**A systems approach to the office of Deacon**

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 bestselling 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 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, Donella 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 systemic change**

The May issue of For Deacon <https://network.crcna.org/deacons/may-issue-deacons> provided a good perspective on how deacons might approach tracking accountability for ministry with 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: <https://www.faithaliveresources.org/Products/704017/deacons-and-elders.aspx>

The CRCNA handbook for Deacons: <https://www.faithaliveresources.org/Products/151104/the-deacons-handbook.aspx?bCategory=CLLS>

A book written some time ago by Jay van Groningen <https://www.greatlakesurban.com/> , but still relevant. It deserves a re-read or study together: [https://www.amazon.com/ChangingTimes-New-Approaches-Handbook/dp/1562122223/ref=sr\_1\_8?ie=UTF8&qid=1531156780&sr=8-8&keywords=the+deacon%27s+handbook](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 to help a diaconate plan out its year, including a helpful guide on creating a work plan and setting goals <https://diaconalministries.com/resources/> .If deacons can begin to make a ministry plan, in collaboration with elders and pastors so their work fits with the church's overall mission and vision, then this could be a good first step in taking a systems approach to their mission.

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

As has been noted in the section dedicated to local 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 take full advantage of utilizing the diaconal mandate on this regional basis. This role is no less important in the RCA where Synod 2017 called for the formation of deacon conferences at the classis level.

The Center For Parish Development <https://missionalchurch.org/> has developed the following criteria for thinking through a systems analysis in preparation for planning more ministry. These criteria are:

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| 1. The effectiveness of the functioning of the whole and 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**](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** by J. Russell Crabtree [**https://www.amazon.com/Fly-Ointment-Denominations-Helping-Congregations/dp/0898696062/ref=sr\_1\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1531335843&sr=1-1&keywords=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)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 that right to strategy & accountability for planning*.”The second book is called Pursuing God’s Will Together by Ruth Haley Barton. [**https://www.amazon.com/Pursuing-Gods-Will-Together-Transforming/dp/0830835660/ref=sr\_1\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1531336908&sr=1-1&keywords=pursuing+god%27s+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)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 and people who are minorities are included and 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" by Tod Bolsinger; one that many churches have been reading with their leadership teams. Bolinger uses the exploration of Lewis and Clark as a great example of systems thinking. <https://www.ivpress.com/canoeing-the-mountains>The Network **<https://network.crcna.org/classis>**  is another place where the dialogue on classes and resources to help plan for change are plentiful. Here is just one article on principles of adaptive change |

[**https://network.crcna.org/classis/six-principles-leading-adaptive-work**](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. Here is their link to resources on classis level change <https://alban.org/?s=middle+judicatory>

All of this system thinking requires champions to implement Christ centered ministry. Synod 2015 took visionary steps to see to it that deacons are at the table. Now we need leaders at both the church and Classis level to step up and help give shape to the vision. Are you that person? For more information contact Andrew Ryskamp at andrewryskamp@crcna.org . This article also appeared in the Summer issue of the ***For Deacons*** newsletter available on the CRCNA Network.