***For Deacons***, Summer 2018

The Diaconal Structure within the Church

**Introduction**

***For Deacons*** is a joint effort with Diaconal Ministries Canada (DMC). DMC has a rich heritage of supporting deacons through its network of regionally based [Diaconal Ministry Developers](https://diaconalministries.com/equipping-deacons/diaconal-ministry-developers/). In the United States there are also a number of resources aimed at supporting deacons and their mandate, although the system there is more scattered than the ideal system that Canada has in place. This issue of ***For Deacons*** takes an in-depth look at what our vision statements, Church Order, and systems have envisioned and what resources exist to help us continue the work of adapting our systems for effectiveness in ministry.

Both the CRCNA and the RCA have powerful statements of vision and mission into which we are challenged to live as deacons. Yet how often have we actually asked how well we as a local church fit into that whole? It is a great systems exercise.

Here are excerpts from each vision statement, along with links to the full statements:

**For the CRCNA**

Our congregations will flow like streams into their communities. We will meet our neighbors at community events and gathering places, listening to each other, learning from each other, and serving each other. By our presence we will become channels for the love of Christ and the Holy Spirit’s life-giving transformation. Full statement: [crcna.org/OurJourney](https://www.crcna.org/OurJourney)

Synod 2015 of the CRCNA adopted significant changes in its Church Order related to the office of deacon. See [network.crcna.org/community-engagement/deacons-church-order-and-community-transformation](https://network.crcna.org/community-engagement/deacons-church-order-and-community-transformation).

A recent post on The Network explores what that means from a systems perspective. Take a look, and let us know what you think: [network.crcna.org/crcna-and-synod/deacons-classis-synod-why-it%E2%80%99s-not-just-%E2%80%9Canother%E2%80%9D-meeting](https://network.crcna.org/crcna-and-synod/deacons-classis-synod-why-it%E2%80%99s-not-just-%E2%80%9Canother%E2%80%9D-meeting)

**For the RCA**

The Reformed Church in America is a fellowship of congregations called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world.

Our shared task is to equip congregations for ministry—a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God. Full statement: [rca.org/ourmission](https://www.rca.org/ourmission)

**Reflection**

In her book [*Thinking in Systems*](https://www.amazon.com/Thinking-Systems-Donella-H-Meadows/dp/1603580557?SubscriptionId=AKIAJ2F6RDUSIYCWQMFQ&tag=sa-b2c-new-20&linkCode=xm2&camp=2025&creative=165953&creativeASIN=1603580557), Donella Meadows (author of *The Limits to Growth*, a best-selling and widely translated book) discusses how to use feedback loops to make certain the connections between the parts of our systems work well so that the whole system works as intended. In our church systems we also need to pay more attention to ensuring that the parts of our structure that are intended to support our churches in all aspects of mission are functioning well.

In a paragraph that should resonate with the deacon’s heart, Meadows notes*,* “Hunger, poverty, environmental degradation, economic instability, unemployment, chronic disease, drug addiction, and war, for example, persist in spite of the analytical ability and technical brilliance that have been directed toward eradicating them. No one deliberately creates these problems; no one wants them to persist, but they persist nonetheless. That is because they are intrinsically systems problems—undesirable behaviors characteristic of the structures that produce them. They will yield only as we reclaim our intuition, stop casting blame, see the systems as the source of our own problems, and find the courage and wisdom to restructure it. Obvious. Yet subversive. An old way of seeing. Yet somehow new. Comforting, in that the solutions are in our hands. Disturbing, because we must do things, or at least see things and think about things, in a different way.”

The same is true in adapting the systems in our denominational structures and local churches for ministry. It is difficult to move away from how we have always done things, but we readily recognize that our context has changed dramatically over time, thus demanding change. Working consistently at systemic change is critical to fruitful ministry.

**Tools for Local Systems Change**

The May issue of [For Deacons](https://network.crcna.org/deacons/may-issue-deacons) provided a helpful perspective on how deacons might approach tracking accountability for ministry in their community context. This is a great place to begin. Of course, the role of the deacon is broader than helping the membership connect with community. Several books can be studied by deacons that will help them analyze their role, as well as sustain the systems to maintain accountability. Here are a few links.

* The RCA training manual for elders and deacons: [*Deacons and Elders: Called to Serve*](https://www.faithaliveresources.org/Products/704017/deacons-and-elders.aspx)
* The CRCNA handbook for deacons: [*The Deacon’s Handbook*](https://www.faithaliveresources.org/Products/151104/the-deacons-handbook.aspx?bCategory=CLLS)
* A book written some time ago by Jay van Groningen, now serving at [Great Lakes Urban](https://www.greatlakesurban.com/). This book is still relevant. It deserves a re-read or study together: [*Changing Times, New Approaches*](https://www.amazon.com/ChangingTimes-New-Approaches-Handbook/dp/1562122223/ref%3Dsr_1_8?ie=UTF8&qid=1531156780&sr=8-8&keywords=the+deacon%27s+handbook)*.*

Diaconal Ministries Canada has a [host of resources](https://diaconalministries.com/resources/) to help a diaconate plan out its year, including a helpful guide on creating a work plan and setting goals.If deacons can begin to make a ministry plan, in collaboration with elders and pastors so that their work fits with the church's overall mission and vision, this could be a good first step in taking a systems approach to their mission.

**Tools/Resources for Classis or Regional Systems Change**

Deacons, at least in the CRC, have been given a fresh mandate at all levels of church life. This requires taking a fresh look at how we incorporate the role of deacons into our classis system, and taking full advantage of utilizing the diaconal mandate on this regional basis. This role is no less important in the RCA, whose General Synod 2017 called for the formation of deacon conferences at the classis level.

The [Center for Parish Development](https://missionalchurch.org/) has adopted the following criteria for thinking through a systems analysis in preparation for planning more ministry:

1. The effectiveness of the functioning of the whole and of each part.

2. The relationship of existing parts with each other.

3. Decision-making and leadership processes.

4. Current financial resources development, allocation, and management.

5. Information flow (communication).

6. The role, function, and effectiveness of key groups.

7. Key system processes, policies, and procedures.

8. Congruence between the vision and priorities and the work being done.

9. The organizational climate that is experienced by those who participate in it.

The CRC has established the role of [Classis Renewal Coordinator](https://www.crcna.org/resources/other-resources/classis-resources) in the person of Al Postma. He helps classes work through this process. He recommends two books as background. The first book is [*The Fly in the Ointment*](https://www.amazon.com/Fly-Ointment-Denominations-Helping-Congregations/dp/0898696062/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1531335843&sr=1-1&keywords=fly+in+the+ointment)by J. Russell Crabtree. Here is what Al has to say about this book. “I have found *A Fly in the Ointment* to be an interesting conversation partner. It is deeply systemic in its understanding of the place of the regional assembly/middle adjudicatory in church life. It has good questions to explore . . . [regarding] strategy and accountability for planning.”

The second book is called [Pursuing God’s Will Together](https://www.amazon.com/Pursuing-Gods-Will-Together-Transforming/dp/0830835660/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1531336908&sr=1-1&keywords=pursuing+god%27s+will+together) by Ruth Haley Barton. Here is what Al says about Barton’s book: “My conviction about classis is that it is at core a community of churches. This book grabs onto the communal nature of discernment. In that sense, it isn't about where a church/classis is going but how they get there. This is deeply connected to systems thinking. Also, another one of the contentions I have is that classis is a spiritually discerning community. Discerning isn't about making sure my voice is heard but setting ourselves up to ensure God's voice is heard . . . so that is why we ensure that there is a broad representation, [including] people who are minorities, . . . deacons, etc., because we need to be together as community to listen collectively for God's leading.”

Another good book that speaks to adaptive leadership is [*Canoeing the Mountains*](https://www.ivpress.com/canoeing-the-mountains) by Tod Bolsinger, one that many churches have been reading with their leadership teams. Bolsinger uses the exploration of Lewis and Clark as a great example of systems thinking. [The Network](https://network.crcna.org/classis) is another place where dialogue is plentiful on classes and resources to help plan for change. Here is just one article on [principles of adaptive change](https://network.crcna.org/classis/six-principles-leading-adaptive-work).

The Alban Institute is another resource for thinking about systems change at the classis level. Alban at Duke Divinity School helps leaders connect and learn from one another by sharing practical wisdom, stories of thriving congregations, and transformational models of ministry. Take a look at their [resources on classis level change](https://alban.org/?s=middle+judicatory).

Resonate Global Mission reports that a number of churches have found the book [*The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age*](https://www.amazon.com/s/ref%3Dnb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=+The+Agile+Church-+Spirit-Led+Innovation+in+an+Uncertain+Age+%28Dwight+Zscheile) by Dwight Zscheile helpful in thinking about systems. The book has helpful discussion questions after each chapter. Some councils have used a chapter at each of their council meetings for their continuing education.

All of this system thinking requires champions to implement Christ-centered ministry. Synod 2015 took visionary steps to ensure that deacons are at the table. Now we need leaders at both the church and classis levels to step up and help give shape to the vision. Are you that person? For more information, contact Andrew Ryskamp at andrewryskamp@crcna.org.

**Deacons Connect**

Got a question about diaconal work? Ask your fellow deacons!

Post your questions and ideas in the [Deacons section of The Network](https://network.crcna.org/deacons). Here are some related questions from this issue:

1. The CRC’s Synod 2018 has encouraged classes to coordinate with denominational entities for a healthy systems approach to planning by sharing the classis plan with the Council of Delegates. What is the experience of your classis in developing and sharing a plan?
2. What are your thoughts about the PDF document regarding [*Top Reasons Why Deacons Are Needed at Classis and Synod*](http://3phzqy3f3ya0kq6h52bv8dj1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Top-Reasons-Why-Deacons-are-needed_FINAL-2.pdf)?

**A Host of Supportive Resources**

**for Deacons**

Remember to check out these resources dedicated to your support.

[Diaconal Ministries Canada, e-Quip diaconal blog](https://diaconalministries.com/equipping-deacons/e-quip-the-diaconal-blog/)

[Volunteers in Service](http://visgr.org/resources/)

[Holland Deacons Conference—Diaconal Ministry Resources](https://hdccrc.org/resources/)

[Volunteers in Action—Resources for Deacons](http://www.volunteersinaction.info/resources-for-deacons/)

[Northern Alberta Diaconal Conference Newsletter](http://www.classisalbertanorth.ca/nadc)

Andrew Ryskamp is acting editor of this resource. You can contact him with questions or suggestions at andrewryskamp@crcna.org. Andrew is retired from World Renew after working as diaconal ministries director for thirteen years and as executive co-director for seventeen years.