The Office of Deacon:
Calvin's Ecclesiology, Geneva's Practice, and the CRC Diaconate.

#140

Thea N. Leunk
Church Polity
October 19, 1999

Let the deacons (my special favorites) be entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ...
(from a letter of Ignatius to Christian of Magnesia)

Scripture specifically designates as deacons those whom the church has appointed to distribute alms and take care of the poor, and serve as stewards of the common chest of the poor. Their origin, institution, and office are described by Luke in the Acts (Acts 6:3). For when the Greeks started a rumor that their widows were being neglected in the relief of the poor, the apostles, making the excuse that they were unable to fulfill both functions (preaching the Word and serving at table), asked the multitude to choose seven upright men to whom they might entrust this task (Acts 6:1ff). Here, then, is the kind of deacons the apostolic church had, and which we, after their example, should have. (Calvin, Institutes, 4.3.9)

The deacons shall represent and administer the mercy of Christ to all people, especially to those who belong to the community of believers, and shall stimulate the members of Christ's church to faithful, obedient stewardship of their resources on behalf of the needy—all with words of biblical encouragement and testimony which assure the unity of word and deed.
(Church Order of the CRCNA, Article 25, c)

Part of the enduring legacy of Calvin is the Reformed/Presbyterian form of church government and the ecclesiology on which it rests. A reformed faith called for a reformed church; this new theology and faith needed a way to be expressed and put into practice. Just as Bucer reformed church polity in Strasbourg, Calvin shaped a new rule for the faith and life of Geneva. How was the church to be governed? Calvin looked to the Bible, especially the New Testament, for models and precedents, interpreted these theologically in the call of all believers to ministry, and worked out a new paradigm that fit the context of his Geneva. This model of four offices, minister, elder, teacher, and deacon, still exists in the Reformed tradition today and has influenced all Protestant thinking on the offices of the church. The offices of minister and elder remain strong in our systems of governance while the office of teacher has lapsed among almost all Reformed denominations. Is the office of deacon soon to follow? In some traditions, like the Christian Reformed Church, it is undergoing a major revitalization as the church

struggles with how to minister to the needs of both local and global communities while in others, like the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), it grows steadily weaker.

The purpose of this paper is fourfold. First, it will attempt to set out the office as Calvin envisioned it by looking at the New Testament models he found and the exegetical work he did in understanding them, the theological foundations he laid out for the office, and the actual institution of the office in Geneva. Second, it will review how the office of deacon was practiced in the years of Calvin's residence in Geneva: who were the deacons and what did they do to minister to the poor of Geneva? Third, it will put these two together to discern how well the practice met the polity. How successful was the work of the deacons in meeting the ideals set out by Calvin? Finally, what conclusions and implications are there in this history for the Reformed tradition today and the office of deacon in the CRC?

I. Calvin's ecclesiology of the office of deacon

Calvin's understanding of the office of deacon was directly derived from New Testament models. *Ad fontes*, back to the Biblical sources, was the logical place to start--not the tradition. When Calvin read the history of the early church as recorded in Acts and the epistles, he found five key passages that directly spoke to this office of deacon. The first, interestingly enough, was Acts 6:1-6 which doesn't use the word "deacon" to describe the men appointed to take over the task of serving the tables. Throughout the exegesis of this account in the history of the church, this passage had always been understood to describe the beginnings of the deacons. It was assumed, however, on the basis of how I Timothy 3 was read, that the work of the deacons was liturgical, assisting in worship as a priest in training. (McKee, *John Calvin on the Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving,* p. 194) This was the traditional context of the church's interpretation in which Calvin reads this passage. In contrast, Calvin notes that this passage lays out clearly

that the purpose of the office is ministry to the poor. "We now ascertain the purpose for which deacons were created. The term itself is certainly a general one, yet it is properly taken for the stewards of the poor." (Calvin, *Commentaries*, Acts 6) Originally the responsibility of the apostles, it becomes the responsibility of these seven when the apostles are unable to continue to both teach and serve the tables. Calvin notes that "they do not decide that they must put an end to a service which they knew to be pleasing to God, but they think out a remedy to remove the complaint, and leave what is of God." (Calvin, *Commentaries*, Acts 6) It is, furthermore, an ordained office because the apostles lay hands on the seven to commission them for their task. Here then is a New Testament office for the church. Its purpose is to care for the poor, but is it an office for all time?

Calvin looks to I Timothy 3:8-13, a passage commonly understood by the tradition and the reformers to discuss the office of deacon. Here he states clearly that "we understand 'the deacons' to be those who are mentioned by Luke, (Acts vi. 3,) and who had the charge of the poor." (Calvin, *Commentaries*, I Timothy 3) This cross-referencing of the two passages is unique to the sixteenth century Reformation exegetes and powerfully expounded by Calvin. (McKee, p. 220) The passage describes the person who is to hold the office of deacon, but not the function of the office itself. Traditionally, this deacon had been the one who assisted the priest in worship and verse 13, "for they who have served well", was read to indicate promotion to the priesthood. Not so, Calvin writes, "For my own part, though I do not deny that the order of deacons might sometimes be the nursery out of which presbyters were taken, yet I take Paul's words as meaning, more simply, that they who have discharged this ministry in a proper manner are worthy of no small honour; because it is not a mean employment, but a highly honorable office." (Calvin, *Commentaries*, I Timothy 3) By connecting these two passages, Calvin

formulates a basic understanding of the purpose of the office of deacon, defines the credentials of those who are to serve in this office, and confers ordination on it as a sign of its sacred calling. As McKee points out, "The three key attributes of the diaconate as office come to the fore: its ecclesiastical status, as a distinct office charged with the care of the poor, permanent and necessary to proper church order." (p. 236)

Calvin did not skip texts that were difficult to understand or avoid problems in interpretation. One of these is Romans 16:1-2 which calls a woman a "deacon". (McKee, *Diakonia in the Classical Reformed Tradition and Today*, p. 72) Calvin does not explain away her title, but accepts it and then looks to other scripture to understand it. What is the ministry for which Phoebe is being commended? "The character of the ministry which he is discussing is also described in I Timothy 5.10. The poor were supported out of the public funds of the church, and were looked after by persons charged with that duty. For this last widows were chosen who, since they were free from domestic duties and not hindered by children, desired to dedicate themselves wholly to God for religious service. They were therefore received into this office to which they were bound and under obligation," (Calvin, *Commentaries*, Romans 16) Calvin understood these two passages to be speaking of a diaconal office that was charged with caring for the sick and poor. Were these female deacons the same as the deacons of Acts and I Timothy 3? If so, what did this mean for the office of deacon? If not, how were they different?

It is in Calvin's exegesis of Romans 12:8 that the connection is made. Following the lead of Bucer, Oecolampadius, and d'Etaples, Calvin reads Romans 12 as one of the passages of the New Testament that lays out the gifts of the spirit and the offices of the church. (McKee, *Calvin, Diaconate, and Almsgiving*, p. 254) "Those who give aid" and "those who do mercy" are phrases describing the work of the office of deacon. "When Paul speaks here of givers he does not mean

those who give their own possessions, but technically the deacons who are charged with the distribution of the public property of the Church. When he speaks of those who show mercy, he means widows and other ministers, who were appointed to take care of the sick, according to the custom of the ancient church. The functions of providing what is necessary for the poor, and of devoting care to their attention, are different." (Calvin, *Commentaries*, Romans 12) There are two types of deacons being discussed here, Calvin says, and while not directly stating the obvious, one is a male office and the other potentially female.

On the basis of the reading of these texts, Calvin distinguishes a New Testament office of deacon. It is an ordained office dedicated to the apostolic ministry of the poor which has two duties: administering the alms entrusted to the church and taking care of the poor and ill. It is an office to be filled by those carefully chosen for their spiritual gifts including widows who have chosen to dedicate their lives in service to the poor.

In Book Four, Chapter Three of the *Institutes*, Calvin sets out his understanding of the offices of the church. Basing this theology on his reading of scriptural models, Calvin embeds all of these in an understanding of doing the work of God in particular ways. The purpose of all these offices is to hold the church together so that spiritual growth can take place and that the body can be built up. God has set in place different types of offices. Some of these are temporary or ordinary, established for a specific purpose or season of time such as the office of apostle, evangelist and prophet. Others are permanent: teacher, minister, presbyter, and deacon. Each has a specific task: the teacher is to carry on the task of the prophet, the minister is to proclaim the gospel and administer the sacraments, the presbyter to govern the church, and the deacon to care for the poor. Reid makes the interesting point that in the first edition of the *Institutes* there were only two offices, presbyter and deacon, and in the final edition there are two

listings--the four offices above and later in 4.4.1, three. "For the purpose here it is necessary only to note that in all three distributions of office, whether twofold, threefold, or fourfold, the office of deacons is named. The persistence of the office might in any case have been expected in view of Calvin's insistence that ministry in general is service to God and man." (Reid, "Diakonia in the Thought of Calvin" in *Service in Christ*, p. 104)

What, then, does Calvin say about this office of deacon? The major description of the office is set out in 4.3.9. Citing Romans 12, I Timothy 5, and Acts 6, Calvin states that the task of the office is care of the poor. The office has "two distinct grades", those deacons who administer the affairs of the poor and those who devote themselves to the care of the poor. Women have been permitted to serve in the second grade of the office. In 4.4.5, Calvin relates the past and present understanding and practice of the deacon as understood by the tradition and chides the current Roman Catholic church for neglecting the office's true task. He further decries this misunderstanding of the office in 4.19.32 when he addresses the role of the deacon in the Roman Catholic celebration of the mass. Calvin has clearly stood by his exegesis in setting out his ideas about office in the church. Based on the scriptural models "handed down to us from God's pure Word" (Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.4.1), the office of deacon is defined as the work of the church on behalf of the poor.

This consistency is also seen in the writing of the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541*, the charter of the Genevan church put in place after Calvin's return from Strasbourg. Again Calvin says that there are four orders of office for the governance of the church. The "fourth order" is the office of deacon. Being a legal document, rather than a theological treatise, the explication of the office is more detailed. The two types of deacons and their tasks are closely defined. One type is to receive, dispense, and hold goods for the poor, the other is to tend and care for the sick

and disperse daily allotments. These two offices of deacon are understood to already exist in the civil positions of procureurs and hospitalliers of the hospital of Geneva. These offices are, however, now to be elected according to the scriptural guidelines of Paul; the nominees for the office are to be made by the pastors and then elected to office by the town councils. The tasks of these deacons are carefully delineated: to watch over the public hospital, to care for the sick, to care for all the poor of the city (the orphans, widows, disabled, and elderly), to deal with special cases of charity, to provide medical care, to implement separate facilities for nursing of plague victims when necessary, and to discourage begging. An additional function for deacons is mentioned in the section on the Lord's Supper. "The ministers are to distribute the bread in proper order and with reverence; and none are to give the chalice except the colleagues or deacons with the ministers." The traditional, liturgical role of the deacon is interestingly introduced here but no where else in Calvin's exposition of the office of deacon.

Except for this inclusion in sacramental celebration, the office of deacon is consistently laid out in all of Calvin's writings on the subject. Ministry to the poor is a holy, apostolic calling and it is an office to be filled by men and women equipped with the abundant spiritual gifts needed to fulfill their ministry. It is the work of God through the church and of high priority, clearly modeled for the church of Calvin's time by the church of the New Testament. It is, furthermore, an office with two distinct tasks: administration of the money and goods used to care for the poor and the actual, physical care of the poor. The caring office is open, through Biblical testimony, to single women who wish to dedicate themselves to that care. Whatever opinion one may have about the twofold office aspect of the deacon as derived from Calvin's exegesis, the intent of the office remains clear: God calls the church to loving, merciful ministry to the poor. This task must be articulated and implemented in the practical life of the church. As

one of the external aids to the increase of the Christian's piety it is as important as preaching, sacraments, prophecy, and spiritual discipline.

II. The office of deacon in Geneva

The institutionalization of the office of deacon in 1541 in Geneva was part of an already established system of care for the poor. It is important to know how the social welfare system of the city operated and its historical beginnings before its interaction with the office of deacon created by the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*.

Prior to the sixteenth century, the care of the poor, or charity, was the provenance of the church. Almsgiving and benevolence were highly regarded virtues of the Middle Ages. Wealthy people often made large gifts of money to establish almshouses (called hospitals) which tended to the needs of the poor and were run by clerics or an order of religious. It was the duty of pious folk to provide for the support of mendicant orders and other pilgrims and penitents who had chosen to live a life of self-denial. By the late Middle Ages problems began to develop with this system. A troubling array of tragic events struck Europe: the bubonic plague, civil wars, and famine. A growing landless population of poor found their way to the new cities which were forming around a new class of merchants. These cities, led by their new merchant classes, began to initiate reform in the charity system in order to meet the tremendous needs of the times. These reforms involved two major components: centralization and laitization. Several small almshouses would be combined into one or two larger ones and their oversight would be turned over to the civic authorities. These reforms were often linked to the adoption of the new Reformation church by the city.

In Geneva, social welfare reform took place in 1535 at the same time as the city broke away from the Catholic church and embraced the teachings of William Farel. Seven hospitals

and one almshouse were combined into the one Hôpital-General when the priests who oversaw them left the city in the wake of the reform. As Geneva was facing the probable increase in the poor population in the wake of a threatened siege, the civic authorities had to act quickly to create a new system of charity. The properties of the eight were turned over to the needs of the new hospital which housed orphans and the homeless poor and distributed a weekly ration of bread. The director of the hospital was a layman called the hospitallier who lived in the Hôpital-General with his family and ran the day-to-day operations of the institution. His work was overseen by a board of directors called the procureurs who were appointed by the city council. By 1541 when Calvin was invited to come back to Geneva and institute his ecclesiastical reform, the social welfare system of the city was running efficiently as an arm of the civic authority.

In the 1541 ordinances, Calvin integrated his two-fold office of deacon into this already existing system. The first kind of deacon, those who administer the affairs of the poor, he identified as the procureur; the second kind, those that devote themselves to the care of the poor he labeled the hospitallier. This civic charitable system now became the work of the deacons and its caretakers and overseers were now also office holders of the Genevan church. In addition to the Hôpital-General, the Bourse française, established in 1550 to aid the French émigrés who were seeking homes in Geneva, was also a diaconal institution run by deacons. The Bourse française, however, was never incorporated into the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* and remained outside official channels of civic governance. Both of these ministries to the poor provide working examples of this new office of deacon.

The "established" form of the diaconate in Geneva was the Hôpital-General. The organization and function of the hospital remained much the same after its inclusion as the work

of the church. By 1545, its work and governance were totally enfolded into the new structure of the city. Elections of the deacons were held on a regular basis and overseen by the councils; they were equal in status to the elders of the consistory (Kingdon, "Social Welfare in Calvin's Geneva" in *American Historical Review*, p.57) Calvin took some interest in the hospital. "In 1545 he requested the city council to put the hospital's accounting in order, to list the revenue in writing, and to keep track of those who were given assistance. In December of that same year he suggested that the poor of the hospital be given a craft. Eventually the silk industry was brought to the hospital." (Olsen, *One Ministry, Many Roles*, p. 116) The Hôpital-General provided for all the social welfare needs of the city adapting as needed to changing circumstances and population.

One circumstance which it was unable to meet was the tremendous number of French refugees who poured into the city beginning in 1550. A large donation allowed the fund to be set up which was called the Bourse française or French Fund. It seems likely that Calvin was instrumental in its founding; he was one of the initial contributors and remained a faithful and generous one throughout his life. He took a personal interest in the Bourse and its deacons: at least once the deacon elections were held in his home and his brother Antoine was one of its deacons. Its function was very similar to the Hôpital-General: it granted money to meet emergency situations, distributed food, provided medical care, dowries for poor single women, apprenticeship moneys, and aided orphans and widows. It also sent books and pastors back into France, established a publishing house, and paid a scribe to transcribe Calvin's sermons. Its clients, however, were not the poor of Geneva but French refugees. It too was administered by deacons but these deacons were elected by the donors to the fund and the city's ministers and were never directly under the official overview of the city council. Both institutions continued to

serve the poor of Geneva for many years. The Bourse was disbanded in the nineteenth century, but the Hôpital-General is still involved in the social welfare of Geneva.

What roles did deacons fulfill in these institutions? The Hôpital-General's five procureurs and one hospitallier were the first six deacons in this new Reformed church order. The composition of this group, all lay people and members for the most part of the merchant ruling class, turned over only when someone decided to retire from the office or died. The procureurs attended a weekly meeting to hear the hospitallier's report for the week, affirm his expenses, and rule on each client's request for bread or help. They supervised all the property belonging to the hospital including farm land for which laborers had to be employed and supervised. Legal matters, real estate, apprenticeships, and marriage contracts all had to be seen to and they had to represent the hospital to the small council--all this in addition to fundraising! (Kingdon, p. 58) The hospitallier remained the sole deacon involved in the actual care of the clients of the hospital, supervising the work of the paid staff under him.

The deacons of the Bourse française were equally as busy but no distinct line existed between the administrative and caring functions. Five deacons were elected for one year terms subject to reelection. All five deacons handled the money, dispersed it and visited the poor. Each deacon took a six month rotating term serving as bookkeeper. Many of the gifts the fund received were not in cash but commodities or bequests which needed to be sold, invested, or converted in order to be useful. Settling legal disputes and managing these gifts often involved not only legal authorities in Geneva but those of France. Weekly meetings were held to decide on disbursement issues and the work of the doctor, surgeon, and apothecary employed by the fund needed to be supervised. Visits to the poor in their homes was a major innovation among these deacons. The fact that so many of them died within a few years of serving their terms

perhaps indicates the risks involved in doing so. (Olsen, *Calvin and Social Welfare*, p. 77) For the most part, these were men already established in the business community of Geneva who brought their management skills to their office.

Were there any women deacons in Geneva? According to Calvin's understanding of the office, women could serve as deacons of care if they felt called. In Calvin's recorded sermon on I Timothy 3, he decries the lack of widows in Geneva who are willing to serve as deacons. There were widows who indeed were working among the poor, though never holding an official title as deacon. The Bourse française used many widows as foster parents for orphans, deacons' wives often worked as hard as the deacons did, and some continued to fulfill their husbands' official duties after their deaths until a replacement was elected. Many were active in the fund as "donors, hostesses, landladies, nurses, and recommenders of the poor to the deacons." (Olsen, p. 80) The wives and families of the hospitalliers of the Hôpital-General were as involved in the caring work of the hospital as their husbands.

One final note of diaconal practice was the use of deacons in the serving of communion. This responsibility was set out in the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*: deacons were to assist the ministers in serving the chalice at the Lord's Supper. Deacons did perform this function in Geneva. A consistory minute in 1542 named four deacons, three procureurs and the hospitallier, to prepare and administer the sacrament. (Henderson, "Sixteenth Century Community Benevolence: An Attempt to Resacralize the Secular" in *Church History*, volume 38, p. 428)

The actual practice of the diaconal office in Geneva was a busy one. The institutions provided all the care of both the town's poor citizens and the steadily increasing stream of refugees. During this time, at least twelve deacons supervised the social welfare of the city and provided pastoral care to its people. The hungry were fed, the homeless housed, the orphaned

provided with livings, and the stranger given a home. While it is impossible to judge how successful this system was in meeting the needs of the city, it did set out to meet as much of the need as it could. The establishment of the Bourse française would seem to indicate that as needs arose, solutions were found to meet them. The Bourse française in particular provides a clear instance of successful diaconal ministry in Calvin's Geneva. "Without the General Hospital or some equivalent, there would have been no way Geneva could have handled the types of poverty endemic in sixteenth-century society. Without the Bourse française or some equivalent, there would have been no way Geneva could have accommodated an influx of refugees so large that it doubled the population of the city in a little over ten years. It was these institutions, so it seems to us, that made of Geneva what one contemporary visitor, John Knox, called 'the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles.'" (Kingdom, "Calvin's Ideas about the Diaconate" in *Piety, Politics, and Ethics*, p. 180)

III. Correlation of the ecclesiology and the practice

The relationship between the teachings of Calvin on the office of deacon and its actual practice in Geneva are integrally related. When reading the description of the fourth order in the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, one is struck immediately with the applied theology of Calvin's two-fold diaconate. The question that arises from this is obvious: which came first--the theology of the office or the Hôpital-General? The answers among several Calvin scholars are mixed. Kingdon, for one, insists that Calvin adapted the theology to the existing institution while McKee insists that the theology came from the exegesis, not the institution. These theological and institutional arguments seem antithetical and opposed to each other and may never be completely resolved. Efforts have been made to reconstruct Calvin's teachings on the office of deacon along a time line of his involvement in the city of Geneva, his time in

Strasbourg, and the establishment of the ordinances. While this is helpful, it does not take into account, perhaps, Calvin's complete dedication to scriptural models over historical models. Calvin was not afraid to find new ways of being the church and his understanding of the offices of the church were reflective of that courage.

Perhaps the reason for this disagreement is based on too closely identifying the diaconal office in Geneva solely with the work of the Hôpital-General. Granted that there is a direct correlation between Calvin's understanding of the two-fold office of deacon and the two positions held by the existing overseers of the hospital, but there is no such correlation between the two-fold office and the deacons of the Bourse française. That group did not distinguish between administration and care, all participated in both. Each deacon made pastoral calls and each deacon took a turn at administering the moneys of the fund. Both groups were deacons in Calvin's eyes; both were about the ministry of the church to the poor of Geneva and France.

The real issue is that of modification or accommodation. "A traditional popular source for his ideas on these offices is the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* that Calvin and others wrote for the city after he came back in 1541, but the section on deacons in these ordinances was formulated around the image of the city hospital, and that description does not fit the deacons of the Bourse française, whose responsibilities were a modification of the pattern laid out in the ordinances. Yet this modification apparently occurred with Calvin's blessing." (Olsen, p.27) The key to Calvin's theology of the office is not how the office is practically worked out in the organizational life of the church, but in its purpose. Is the church doing God's ministry to the poor? Are the needs of the least being met? Is the apostolic duty being acted out? If these answers are affirmative, then the tasks, number, titles, and governance of those who have been instructed to carry out this ministry is not important. "Establishing here not perpetual law for

ourselves, we should refer the entire use and purpose of observances to the upbuilding of the church. If the church requires it, we may not only without offense allow something to be changed but permit any observances previously in use among us to be abandoned." (Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.10.32) Calvin accommodated his definition of the office to his context in Geneva and to the general Christian tradition. His approach is flexible and pragmatic yet scriptural. Above all, the church's faithful witness to Christ must be promoted by what the church does and through all the ways it governs itself.

IV. Learnings and Challenges for the Office of Deacon in the CRC

Calvin's view of the office of deacon embraced both a theology and a practiced ecclesiology. Both of these areas offer some learnings to the office of the deacon as currently practiced in the Christian Reformed Church.

Calvin embraced the reinstitution of an apostolic task into an office of the church. This office was permanent and necessary to the church's task of building up the body of Christ. *Diakonia* was an aid to piety in the life of the believer and a ministry of all those in the priesthood of believers. This office was equal in status to the other offices because the nature of its task was apostolic. Like the other offices, it had a primary function; the diaconate was specifically charged with ministry to the poor. This ministry was not only about providing resources to aid those who were in need, but was also concerned with the physical well-being of any who were in distress. These two functions of the office of deacon could be carried out by two different kinds of deacons. The office was to be filled, like all other offices of the church only by those who possessed the spiritual gifts which equipped them for this office.

In the practice of this office in Geneva, the diaconate had both "established" and "disestablished" forms: the Hôpital-General and the Bourse française. These two forms carried

out the diaconal task as Calvin had envisioned it. It was a lay-directed ministry that cared for the poor of the entire city of Geneva and responded to the increasing needs of a refugee population. There were accommodating differences in these two functions of the diaconate. Terms of office varied between the two and the two-fold distinction was understood differently. Geneva's deacons had the additional task of preparing and serving the Lord's Supper at worship.

In what ways does the current office of deacon in the CRC still reflect Calvin's theology and Geneva's practice? The theology of the office still bears the imprint of Calvin in significant ways. The CRC recognizes the office as one of four in the church which differ in task but not in honor. (Article 2 of the CRC church order). The task of the office is "to administer the mercy of Christ to all people" (Article 25c) The form for ordination to this office reminds the congregation that this is a task designated by the apostles to special persons. The ecclesiology of church office that is foundational to our church order is Calvin's.

The differences between current practice and Calvin's ecclesiology are, not surprisingly, based in the issues of practice. Sixteenth century Geneva is distant both historically and culturally from twentieth century North America. Further, our current practice has been filtered through Dutch Reformed church polity which holds together differences between à Lasco and Emden with its emphasis on a diaconate more separated from church governance and the unity of the offices as reflected in *The Belgic Confession* of Guido DeBrès. What are these differences?

The primary difference lies in the provenance of the office. Geneva's deacons were responsible for the entire social welfare of the city—our office clearly stipulates that the task is "especially to those who belong to the community of believers." (Article 25c) Other differences highlight the organization of the office. Geneva established different diaconal boards for different diaconal needs; our polity calls for a single diaconate. Geneva's deacons could be

called to the office of hospitallier or procureur; our single office encompasses both functions. Terms of office, election procedures, and relationship to the consistory are all different although one essential remains the same—both of these diaconates are lay driven. One other difference lies in the task of the deacon: Geneva's deacons were active in the liturgy of the table while this task is seen in our tradition as the task of the elders.

The theological continuities and the practical differences are not surprising. Without trying to put words in his mouth, Calvin would see this as a natural application of his principle of accommodation. As long as the church is apostolicly carrying out the task, the form of the office is not constrained to a particular historical or geographic interpretation of it. But how do these differences speak to our practice?

The relationship of our office of deacon to the other offices of the church raises some questions of our practice. Is this office perceived to be an equal office to that of elder? As was noted earlier, Calvin's first edition of the *Institutes* described only two offices, elder and deacon, and further editions continued to maintain the essential need for both offices in the church. Calvin felt *diakonia* was as necessary for the church as the sacraments, preaching, and discipline—do we? Our current distinctions of council, consistory, and diaconate with the diaconate "giving an account of its work to the council" (Article 35c) while elders do not, is one way we create a hierarchy of office. Further, the lack of diaconal presence at the larger assemblies of the church speaks eloquently to the distancing of the office from the full life of the church. Further questions arise from our practice in the areas of tenure and the selection of those who serve in the office. Calvin spoke strongly about the need for these people to be clearly gifted for the office, neither our church polity nor our form for ordination reflect this. We do feel quite strongly that offices are temporary and that deacons, and all office bearers, are to be elected

and re-elected for terms of office. In the light of the variety of terms in Geneva, perhaps this is another area that could use some evaluation. Why do we set the limits we do around the holding of this office and does it help or hinder it? Would the task of the office be better served by longer tenures given the nature of the task today?

The task of the deacon remains fundamentally the same across time and geography. While we no longer recognize the two-fold distinction of Calvin, a growing practice in many diaconates is to ask one of the deacons to serve as an administrator, rather than a servant. Perhaps this emerging practice could be evaluated in the light of Geneva. Distinguishing between the administrative and benevolent tasks might help diaconates in carrying out the larger task of *diakonia*. There is also an interesting similarity between the two forms of the diaconate in Geneva (the Bourse française and the Hôpital-General) and the established and disestablished forms of diaconal work in our tradition. While the official office is clearly linked to the council of the local congregation, there also exists in our tradition many examples of unofficial diaconal organizations that are closely tied to the church. Organizations like The Luke Society, Pine Rest, Bethany Christian Services, and others all carry out distinct diaconal ministries designed to meet particular needs, not unlike the creation of the Bourse française to meet the needs of French refugees. Should these organizations be recognized more "officially" as part of the diaconal work of the CRC? Another key difference in practice was the role of the deacon in liturgy. In many traditions the primary role of the deacon remains in the pre-Reformation context of training for the priesthood or as a liturgical assistant. Our current practice has transferred this role to the office of elder. While this is grounded in the task of the elders to oversee the sacraments, an important link between the gift of God and the gifts of the people in return is lost in the celebration of the Eucharist. Some in our tradition are seeking to make the Lord's Supper

a weekly celebration as Calvin urged. Our celebration of the sacrament has been framed by expressions of benevolence—is there a place for the deacons at the table both as a symbol of our response to and as a reminder of Christ's offering of himself as an act of *diakonia*?

There are profound differences between Calvin's Geneva and our North American context that must be reflected in differences in the office. Our questions here must center on how the principles of the office can be practiced in our context. I highlight only an obvious few. Geneva was a city/state which recognized no distinction between the general population of the city and the members of the church. Every person was a member of both; the church of Geneva was responsible for all the poor of the city no matter their status as church members. We serve in a different context of a sharp distinction between church and state with clear lines between those of the church and those who are outside of it. Who today is the focus of our task? Our church order and ordination form emphasize the necessity of addressing widening circles of need that center in the congregation. Is this a good distinction for us to be making? Do we run the risk of ignoring greater needs because we see only immediate ones? Are we being visionary enough about our "parish"? What role does development play in the task of the deacon as opposed to charity? How do we define "poor" in our contemporary context? What is the relationship between *diakonia* and evangelism? These are not questions with easy answers and they only highlight the need for the CRC to be constantly about the task of reapplying its principles of ecclesiology to practice. If the task of the deacon is to remain apostolic and vital to the upbuilding of the church, if it is to continue to carry out the *diakonia* of Christ, then the CRC needs to be willing to make changes in the way the office is practiced. Are we still willing to practice accommodation?

The greatest challenge for the office today in our denomination is a congregational one. We need to see more clearly and articulate more meaningfully the apostolic call of *diakonia* to each believer. We need to recapture what Calvin means when he calls the offices of the church functional offices. The office of deacon is necessary to the church in order that the life of the body of Christ is strengthened. Unless the office is functioning to lead believers in the practice of *diakonia*, it isn't living up to its mandate. The apostolic task is the task of every member of the church, not just its officers. The deacons are to serve as the pacemakers of the congregation, not its deputies. The diaconal task is not assigned to the deacons, it is assigned to everyone; the deacons are those who inspire, remind, prompt, teach, weigh, encourage, criticize, counsel, and model. "Here, then, is the kind of deacons the apostolic church had, and which we, after their example, should have." (Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.9)

Bibliography

Barnett, James Monroe. *The Diaconate—A Full and Equal Order: A Comprehensive and Critical Study of the Origin, Development, and Decline of the Office of Deacon.* Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995.

Berghoef, Gerard and Lester DeKoster. *The Deacons Handbook: A Manual of Stewardship.* Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 1983.

Calvin, Jean. *Acts of the Apostles. Calvin's Commentaries*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965.

Calvin, Jean. *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.* Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1960.

Calvin, Jean. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Philadelphia: Westminister Press, 1975.

Christian Reformed Church of North America. *Church Order and Rules for Synodical Procedure*. Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1999.

Christian Reformed Church of North America. "Report 44: Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination" in *Acts of Synod, 1973*. Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1973.

Christian Reformed Church of North America. "Report 31: Committee to Study the Authority and Functions of Elders and Deacons" in *Acts of Synod, 1987*. Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1987.

Christian Reformed Church of North America. "Report 32: Synodical Studies on Women in Office and Decisions Pertaining to the Office of Deacon" in *Acts of Synod, 1981*. Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1981.

DeMoor, Henry Jr. *Equipping the Saints*. Doctoral dissertation. Privately published:1986.

DeMoor, Henry, Jr. *The Office of Deacon at the Crossroads*. Published dissertation. 1982.

DeRidder, Richard R., and Leonard J. Hoffman. *Manual of Christian Reformed Government.* Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1994.

Dillenberger, John. *John Calvin: Selections from his Writings*. Scholars Press, 1975.

Douglass, E. Jane Dempsey. *Women, Freedom, and Calvin.* Philadelphia: Westminister Press, 1985.

Henderson, R.W. "Sixteenth Century Community Benevolence: An Attempt to Resacralize the Secular", *Church History*, 38 (1969) 421-28.

Heyns, William. *Handbook for Elders and Deacons: The Nature and the Duties of the Offices according to the Principles of Reformed Church Polity*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.E. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1928.

Innes, William C. *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*. Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publication, 1983.

Kingdon, Robert M. "Calvin's Ideas about the Diaconate: Social or Theological in Origin?" in *Piety, Politics, and Power: Reformation Studies in Honor of George Wolfgang Forell*. Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Publishers, 1984.

Kingdon, Robert M. "The Deacons of the Reformed Church in Calvin's Geneva" in *Melanges d'Historie du XVI Siecle afferts a Henri Meylan*. Geneva: Libraire Droz, 1970.

Kingdon, Robert M. "Social Welfare in Calvin's Geneva" in *American Historical Review* 76 (1971) 50-69.

McKee, Elsie Anne. "Calvin's Exegesis of Romans 12:8—Social, Accidental, or Theological?" in *Calvin Theological Journal*, Volume 23, no.1, April 1988.

McKee, Elsie Anne. *Diakonia in the Classical Reformed Tradition and Today*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.E. Eerdmans Pub, Co., 1989.

McKee, Elsie Anne. *John Calvin on the Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving*. Published dissertation: 1982.

Monter, E. William. *Calvin's Geneva*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1967.

Olsen, Jeannine E. *Calvin and Social Welfare: Deacons and the Bourse Francaise*. Selingrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1989.

Olsen, Jeannine E. *One Ministry, Many Roles: Deacons and Deaconesses through the Centuries*. St Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1992.

Reid, J.K.S. "Diakonia in the Thought of Calvin" in *Service in Christ: Essays presented to Karl Barth on his 80th Birthday*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.E. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1966.

Spaan, H.B. *Christian Reformed Church Government*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1968.

Thompson, John Lee. *John Calvin and the Daughters of* Sarah. Geneva: Librairie Droz S.A., 1992.

Van Dellen, I. And Monsma, M. *The Revised Church Order Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970.

Van Klinken, Jaap. *Diakonia: Mutual Helping with Justice and Compassion*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1989.