

STEWARDSHIP CONNECTIONS

A Newsletter for Financial Connections Within the Anabaptist Community

In this Issue

The Role of the Deacon 1
David G. Martin

Telling the Truth About Burnout in Charities, Organizations, Missions, and Schools 3
Richie Lauer

Deacon Seminar 4

How Business and Prayer Changed a Community 5
Rachel Mast

Young Family Finance Seminar 6

Business Advising 9

Annual Strategic Plan 10
Greg Wolf

The Role of the Deacon

Adapted from a presentation given by David G. Martin at an AF Deacon Seminar

When Jesus saw needs while He walked on this earth, He was moved with compassion. He met the spiritual, physical, and mental needs of the people. Jesus’ followers in the early church had that same compassion toward their brothers and sisters and toward those outside of the church.

Galatians 6:10 teaches, “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” We know the early believers followed this teaching. In Acts 4, the new Christians sold some of their possessions and gave the money to the apostles who in turn distributed it to believers with needs. A few chapters later, in Acts 11, the new Christians at Antioch became aware of a need at the church in Judea and responded by sending them relief through the church leaders.

At that time, the church was fulfilling their calling by caring for the widows, but the apostles were too busy and not able to teach and preach while also caring for the widows. Therefore, seven men were ordained to take up the work of caring for physical needs, which allowed the apostles to give themselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word. This is what is commonly known as the first example of the deacon office (Acts 6).

Called by God and the Church

At my ordination, I was asked, “Are you willing to accept this service and by the grace of God and the aid of His Holy Spirit to give yourself up to the work which this office demands of you, as a faithful laborer in the church of God?”¹

I was then given the charge that says, “You’ve been called to the office of deacon. It will now be your duty to receive and take care of the charities of the church, to distribute them to the needy members according to their necessities, to visit the sick and widows and orphans, to comfort them and pray with them in their afflictions, to assist the bishop in the administration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and to bear testimony to the truth in their public ministrations.”

Deacons have a lot of responsibility and behind-the-scenes work. A schoolteacher once asked her students what the responsibilities of the bishop, minister, and deacon are. Their answer was, “Well, the bishop is the leader. He tells the people what to do. The preacher is to preach the Word. And the deacon, well, he does all the work.” Deacon work isn’t always easy, but as we submit and fulfill this God-given

¹ David G. Martin was ordained as a deacon at 40 years old and has been a deacon for 24 years.

Continued on page 2 »

responsibility, we can find joy in it.

When the early church went about ordaining the seven men, the apostles instructed the congregation to look among themselves and choose men “of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom” (Acts 6:3). Men who exemplified these qualities were then set before the apostles who laid their hands on the men and ordained them. Through this ordination charge, the men were appointed to work in the capacity of deacons.

Accepting and Fulfilling Their Charge

We do not read that any of the seven men ordained in Acts 6 refused to accept and fulfill their charge. As a result of their willingness to serve, the Word of God increased and the church grew! Was the work easy for them? I doubt it. Yet there was a blessing when these men accepted and fulfilled their charge. For a deacon to fulfill his responsibility effectively and joyfully, he must accept his calling.

Accepting the call of a deacon starts long before the ordination. The Christian life begins with accepting God’s call to surrender our lives to Him. From then on, the Christian’s desire is to be in the center of God’s will. Young people might accept the call to teach school or go on the mission field. God calls His faithful children to a variety of roles, including the role of deacon.

With the call to serve as deacon comes sacrifice. In most situations, a deacon has a wife and children, and they also must sacrifice. When a wife doesn’t accept her husband’s call or a child doesn’t accept that Dad has been called to deacon, it will hinder the effectiveness of the deacon’s work. My oldest sons were around sixteen to eighteen years old when I was ordained as deacon. At that age, they had to adjust to and accept the call of God on my life.

With the willingness to accept the charge comes the ability to fulfill the charge. First Timothy 4:14 says, “Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.” The Greek word for gift in that verse is *charisma*, meaning a divine gratuity or a spiritual endowment. Deacons are given the gifts they need to fulfill their charge and to use their abilities and talents as an opportunity to serve the Lord by serving the church.

Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:12, “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful,

putting me into the ministry.” Paul recognized that God had enabled him and would continue to enable him for the work of the ministry. God had also called Paul to the ministry in spite of his past. He called Paul on the road to Damascus and forgave him of his sins. As Paul accepted God’s call on his life, the church was extremely blessed by it. Deacons should not use the excuse of past failings to reject God’s call. God uses forgiven sinners to do His work.

Serving the Church

The Greek word for deacon is *diákonos* and generally means a “servant or attendant.” A servant is someone who has the best interest of others in mind. He will lay down his agenda and will for the good of the persons he is serving. A servant’s responsibility is to meet the needs of his master. In the same way, deacons are called to serve their Master by serving the church. Many times they will need to lay down their own agenda to meet the needs of the congregation.

James 1:27 teaches that “pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction.” Practicing this verse is one way that deacons serve the church and help take care of God’s people. Another way is to keep in touch with the members, especially those in one’s own congregation or district. There are many different ways to do it, but visiting the sick, the widows, and the fatherless in their afflictions is part of the work of the deacon.

This verse, however, is not only talking to deacons. The call to visit the fatherless and widows is the responsibility of all members. But a deacon can help make this happen by involving the congregation and taking initiative. Not everything has to be done through the deacon, but it is his responsibility to see that it happens and in an orderly way.

A man who had been attending our church for some time but was not a believer became sick. I asked his wife if we could have the men come

and visit him. “Well,” she said, “don’t all come visit at one time, but do show interest in him. He’s been more open.” This is an example of how the deacon can organize events to fulfill such callings as visiting the sick. In this case, I organized a visitation schedule for the brothers in the church.

Later, we will look at the specific areas of a deacon’s work, but a deacon’s primary calling is to be a servant to the church.

ACCEPTING THE CALL OF A DEACON STARTS LONG BEFORE THE ORDINATION. THE CHRISTIAN LIFE BEGINS WITH ACCEPTING GOD’S CALL TO SURRENDER OUR LIVES TO HIM.

Telling the Truth About Burnout in Charities, Organizations, Missions, and Schools

By Richie Lauer



“It’s better to burn out than to rust out.” Really???

Is this a true statement? In a comparative sense, perhaps so. “Burning out” while doing worthy work seems a better option than “rusting out” from inactivity. But these two choices are rather bleak when offered as either/ or options.

Burning out implies intense, prolonged overwork that results in exhausting our usefulness. Not only is less work now achievable, but the worker is damaged in the process. Rusting out implies prolonged inactivity, which also results in uselessness, with the value of the worker destroyed and productivity forfeited. Burning out or rusting out are poor choices to offer anyone.

Yet the slogan “*It’s better to burn out than to rust out*” seems to be the unofficial motto of many conservative Anabaptist charities, organizations, missions, and schools.

Within our church circles, we place high value on work. We respect diligence and initiative. While we are not known for being liberal with compliments, our words of appreciation tend to flow toward those who earn the reputations of being “workers.” Other than the part about not being liberal with compliments, this is all right and good.

But it is not right nor good that our charities, missions, organizations, and schools consistently burn out willing workers. When you allow yourself

or someone else to burn out from overwork, you become responsible for having damaged God’s work.

In every church and organization, you can find three types of people:

- **Those who do more than their share.** These individuals “get it done,” sacrificing when and where necessary. They work until the work is done.
- **Those who do their share.** These folks are really good at math. They divide the work by the number of workers, do their share, and then quit working.
- **Those who do less than their share.** These are the people who are strangely blind to the dozen little things that need to be done yet. They walk away from an event, never noticing that chairs need to be put away, trash cans need to be emptied, and bathrooms need to be cleaned.

Every charity likes to fill its ranks with workers who do more than their share. But some people work too much, and others are quite willing to let them overwork.

Our schools illustrate the problem of burning out willing workers. I’ve met very few parochial schoolteachers who rusted out. But I have known many who burned out. So do you. Most schoolteachers teach because they love children. They overwork for the sake of the children, and most parents and schoolboard members are willing to allow them to be overworked. It is less costly and less work for the parents and the schoolboard if the teachers are underpaid and overworked.

The same problem occurs in most conservative Anabaptist nonprofit organizations, charities, and missions. We have demonstrated a solid track record of burning out the best workers.

Part of the blame for this burnout rests on the worker. Having the reputation of being “a worker” can become a pride issue. Every person has limits, but some refuse to reveal or own up to their limitations because they enjoy the praise of men too much. Overwork seems a sure way to win the respect of others.

Others lack the backbone to say “no,”

Continued on page 4 »

WHEN YOU ALLOW YOURSELF OR SOMEONE ELSE TO BURN OUT FROM
OVERWORK, YOU BECOME RESPONSIBLE FOR HAVING DAMAGED GOD’S WORK.

even when it is obviously necessary to decline a new responsibility or task. They consistently overcommit and accept new responsibilities, ending up in situations where they cannot fulfill any of their commitments well. Some of us also make poor choices in how we manage, or fail to manage, necessary and unavoidable stresses. Some zealous workers have a problem sharing work with others.

The rest of the blame for worker burnout rests on those who serve in management and on boards for our charities, missions, and schools. In exchange for short-term gain, long-term damage is inflicted on the organization's mission. In the name of getting good work done, those with oversight choose to damage people. A businessman who destroys his valuable machinery and tools in the name of

getting a job done would not long remain in business. Board members would not need to worry so much about finding replacement workers if they simply took better care of the workers they were already given.

What should be done? The right thing to do is tell the truth. Willing workers should shed their pride and be honest about their limitations. Boards of directors should take collective responsibility to protect those doing the work. They should lay the issue of burnout on the table for open discussion and action. If they need to add staff, cut back programs, pay a little more, or jump in to help personally, then they should do it. We never want to lose a mission mindset, but we can retain that while meeting the emotional, financial, and physical needs of those doing the work.

1 Kings 19 and the following chapters provide a wonderful example of how a willing worker can be rebuilt after burning out. God was gentle in recognizing that Elijah had reached his end. In this case, Elijah had relied too much on his own strength. "The journey is too great for thee," was God's observation. He provided Elijah with rest and sustenance. After a period of recovery, God gently probed Elijah's version of events, leading him to clearer understanding. Elijah was given new but different responsibilities and provided with a helper and successor.

For change to happen in our burnout culture, we must do truth telling and take corrective actions. Our schools and organizations should commit to building new reputations as places that build people up rather than burning them down. ✍️

Deacon Seminar*

Helping church leaders and advisors navigate adversity and prosperity

Helping a struggling brother or family is an act of service, but often the problems are challenging and complex; personal, financial, and spiritual issues are usually mixed together. This seminar covers topics related to working with those who have financial difficulties. Topics also guide and inspire leaders in directing the church toward stewardship living. We face the challenge of living in an affluent age, and Jesus teaches that the more we have, the more responsible we are as His stewards.

Upcoming Deacon Seminars:

- Tuesday, June 22, 2021 – Martindale Reception Center
352 Martindale Road, Ephrata, PA 17522
- Thursday, June 24 – Antrim Brethren in Christ Church
28 Kauffman Road E, Chambersburg, PA 17202
- Tuesday, July 27 – Finger Lakes Fellowship Center
3403 SR 414, Seneca Falls, NY 13148
- Thursday, September 23 – Halsey Mennonite Church
910 E. 1st Street, Halsey, OR 97348

Three ways to register:

Call: 570-468-1326

Email: seminars@afweb.org

Write: Stewardship Resources, 55 Whisper Creek Drive, Lewisburg, PA 17837

There is no charge for the seminar. However, seating is limited, so please register by two weeks prior to the seminar date.

Ordained brethren—bishops, ministers, and deacons—and those who have served or are serving as financial trustees/advisors are welcome to attend.

*Formerly called Seminar for Deacons, Financial Advisors, and Trustees.

How **BUSINESS AND PRAYER** changed a community

By Rachel Mast



It's not every day that we get a front row seat to see how business and spiritual aspects so clearly intersect in daily life. This story is a picture of how God wants to use business to bring transformative good in our communities and to build His kingdom.

For more than twenty years, a dark cloud hung over the church community of Port Trevorton. Once a reputable diner where families gathered and friends broke bread, the diner eventually fell on hard times and was sold to someone with less reputable intentions. An adult bookstore replaced the diner, leaving a stain on the landscape that our brothers and sisters had to pass each time they drove through town.

Susquehanna Mennonite Church, where one of AF's loan facilitators and his family attend, was just a few short miles away. Brian and his family, along with others from the Susquehanna congregation, regularly passed by this spot on a Sunday. They averted their eyes and longed for the darkness to be overthrown.

Members of Susquehanna and neighboring congregations felt the same and prayed against the principalities that besieged this part of Snyder County, PA. "At first it wasn't that public of a prayer ministry in our congregation," Brian says of the situation. "It was more of a grass-roots movement. But the request was brought up at our prayer meetings at times, and specific prayers were uttered on many occasions."

While the believers knew of God's promises to overcome evil, little did they know that their prayers, God's power, and a business transaction would align to bring about change in

their small community.

You see, just a mile down the highway from the bookstore, Ken of Palace Creek Enterprises had been renting a plot of land. Ken is from the Bethel Mennonite congregation of the Nationwide conference. Palace Creek started almost three decades ago, specializing in sheds, outdoor furnaces, hunting blinds, and outdoor playsets. His workers build the sheds about 12 miles away in Liverpool.

Ken was not satisfied with the rented location for his display. It sat too far away from the main thoroughfare, lacking the exposure and access needed to draw customers.

When the bookstore property came up for sale, Ken recognized it as a much more strategic location at a busy intersection, just what he needed to reach his ideal customer. However, the timing didn't seem right to buy it, and so the dark business continued to infect Port Trevorton.

Ken wouldn't know until later how God was moving to one day use his business to answer the prayers of the saints and bring about change.

Back at Susquehanna, the church continued to pray. Then in 2019, a Christian Aid Ministries billboard appeared above the adult business. It read, "Lust Destroys, Jesus Saves." Not long after, an evangelist who also answers calls for the CAM billboard ministry shared a week of meetings at Susquehanna. That week he went out to talk with the property owner of the bookstore, hoping to sway him from his evil ways, but the owner was not open to hearing the Gospel.

However, between the evangelist's visit and the presence

Continued on page 6 »

of the billboard, the congregations became more acutely burdened for the situation. “It made the spiritual warfare more public and brought the specific situation into clearer focus,” Brian shares. The churches now began to pray in earnest, specifically for the business to be turned into something useful and good. Perhaps, they thought, God would raise up a local Christian businessman to purchase it.

Less than a year after the visiting evangelist left, a *For Sale* sign again appeared at the bookstore. Ken felt something different this time. Unbeknownst to him, the local churches were still praying. “I didn’t realize until later how much thought and prayer some people in the community were putting into this building,” he shared.

Ken again noted the ideal location and property layout and how it would aid his growing business, and this time it felt right to buy it. “Dad had the money to put in it, and I had the ambition to make it happen,” he chuckles. Ken hired a real estate agent and went to look at the property.

“I wasn’t able to make money at this location!” the owner declared. “But I wish you well.” Ken wasn’t deterred. When the owner knew Ken was serious about buying, he pushed hard for a speedy sale. “I want to get rid of it,” he demanded. “How fast can you buy it?”

Ken felt the pressure to act fast lest this opportunity slip away. He later learned that the owner owed heavy back taxes, further evidence that the evil here was doomed.

Ken needed a loan for the sale to go through. Normally he used local banks for business transactions, but he had recently had success with Anabaptist Financial and knew their efficiency was what he needed in this moment. “The layers of

bureaucracy are so much less, and they are so easy to work with. I enjoy it,” Ken related. “The transition went very smooth and fast when we started it.”

The loan was approved, and Ken put in an offer for the property, contingent on the former business coming in to clean out and sanitize before closing. The owner accepted, and Palace Creek soon had the deed in hand. The spiritual battle had been won.

A lot of renovating still needed to be done before Palace Creek could move into the building. “We had to change wiring and things,” said Ken. In the meantime, they began the process of moving to the new grounds, setting up the display lot with storage sheds and swing sets. A salesman worked out of an outside office until the renovations could be completed.

Soon the CAM billboard came down, and the community responded with delight at the business transition. Ken hears, “We are so happy the property is being used for something useful. So happy the old business is gone!”

It was as though God had parted the dark clouds over this part of Port Trevorton and a new light shone there, this time in the form of Palace Creek Enterprises.

Few people are happier about it than the families of Susquehanna Mennonite and the neighboring churches. No longer will the children have to avert their eyes on the way to church. Brian shares, **“For our young children, it will leave a lasting impact on the power of prayer and how God does love to see His light shine.** It’s no small matter for us to delight to see the darkness gone and an upbuilding business venture being shown forth there.” 



Young Family Finance Seminar

The Young Family Finance Seminar lays a solid Biblical foundation for youth and young families, teaching stewardship concepts, principles of giving, scriptural view of debt, and principles of saving. The Budgeting Seminar then builds on this by offering practical advice in setting up a budget to help avoid financial pitfalls. AF Stewardship Resources partners with local communities that have a heart for this kind of teaching. For more information or to schedule a seminar in your area, please contact Jason Sensenig at jasonsensenig@afweb.org or call him at 570-468-1357.

Upcoming Family Finance Seminars

Roberts, MT – Friday, May 28, 2021
Young Family Finance & Budgeting Seminar
To be held at Pioneer Sheds, 8399 US
Highway 212, Roberts, MT 59070

Hillsdale, PA – Tuesday, July 6, 2021
Young Family Finance Seminar
To be held at Hillsdale Mennonite Church, 1369
Fleming Summit Road, Commadore, PA 15729

Sauk Centre, MN – Saturday, July 10, 2021
Young Family Finance & Budgeting Seminar
To be held at Barry Horst’s Shop, 35557 455th
Avenue, Sauk Centre, MN 56378

The Deacon's Manual

A deacon's work would be easier if there was a book called *The Complete Guide to Being a Good Deacon* with detailed instructions on what to do in every situation that comes up. There is no such book, but we do have a book—the Bible—that includes guidelines for the deacon.

Here are a few practical and scriptural “do nots” that deacons can apply:

Do not believe gossip. Deacons need to be careful and discerning with what they believe. Unfortunately, people sometimes try to lift themselves up by putting others down. Human nature tends to jump to conclusions and assume without finding out the facts. If one member says something negative about another member, make sure you ask how they *know* it is true. Did they witness it themselves? Have they talked to the person about the problem? Don't fall into the trap of believing gossip.

Do not accept a complaint unless the first two steps in Matthew 18:15–17 were followed. First ask, was an effort put forth to resolve the issue one-on-one? Second, was a witness or two called in to help resolve the offense? Only after these two steps have been followed should the complaint be brought to the church.

Do not form conclusions until you have heard out all persons involved. It has been said, “In disputes among people, the truth almost never sits entirely with one side. There are two sides to every story and sometimes three sides to hear before the truth can be discerned.” Sometimes after listening to the second person's side, you will find out details that will affect your conclusion. Proverbs 18:13 says, “He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.” When approaching the person in focus, do so with love and understanding. It's easy to judge them based on what we heard from others without giving them an opportunity to give their side. When we approach someone with this kind of attitude, they will be able to sense it in us.

Do not talk behind each other's backs on the ministry team. Be up front and open and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships with the congregation and ministry team. The best thing a ministerial team can do for its congregation is to work together and be a united force. Team members may have different opinions about how a situation should be handled, but they need to accept the final decision made as a ministerial team. If each team member does his own thing or lets others know he doesn't agree with how the situation is being handled, it can create a lot of havoc. Build confidence with each other, be open with each other, and work out your differences. Go forth as a unified force.

Do not show partiality in relationships. One could look at a number of examples in the Bible where individuals showed partiality. Jacob showed partiality to Joseph, Isaac to Esau, and Rebekah to Jacob. A lot of problems arose because of this. The deacon shouldn't be partial to his family over others. At the same time, he shouldn't require things of his family he doesn't require of the congregation either. He needs to be fair both ways.

The Deacon's Requisite Character

A deacon's role is a serious responsibility and requires certain characteristics that must be exemplified in church, home, and business life. These requisite characteristics are summed up in 1 Timothy 3:8–13:

“Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless. Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things. Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

Let's take a look at some of these characteristics.

Grave. A deacon should be venerable, having upright character and worthy of respect. Those called into this position must live in a way that is worthy of the respect due the position he holds.

Not double-tongued. A deacon shouldn't say one thing to one person and another thing to another person. He needs to hear and acknowledge various perspectives but not be double-tongued. A deacon needs to always speak the truth in all situations. The truth will always stand.

Not given to much wine. Anabaptists have taken a stand against the intake of wine, but two principles apply here that we shouldn't overlook. The first principle, found in 1 Thessalonians 5:22, is to refrain from any appearance of evil. The deacon should be concerned that all he does has the appearance of righteousness. The second principle is temperance. While the Bible does say that a little wine can be used for the stomach's sake, obviously too much is not good for the body. The deacon should be known for his temperance in all areas of life.

Not greedy of filthy lucre. This is speaking of a greed for material things or things for fleshly desires. A deacon's life should manifest contentment. Leaders are in a position of

influence—the choices they make regarding purchases and their standard of living will affect what is normal for the congregation. If a leader expresses greed in his life, how can he be trusted to handle the church's money and be an example to those following?

Hold to the faith in a pure conscience. The deacon must have a free conscience before God and man. His choices, actions, and words must be pure and holy. Only then will he be able to effectively work with troubled people, helping them make right choices in spite of the circumstances they find themselves in.

Must be proved. A deacon should not be someone that has recently come to the faith. Rather, he must be someone who has proven himself faithful in the Christian life, particularly in the characteristics listed in the Bible for deacon. A church must remember this when seeking God's will for choosing a brother to serve as deacon.

Blameless. Is it possible for someone outside of Jesus to be blameless? A deacon is human and will make mistakes. The congregation should understand that their deacon will not be perfect. However, if a deacon makes a mistake, he should quickly acknowledge and correct it. Unfortunately, a deacon may at times have false accusations brought against him, but if he has a pure conscience, he will be found blameless in his conversation and walk of life.

The Deacon's Example of Service

Jesus Christ is our greatest example of one who serves. The love He had for His Father in heaven, as well as His compassion for those around Him, motivated Him to serve. His work of service culminated at Calvary when He gave His very life for mankind. He was misunderstood and rejected by His own people, yet He served faithfully. Deacons should serve with the mind of Christ and in humility as He did.

To gain the mind of Christ and humility we must:

1. Choose to understand and adopt Jesus' way of thinking.
2. Make His values and attitudes our own.
3. Allow His ways and how He would do things to affect our actions.
4. Follow His example of praying earnestly.
5. Adopt His view of Himself as a servant.

Jesus is our example of humble leadership. He calls us to fulfill His work and enables us to do it. We are merely God's vessels doing God's work to accomplish His purposes.

The Deacon's Work

The deacon has a variety of responsibilities.

Support and assist the bishop or elder in his

administration. A deacon who strongly supports the bishop will help lighten the bishop's load. A deacon who does not pull alongside the bishop can hinder his work and make it hard for the bishop to fulfill his responsibilities. A supportive deacon can help make an effective bishop.

One way of assisting the bishop and congregation in practicing the ordinances is having things ready and in order for baptism and communion. For baptism, this may mean preparing for the service and having the water ready. For communion, it could be preparing the table or having the washtubs prepared for foot washing.

Be a ministerial team player. Along with supporting the bishop, the deacon must be a team player with the rest of the ministerial team. Picture with me Aaron and Hur in Exodus 17 who held up Moses' hands. Israel was fighting the enemy, and as long as Moses kept his hands up, Israel was victorious. As soon as his hands went down, the enemy was victorious. Aaron and Hur holding up Moses' arms is a good picture of supporting one another. They were all team players. One didn't argue or get upset that his role wasn't as important as the other. Rather, the battle was won because the three of them each filled their place. Are we willing to stand by our brother or our ministerial team and lift up their arms so that the church can be victorious? Or are we causing division in the congregation because we aren't willing to stand beside our brother and support him?

Help restore and preserve peace. The deacons ordained in Acts 6 helped to settle a dispute between the Grecians and the Hebrews. Historically in the Anabaptist churches, the deacon was also responsible to help restore and preserve peace within the congregation. The deacon isn't alone in this work, but often if there is conflict within the church, the deacon is the one who is responsible to look into it and find out the facts.

Meet the needs of the congregation. Anywhere you find a group of people, you will also find spiritual, emotional, physical, or financial needs. The deacon should be available and flexible in his schedule to assist wherever needed. It takes a deacon who is well connected to his congregation to be able to sense when there are needs. Some members will be quick to let the deacon know when they have a need, and others will suffer in silence. The deacon needs to always have his ears open and be sensitive to the needs that may not be so obvious.

Be accountable and reliable in handling money given in offerings or the alms funds. The deacon must give account of the funds that come in. A bishop once told me of the time a deacon used the church money to buy steers since the church didn't need the money at the time. He then sold the steers

and put the money back in the church fund. This type of thing should never happen. Deacons need to keep the line between personal and church funds clearly separated and never start using church money for personal needs, even in a pinch.

Deacons must do all things above reproach. In business, even when you have trustworthy people working for you, it's good to have accountability and safety nets in place to help keep honest people honest. The same applies to deacon work. Even though the deacon is trustworthy, there should be levels of accountability to help keep him honest. A deacon should never do anything (even though it may not be wrong) that is questionable or that could lead him to do something later that he never thought he would do. There must be complete honesty in what the church money is being used for.

Keep accurate records that are easy to follow. In our group, we assign two brethren to look over the church's checkbook and the deacon's books and audit them every year to make sure everything is right. These two brothers will then give a report of what they found to the congregation. It will make things a lot easier with a lot fewer questions if the deacon has a clear checkbook and clear records for others to look over.

The Deacon's Humanity

We live in a culture that is fascinated by self. For many people, life is all about satisfying their selfish desires. Philippians 2:3 tells us to esteem others better than ourselves. A deacon must lay down self to be an effective deacon. How he views himself in relation to others will affect his work. This means being open and humble about his humanity.

An open and humble deacon admits when he doesn't have an immediate answer when trying to help in a needy situation or help a brother who calls with hard questions. Rather, he gives assurance that the needs and questions are important. He promises to look into things and get

back to the person. And then, of course, he needs to follow through on his promise. When a deacon tries to cover up his ignorance by giving an answer he doesn't have, it will often get him in a bind later on.

A humble deacon also admits to struggles. All deacons struggle at times with their God-given role. When the load gets heavy, a deacon may feel like resenting God for putting him in this role. However, we must never start down the path of resenting God. When we begin to resent God, we begin to question the sovereignty of God. If a deacon feels discouraged or overwhelmed with his load, he should talk to his fellow ministry so they can support him in his work and help him work through it.

Deacons are human like everyone else and don't need to hide their emotions. You might feel like you are always giving and pouring out. Don't be ashamed to admit when you feel drained and need others to pour encouragement into you. We all need people to speak into our lives and encourage us.

Conclusion

Fulfilling the office of a deacon can be a joyous, fulfilling experience. I have enjoyed being a deacon, mainly because I was called of God to do this work. The deacon's office is a way of life, and similar to what Paul said at the end of his life, the deacon's reward is yet to come:

"For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8). 

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Annual Strategic Plan

Adapted from a presentation given by Greg Wolf at an AF business seminar

Planning for a business endeavor is challenging, because “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). It can be tempting to say, “Well, we just want to trust the Lord.” But our intent in business planning is to commit our trust in the Lord while tangibly planning.¹ Following are some specific scriptural teachings that support the practice of planning.

Submissively seeking God’s will. In planning, we’re not telling the Lord what our lives should be in the future. We’re submissively seeking His will. The Scripture says:

“Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, **If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that**” (James 4:13–15).

The most important lesson here is that God is sovereign. He knows our future, and we don’t; we desire His will, not our own. Secondly, our lives are like a vapor, both fleeting and passing. And yet, even as we acknowledge that our lives are fragile and God is sovereign, it can be an act of faith to plan our business endeavors.

Intentionally planning future outcomes. Luke 14:28–32 talks about sitting down and counting the cost for a project or endeavor. The context is being willing to sacrifice everything to follow Jesus, but Jesus uses illustrations from construction and warfare: Who would launch into building a tower or fighting a war without first planning whether sufficient resources are on hand? The same is true in planning future outcomes in our business—we should determine whether we have enough resources to finish what we started. Or will our endeavors fail because we ran out of resources along the way?

Humbly involving others. The business planning process is always collaborative. Of course someone must lead the process, and yet there are good reasons to seek and honor the input of others, including family members. Proverbs 15:22 says, “Without counsel purposes are disappointed:

but in the multitude of counsellors they are established.” Involving others enhances the sense of unity and improves the odds that the plan will be successfully lived out.

A wise man once said, “In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Proverbs 3:6). We seek to wisely acknowledge the Lord and His direction, even as we follow the path of business before us.

The Annual Strategic Plan

A financial consultant I once learned from used to say, “You have to understand that a business is a living, breathing entity, which means you have to take it by the neck and tell it where it’s going.” While a rather rough analogy, what he meant to say was a business owner cannot allow himself to be passively dragged along with his business. Rather, an owner must be intentional and purposeful in telling the business where it’s going to go. One way to do this is by having a good annual strategic plan.

Three aspects of the business planning process are nested within one another: The action plan unfolds quarter-by-quarter throughout the year and is nested within the annual strategic plan, which is nested within the long-term strategy (3–5 year focus). All aspects of the business planning process should harmonize with each other. In other words, what you plan on a daily or weekly basis should be consistent with the bird’s-eye view represented by your long-term strategy.

This article focuses on the annual strategic plan, which goes through the planning process every year. Even nature around us follows an annual cycle with quarterly seasons—spring, summer, fall, and winter. The annual cycle of business also has its seasons—quarters, weeks, days, and even moments.

Annual strategic planning is most valuable after long-term planning is complete. Long-term strategy focuses on such things as company culture and market strategy; the annual plan then builds on that. Annual planning involves three steps: developing an annual strategy, documenting the annual plans, and then sharing the plan.

Developing an Annual Strategy

The first step in annual planning is developing a strategy for the year. What are the key things you intend to do this year?

¹ Proverbs 14:15 “The simple believeth every word: but the prudent man looketh well to his going.”

What is going to shape your business in the year ahead? What are the most valuable areas of the business in which to invest time and dollars?

Specific annual plans must be shaped by the key strategies a business has chosen for the year. To quote from AF business advisor Leonard Meador, “A strategic plan has no fuse longer than twelve months.” The most common tool for identifying and clarifying these areas is **SWOT analysis**, which stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. SWOT analysis is a tool that helps you identify the most important strategies you should be focused on in the next year.

A SWOT analysis usually involves a guided discussion with a group of people. The goal is to accurately assess the situation the company is in.

First identify strengths and weaknesses, which are *internal* and *present* factors. In other words, this is not an aspirational exercise, but an honest assessment of where you are today. Identify the areas inside of your company that you consider to be strong *today*. At the same time, if you’re honest with yourself, there are areas inside of your company that are weak *today*. Are you weak in your management of people? Does the company have a heavy debt load? How about customer enthusiasm?

This is not an easy process. For example, in our food store, customers come up to us and ask, “When are you going to add on?” It can feel a little flattering. After all, isn’t that kind of a good sign? We’re busy and appreciate the fact that we look busy. But then we realize—maybe that’s not really a strength. Maybe there’s a bottleneck at the deli counter or people waiting to check out. Perhaps this customer feedback is actually identifying a weakness. So doing a SWOT analysis in a group setting helps to identify and document what are strengths and what really are weaknesses.

Next look at opportunities and threats, which are opposite of strengths and weaknesses. Opportunities and threats are *external* to your business and *future-oriented*. As you look outside of your business, what represents opportunity? And what are things that threaten?

A threat to a longstanding and successful business could be that its primary market is drying up. Other competitors might be going out of business, and while that could sound like a good thing, it’s a bad sign when the entire market is shrinking. Why is the market shrinking, and why are customers going away? Keep in mind that some things can represent both an opportunity and a threat.

Once you have identified your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, consider the following questions to guide what you would like to do about them:

- How do we preserve, protect, or enhance our strengths?

- How do we mitigate or strengthen our weaknesses?
- How do we capitalize upon our opportunities?
- How do we protect ourselves from the threats?

For example, there might be ten different things you could do to correct a weakness in your Human Resources program and the care of your employees. Your turnover is extremely high, and everyone knows it. So you can ask, is it a problem with our culture? Are we too critical of each other? Have we not shared our company goals and vision with our employees? Arrive at a consensus about what is happening and then brainstorm strategic ideas to improve your business. At this point, there are no costs associated with these ideas, so list as many as the team can possibly come up with that are worth considering for the company.

The next step in developing an annual plan involves identifying a few key strategies for the company for the year ahead. Choose strategies that will have the most value to the company in the year ahead. These key strategies will identify what areas your company will focus on and whether your company has enough resources to succeed.

Typically, it’s wise to choose a handful of key strategies (up to five) to focus on. Relating to a problem with Human Resources, for example, could be as simple as developing an employee manual in the next year. Other key strategies will address other themes that emerged from the SWOT analysis. Perhaps it is time to create a sales team, or maybe the company balance sheet needs to be refinanced.

In summary, crafting an annual strategy involves comprehensively assessing the situation the company is in, brainstorming improvement ideas for the year ahead, and then choosing and documenting a handful of ideas that have the highest value and match the resources of the company. Ideas not utilized this year should be retained, added to the SWOT analysis the following year, and possibly chosen to be utilized then.

Documenting Annual Plans

We are now ready to begin documenting the nuts and bolts of our annual plan; this is what many people think of as the actual “business plan.” After the consideration of the company’s historical trends and the choosing of key strategies for the year, five specific areas of business can now be developed: people, finance, operations, marketing, and sales. Each of these five key business areas merit an annual plan.

In our family’s business, we are planning a remodel project, which is kind of a big deal for us. It will change our operations and financial picture. It will change the way we care for

Continued on page 12 »

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Stewardship Connections ▪ Volume 14, Issue 2 ▪ May 2021 ▪ A quarterly publication of Anabaptist Financial

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« Continued from page 11 *Annual Strategic Plan* »

customers, organize our products, and set up the way people flow through our store. It might also change our ordering process. Most exciting for us, it will change the way people view our store as they drive past. In other words, we have chosen to implement an idea that we have carried along for years. Now that we have chosen to make it a key strategy for our year, it will influence all of our specific annual plans.

Sharing the Plan

The final step in developing an annual strategic plan relates to some verses in Proverbs: “in the multitude of counsellors there is safety” and “in the multitude of counsellors [purposes] are established” (Proverbs 11:14, 15:22). Sharing the plan is vitally important to keeping the plan alive.

Sharing the plan is a leadership responsibility. You should share your business plan with shareholders, lenders, family, extended family, employees, management, and even church people as it relates to accountability in the local congregation. I even know of business owners who shared their planning ideas with neighbors.

You might choose to share only certain components with certain people; there’s no law that says you can’t be selective about what you share with whom. Nevertheless, share the business plan with others, particularly those who are involved in the planning and those who will be involved in implementing it.

It’s important that our plan is not an intellectual document to be placed on a shelf. Rather, we seek for it to be connected to the hearts of our people. If you want a business plan with a heartbeat, one that touches closely the very life of your business, make sure that those who care about the business are intimately aware of the plan.

We want to walk with vision for the future, even with that eye of faith and with intention that is grounded in what we believe and what we aspire our businesses to represent. 

Greg Wolf is the Content Developer for AF’s workshop curriculum and business articles. This article is one of the topics covered at our Business Planning Workshop, along with the topics of long-term strategy, action plans, budgeting, financial ratios, and more.