Women in the Diaconal Ministry

A Statement by the Session
of Alexandria Presbyterian Church
23 April 2023

2022 was a year of blessing for Alexandria Presbyterian Church. God did marvelous things in the midst of our church family: New believers professed faith; the church moved its home to our first-ever owned building; and ministry renewal was strengthened across the church's many ministries in the wake of the difficult COVID-19 season. The Diaconate, too, was blessed, in particular with a strengthened spirit of unity and Gospel partnership prevailing among Deacons.

The Deacon's ministry is one of "sympathy and service." [Book of Church Order (BCO) 9-1] The focus is on mercy and administration. The Deacons' ministry includes the "duty to develop the grace of liberality in the members of the church." [BCO 9-2] Relative to this ministry, 2022 was a unique year for APC's Deacons – an important inflection point. It was the first year in nearly two decades the Diaconate did not have the benefit of a full-time pastor or director of mercy assigned to lead and serve with them. Session and the Diaconate were intentional in prayer about the changing ministry model.

During the year, a conviction arose for some officers that APC's diaconal ministry had opportunities before it. In particular, the questions arose: In our current diaconal model, are we *fully* inviting our sisters in Christ into the ministry of mercy and administration (beyond what had been the service of the Mercy Committee); and is our current diaconal model *fully* ministering to our sisters?

Multiple rounds of discussion and seasons of prayer were held at the Session table, at the Diaconate, at discussions open to both groups and at joint meetings of both groups to address the questions of whether and how women could be further and formally invited into APC's diaconal ministry and how that could impact our ministry to women.

As in all matters, the foundational principle is consistency with Scripture. The Officers also acknowledged the great importance of the rules and regulations of the Presbyterian Church In America (PCA) in particular and denominational respect in general. For study, the Elders and Deacons were provided with the Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Women Serving in the Ministry of the Church to the 45th General Assembly of the PCA (2017) (With Recommendations as Amended and Adopted by the 45th GA)("Ad Interim Committee Report"), as well as several other materials relating to women in ministry. Other PCA church models that formally incorporate women into diaconal ministry were also examined.

The below conclusions reflect the considered sense of Session that resulted from the inquiry:

1. The General

1.1 Complementarity. We, along with The Presbyterian Church in America, are joyfully and confessionally committed to the Bible's teaching on the complementarity of men and

women. We believe with our denomination that the teaching is true, good, and beautiful. We affirm the full dignity of men and women as created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-28). We also humbly and happily embrace Scripture's clear teaching that the eldership is an office of authority and as such is to be composed of qualified men (1 Tim. 2:12; 3:1-7; 5:17), who are entrusted by Christ with the ministry of the authoritative teaching and ruling of the church for the building up of the whole body (Eph. 4:11-13). In marriage, this mutually-edifying complementarity is displayed when a Christian husband expresses his responsibility of headship in sacrificial love to his wife (Eph. 5:23-31) and when a Christian wife welcomes her husband's headship with respect (Eph. 5:22-24, 33). [*See Ad Interim Committee Report, Chapter 1*, p. 1]

1.2 Interdependence. Male and female interdependence is a key element of the structure of the local church, for "in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God" (1 Cor. 11:11-12). [*See Ad Interim Committee Report,* p. 53]

1.3 Authority. The office of Elder is a spiritual office of authority as overseer in the church (1 Tim. 2:12-3:1). [*See* BCO 7-2]

1.4 Sympathy and Service. In contrast, the office of Deacon is a spiritual office of "sympathy and service," [BCO 9-1] not of rule, in which the Deacon's authority is to be in "charge of the tables" to care for widows and the neglected (Acts 6:3). [*See* BCO 7-2 ("The office of deacon is not one of rule, but rather of service both to the physical and spiritual needs of the people.")] Deacons accordingly serve under the supervision and authority of the Session. [BCO 9-2] BCO Chapter 24 provides within the PCA for the ordination of Deacons, consistent with the PCA's classification that Deacon is an "ordinary and perpetual office in the Church" and the PCA's Doctrine of Ordination. [*See* BCO 17-1 ("Those who have been called to office in the Church are to be inducted by the ordination of a court.")] The offices of the church are open to men only. [*See* BCO 7-2] Session, when it is expedient, may select and appoint godly men and women of the congregation to assist the deacons in their ministry. [*See* BCO 9-7]

1.5 Service for all. We believe that all Christians are called to show mercy and help others and the church herself with tangible needs. The serving work of the church includes:

- 1.5.1 Works of mercy: Helping the poor – deeds of mercy to the needy, the unemployed, the sick and/or the elderly.
- 1.5.2 Works of administration: Stewardship of funds and property – caring for the physical property of the church and oversight of funds to be given to those in need.
- 1.5.3 Works of counsel and ministry assistance: Ministry assistants, counselors, etc. – helping the Elders in various tasks in areas of discipline, discipleship and counsel to those who are needy and troubled, administrative support for pastoral ministry, and providing input into policy formation.

1.6 Bearing in mind the overall goals of the church as the body of Christ, we are to encourage the exercise and growth of spiritual gifts among both men and women, for the edification of the body.

1.7 Finally, we observe that the Recommendation of the Ad Interim Committee as Adopted by the 45th General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in America formally establishes the right of sessions and presbyteries to establish the position of commissioned church worker within the PCA for qualified and gifted non-ordained men and women and indeed recommends they do so. [*See Ad Interim Committee Report*, *Recommendation #7*, p. 62]

2. The Particular

2.1 The above-described 2022 discussions by APC's officers identified four opportunities for advancing the church's diaconal ministry by more formally and fully inviting women to assist the Diaconate, beyond the existing mode of partnership, which is the Mercy Committee. More formally and fully inviting women to assist the Diaconate, including through formal training, Sessional selection, and Sessional appointment is expected to:

- 2.1.1 More broadly and deeply engage women at APC in the work of mercy and administration ministries than is even currently enjoyed (***Engagement***).
- 2.1.2 More effectively minister to women, especially on sex-sensitive or -vulnerable subjects, by having women in a formal, Session-appointed role with the mercy ministry (***Ministry to women***).
- 2.1.3 Further leverage the Deacons' work through the extended arms and legs that additional non-ordained members of the church offer (***Leverage***).
  - 2.1.3.1 When Session-appointed, non-ordained members can play *leading* roles with mercy partners, at different seasons of their life journey, they can free up Deacon time, allowing the Deacons to cover a broader field of service.
- 2.1.4 Recognize and acknowledge that there are members who believe APC does not fully permit all that Scripture authorizes, relative to women's role in ministry (***Women's role in Ministry***).
  - 2.1.4.1 It is APC's guiding principle not to prohibit what Scripture permits; nor to permit what Scripture prohibits. There is an opportunity to address APC policy in regards to women in the diaconal ministry to avoid instances of women not being fully invited into a permissible ministry space.

2.2 Given the circumstances of APC's covenantal, congregational life, and the opportunities identified above; and in order that the Deacons would most effectively advance their duty to develop the grace of liberality in the members of the church, it is wise and good for APC in particular to heed the Recommendation of the Ad Interim Committee Report and to see to it that pursuant to BCO 9-7 our "session … select[s] and appoint[s] godly women and men of the congregation to assist the ordained diaconate." [*See Ad Interim Committee Report, Recommendation #5*, p. 61]

2.3 Considering the theology, wisdom, and practice of inviting women to serve in the church's diaconal ministry, it is believed non-ordained appointment of Deaconesses is the appropriate mechanism for the appointment considered above.

2.4 APC's Session will take responsibility for developing and implementing a published process for its maintenance of the category of appointed, non-ordained Deaconesses, and for the effective integration of those Deaconesses into the Diaconate as they serve alongside the ordained Deacons and assist them in their work.

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