Resubmission in 1967 – the committee resubmitted its report along with a summary of responses from the churches and answers t0 1966 questions.
   1. Reponses from churches led to three conclusions:
      1. Most recognized the need for delegation of deacons but there was hesitation to adopt equal representation with equal mandates
      2. Concern was expressed about losing distinctiveness of the offices (the study committee smartly observed that preserving the distinctiveness actually *requires* the delegation of deacons
      3. Questions about the nature of the major assemblies – is it merely judicial and regulatory (governance)?; or is it the ‘church in action” – deliberating upon, planning, deciding its whole prophetic, priestly and kingly ministry
   2. Concerning 1966 questions
      1. Here are the five questions
         1. Is the nature of the major assemblies characterized by a representation of all the offices and does it therefore demand the delegation of deacons
         2. Which authority is inherent in ecclesiastical office as such and in that of the deacons especially
         3. How will the distinctiveness of the offices be maintained if deacons should be delegated to major assemblies with *identical*  mandate and credentials along with elders and ministers?
         4. Is it possible to draw some conclusions from the Old Testament idea of office to that of the New Testament?
         5. Does the principle that no office bearer may ‘Lord it over another’ demand *equal*  representation of deacons with minister and elders?
   3. Here are the responses made by 1967
      1. Questions 1 & 5 assume that major assemblies are constituted by delegates representing certain offices – this is incorrect. The question is not which offices are represented but how and by whom are churches or groups of churches represented. An office is to be performed, not represented. Hence the question is not ‘who represents the office of deacon at major assemblies?’, but rather ‘who performs the office of deacon at major assemblies?’ According to CO 28B major assemblies meet to handle matters referred by a lower assembly for adjudication or to address those matters which concern the churches in common. These matters of common ministry go far beyond the tasks of adjudication and discipline –they are matters of the general government of the churches with regard to her total common or cooperative ministry. So major assemblies do have a judicatory function but they also represent the Church-in-action ….determining her common ministry. The report then goes on to suggest that, “***a major assembly resembles the general consistory rather than the restricted consistory in its function. It is responsible for the general government of the churches in all matters of their ministry which they undertake cooperatively or in common.*** The report continues to develop the implications of this by stating that: **“at present deacons are excluded from fulfilling their proper function at the broader level of the church’s deliberative assemblies. If the distinctiveness of the offices is to be maintained, deacons should participate in this general government of the Church’s cooperative and common ministry.” (p.248, 1967)**

Furthermore, the committee goes on to declare that ‘the quality of offices and their distinctiveness prohibits the regular, systematic, and unnecessary take-over of the function of one office by another.

The committee rejects as the idea that deacons could be delegated but with limited mandate – for one thing this would be unworkable (as the experience of the GKN makes clear); for another, the distinctions between that which is properly the work of elders and that of deacons is not easily made (and who decides?) and finally, if that were a necessary condition of ‘office distinctiveness” then consistency would require elders to refrain from participating in matters that are in the domain of diaconal responsibility. “If the distinctiveness of the offices must be safeguarded for the one, it must be safeguarded for both.”

* + 1. Concerning question 2 – authority belongs to Christ which he exercises through all three offices – authority exercised by an elder or a deacon is not power inherent *in that position* but an authority assigned by Christ to perform the task given him. Furthermore, citing L. Berkhof, the report states “the power of the Church is no independent and sovereign power but a *diaconia leitourgia*, that is, a ministerial power.
    2. Concerning question 3: “it is precisely a concern for the distinctiveness of the offices that leads your committee to recommend the delegation of deacons to the major assemblies. The distinction is not safeguarded when elders and ministers discuss and decide diaconal matters without the participation of deacons (then go on to cite the matter of CRWRC request to work in Hong Kong.
       1. Also, the distinction between elder and minister is maintained yet they identical mandates at major assemblies
       2. True distinction is not maintained by differing functions at higher assemblies, but in the local churches
       3. And more….
    3. Concerning question 4 about drawing lessons from the OT: not many lessons were found

1. Synod 1967: Advisory Committee made short shrift of the report, finding their conclusions to be feeble and unwarranted. Synod declined each and every recommendation of the study committee. Their objections can be summed up as follows:
   1. “The study committee fails to prove that deacons by virtue of their office have authority to deal with all the matters that come before an ecclesiastical assembly
   2. “it is not proved, and we are doubtful it can be proved, that non-delegation of deacons to major assemblies does violence to the unity and distinctiveness of the offices in Christ
   3. Advisor committee argues that the report tends toward a diminishing of the distinctiveness of the office of deacon, toward a coalescence. They worry that the call to reactivate the office of deacon is in fact a proposal to engage deacons more fully in work now performed by elders
2. Overture by Classis Hamilton, 1970, asking Synod to study the question anew
   1. Based on diaconal study by Wm. Heyns
   2. Believed that the *need* for diaconal delegation had not been sufficiently demonstrated
   3. Grounds for Hamilton overture
      1. Many matters which are distinctively the responsibility of the diaconal office are considered at major assemblies (ref 1967, p. 242
      2. Diaconal conferences which take decisions in matters pertaining to the work of mercy have no authority to implement these decisions in the church.
   4. Adopted by Synod, study committee appointed
3. Not mentioned in de Ridder’s history is the overture by Classis Sioux Centre in 1971, the thrust of which was to change the CO so as to provide for the delegation of deacons because 1. Each office should be represented; 2. The deacons must be involved in decision making because acts of mercy extended by them are interwoven with the church’s spiritual ministry; 3. The cost of synod will be reduced significantly; and 4. The representation of local church to classis will be increased.
4. 1972: Report 32 – delivered both a major and minority report
   1. Majority report is the first to dismiss the idea of deacons at major assemblies – there are no sufficient biblical grounds to do so and the arguments from silence deduced by previous committees is inadequate ; it is an attempt to ‘over-reach’ the authority of the office; diaconal conferences would not gain ecclesiastical status by having deacons at synod/ classis; CRWRC functions quite well without deacons at synod
   2. Minority report helpfully points out that synod (1967) on the one hand admits that the delegation of deacons is neither prohibited or demanded by scripture and the reformed confessions – AND on the other hand decides not to proceed with delegation on the ground that no *demand* can be proved by scripture. Minority report says, “we do not consider it incumbent upon us to prove that which synod declared is ‘neither prohibited then the fact that no scriptural basis was adduced to demand delegation cannot be used as a ‘ground’ for denying the delegation of deacons.”
      1. Provides an excellent examination of the argument made by Wm Heyns; with impressive citations by no lesser luminaries than Herman Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper, both of whom endorse the full integration of deacons at major assemblies
      2. Provides a strong review of historical precedent in the French churches, which they argue has Calvin’s approval
      3. More importantly they see that the presence of deacons at classis and synod is not in the first instance a way of achieving partiy for deacons, but rather a way of helping to keep the justice/mercy/ poverty alleviation/ advocacy task of the church more centrally on the agenda of synod and classis. Minority report 32, p. 381 states:

**Delegation of deacons to major assemblies will not immediately bring diaconal service into larger attention and interest throughout our churches. But if we recognize that the church is a united body and that all of its work is interrelated; that the scope of the ministry of mercy has taken on large global dimensions in our day; and that the very presence of deacons at major assemblies can serve to focus the attention of the church on the fact that our compassionate Savior wills that the work of mercy shall stand in the centre of the full interest of the church; then the presence of deacons at major assemblies can be a step in the direction of honouring Christ more fully in his compassion and mercy. The church has a great responsibility to show the mercy of Christ both in, and to, our troubled world. Let deacons be involved at the level of decision making to project the image of compassion and mercy in the church to a sick and despairing world**.

1. Synod was buffaloed by these two reports and could not decide: Synod did adopt the advisory committee recommendation to NOT move in the direction of delegating deacons BUT two other recommendations which would have opened the door a crack (namely, to delegate deacons but with distinct mandates) were tabled (decided to withhold action). Ironically, the churches were encouraged to continue giving constructive attention to this matter!!
2. REPORT 44, 1973 some salient features
   1. “from the book of Acts, therefore, we learn that there was a variety of ministries in the early church, that these ministries did not function in exactly the same way as comparable ministries do in the church today, that there were ministries in the church which were not commonly found in the church today, and that the early church felt free to adjust its ministry to others as the need of the time demanded.” (p.655)
   2. The new Testament materials which we have been examining in this report are instructive and helpful; they give us much necessary guiding principles significant for the church of every age. But they do not present a definitive church-organizational structure to which the church must remain bound for all time. Neither do they describe the offices of the church with such finality that no changes may be permitted in their number or in their functioning.” (p.673)
   3. Report cites Robert Clyde Johnson who expresses the Protestant *functional* view of office by speaking of special offices as the result of the ordering of the church for the purpose of enabling “the church to deploy its forces most effectively in its assigned mission in and for the world” (p.21, page 683 of the report)
   4. Conclusion 6: “The special ministries of some believers are to be distinguished not in essence but in function from the comprehensive ministry shared by all believers, and distinctions among the special ministries themselves are also functional. There is therefore no essential distinction but only a functional one between ministers, elders, deacons, and all other members of the church. There is a difference in manner of service but all are commissioned to serve.” (p.713)
   5. Conclusion 12: “Because the scriptures do not present a definitive, exhaustive description of the special ministries of the church, and because these special ministries are functional in character, the Bible leaves room for the church to adapt or modify its special ministries in order to carry out its service to Christ effectively in all circumstances.” (p.714)
3. On to **1975**: Classis Muskegon Overtures synod once again. The overture refers to a decision of 1973 important for our work: synod of 1973 adopted guideline 1, concerning the ‘diakonia’ dimension of *all*  offices; guideline 6; guideline 12 (bible does not provide an exhaustive description of the particular ministries….leaves room for the church to modify its particular ministries. **Predictably, synod referred the matter back to classis Muskegon for further review suggesting they had not satisfactorily answered the many objections raised by previous synods,**
4. **1976**, Muskegon comes back with the argument that the decisions of 1973 herald a new day and that it is no longer the case that old arguments must be rehearsed but that new structures must be found to live out the spirit of the 1973 decisions concerning guidelines for offices. Hence Muskegon re-submits its original overture and tells synod to do the work itself that synod has tried to download onto classis. Feisty. Not surprisingly Synod has no humour and dismisses the overture.
5. So Muskegon goes it alone, deciding in January 1978 to require that each member church shall send one minister, one elder, and one deacon to its classis meetings, who shall convene together but then meet separately to discuss matters appropriate for that office. This decision is appealed by 2nd CRC of Freemont and Synod 1978 uphold the appeal and Muskegon is told to cease and desist.
6. **1980** Overture 17 (includes an ‘interpretive history’, which I should have read before writing my own! Especially helpful is the analysis on page 587 of 1980
7. **Synod of 1984** requested that the work of elders and deacons be more clearly distinguished, to appease the conscience of those churches that were opposed to women in office. De Moor comments that this had a tendency to weaken the ruling by Synod 1938 which stated that ‘deacons are warranted in performing presbyterial functions including the right to vote in matters of church government’ even though they must then naturally give due consideration to the judgement of the elders’
8. **Agenda 1987** – proposed a plan for sending deacons to classis; also proposed to defer any decision to delegate deacons to synod. However, **Acts 1987** – all recommendations are approved EXCEPT the delegation of deacons to classis. The changes to the church order clear the way for deleting the restrictive clauses concerning women.
9. **Agenda 1995**, Structure for Ministry in Canada – based on the experience of the CCRCC to which deacons were delegated, and given the distinct emphasis on diaconal ministry in Canada, this report included in its recommendations the integration of deacons and diaconal ministries into the governance of the denomination
   1. Specifically: revise 1. CO Art 40 to read that each council should delegate one minister, elder and deacon to classis; 2. CO Art 45 - each classis delegate on minister, one elder and one deacon to synod; 3. Appoint a study committee to work with diaconal conferences to think about how to integrate them into the governance structure of the church. 1,2 above resulted in a request for a study committee – that was **defeated;** 3 also resulted in a request for a study committee – also defeated
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  2. 3. Appoint a study committee to work with diaconal conferences to think about how to integrate them into the governance structure of the church.
  3. **Synod’s Actions**:
     1. 1,2 above resulted in a request for a study committee – that was **defeated;**
     2. 3 also resulted in a request for a study committee – also **defeated**

1. Synod 1997 approves the delegation of deacons to classis with certain qualifications