

Continuing the Conversation

WOMEN SERVING AS DEACONS

Frequently Asked Questions

Where are we in the process? What has been decided and what has not been decided?

In fall 2017, after nearly 18 months of prayer and intensive study, the elders unanimously affirmed that the Bible encourages women to serve in the role of deacon. They also voted to begin the conversation with the congregation and take steps to explore when and how we might make this change. We began communicating the elder's decision at the September 2017 Annual Meeting and assembled the Women as Deacons Task Force (WAD). In winter of 2018, the senior adult bible study spent time studying this topic. In spring 2018, Jim Samra led three intensive and interactive teaching sessions on the theology and history of women as deacons. This website is also part of WAD's effort to engage as many people as possible in this conversation.

As of August 2018, the elders have only decided that the Bible affirms the role of deacon is open to women, and would like to begin the process necessary to allow for their inclusion on the deacon board. Ultimately, moving this direction requires a change to Calvary's constitution. Currently, the constitution requires all deacon candidates to be men so the change would expand the wording to include women. Any change to the constitution requires a 2/3 majority vote of active members present at a congregational meeting or voting by absentee ballot. Currently, we are pursuing this constitutional change, with a goal of holding a special meeting and congregational vote in October/November 2018.

Has this topic just come up recently? How long have we been considering this as a church?

This topic has been under discussion at Calvary for more than 25 years. Early conversations date back to 1990, under the leadership of Ed Dobson, who felt convinced that the Bible does indeed allow women to serve in the office of deacon. At that time, a Women's Ministry Task Force was also established to explore the topic of women in leadership generally at Calvary Church. Many important changes have happened since these initial efforts—the Women's Ministry Department, Women's Leadership Development Forum (WLDF), women serving in leadership capacities, and so much more. The elder's position paper developed as a result of those efforts can be found [here](#).

If we've been discussing this for so long, why haven't we made this change earlier?

The elders believe firmly, and always have, the Bible teaches that final spiritual authority and oversight of the church is the responsibility of the biblical office of elder. In the early 1990s when the idea of women serving as deacons was originally discussed, our Board was structured in an equal-oversight capacity (a so-called "bicameral" board). Both elders and deacons served together as the Board of Calvary Church responsible for the total oversight of the church, in equal capacity, while serving different functions. Since both elders and deacons were on equal footing, allowing women to serve in the office of deacon would constitute a violation of the biblical position on spiritual leadership.

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In 2010, the Calvary Constitution was changed to better reflect the Biblical model prescribed for local church leadership: elders serving as the leaders and overseers of the church, with final spiritual authority; and deacons operating under the authority and oversight of the elders to serve and help with the implementation of the church's programs and ministries. Today, ultimate spiritual authority and leadership resides with the elders, and the deacon board exists to support the elders by carrying out and overseeing administrative and serving functions within the church. All decisions related to the spiritual direction and care of the congregation are the responsibility of the elders.

Although our new governance structure allows for the possibility of women serving in the office of deacon, our constitution does not, as it still specifies this office to be reserved for men. Until recently, Calvary's leadership and board have not felt led to pursue the topic of women serving as deacons. Today, we do feel led by God to pursue this direction.

Why are we considering this direction, and why now?

There are three principle reasons why we are considering women for the office of deacon.

First, and most importantly, the elders are pursuing this direction because they feel led by God to do so, and believe the Bible encourages having women serve in the office of deacon. In 2015, Jim Samra felt God's leading to research this subject. His position paper was part of the initial discussions with the Elders. In 2016, he taught on Romans 16, and dealt with the subject of Phoebe, who was referred to by the Apostle Paul as a deacon of the church at Cenchraea. Then, he and the elders labored in prayer and study over this subject and ultimately came to the decision to pursue opening the office of deacon to women. This history, and the greater history of Calvary Church on the subject of women in ministry and women as deacons, can be heard in the Women as Deacons teaching session.

The second reason to pursue this direction is the elders believe God is calling Calvary Church, as part of our vision for Grace Beyond, to serve more people and serve them better, through the gifts, talents, resources and relationships in our congregation. Today, nearly two-thirds of our benevolence ministry efforts involve working with women, and yet those efforts are overseen and advised by male deacons. Additionally, our widow's ministry is growing but has far greater potential that the elder's believe would be better served by having female deacons. Many ministries would benefit from the support, involvement, counsel, and help of formalized servant-leaders, the biblical role of deacons. In a sense, this expanded servant-leader capacity is at the heart of our vision for Grace Beyond.

The third reason is God has been moving among us and raising up a generation of women who are already servant-leaders in various capacities. We can see this in our thriving Women's Ministry programs, our WLDF programming, our prayer ministry, and in many ministry areas within our church. We believe God has been preparing us as a body to acknowledge the servant-leadership and contributions many women are already making and to formalize opportunities for them to participate in helping guide, support and accomplish the work God has called us to do.

Does the Bible prohibit women serving in leadership roles?

In both the Old Testament and New Testament, women serve in important and significant leadership roles. The Bible does reserve one office specifically for male leadership. At Calvary Church, we believe this relates to the office of elder and position of senior pastor, who is a member of the elder board.

What is the role of elder at Calvary Church?

We believe the bible outlines the responsibilities of elders to include the role of shepherd, overseer and spiritual leader for the church. These responsibilities are outlined in several New Testament passages. Their primary role is to give “attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). More specific responsibilities found in scripture include the responsibility to lead the church through preaching and teaching (I Tim. 5:17). Elders protect the church from false teachers (Titus 1:9). The elders pray for healing for the sick (James 5:13-16). The elders discuss doctrinal issues and provide spiritual direction for the church (Acts 15:6). Elders practice hospitality (Titus 1:8).

At Calvary Church this also includes affirming pastoral staff appointments and handling church discipline issues.

What is the role of deacon at Calvary Church?

We believe the bible also outlines the role of deacon. The word for deacons means “servant” and this gives the general sense of what deacons do in the church. The only passage that specifically gives deacon qualifications is I Timothy 3:8-13. These are moral qualifications and the passage does not outline specific duties, allowing individual churches to determine their specific responsibilities. However, based on the pattern established in Acts 6, deacons are servants who assist the elders to accomplish the tasks outlined by the elders.

At Calvary Church this includes overseeing the financial needs of the church, caring for the facilities, overseeing benevolence, providing pastoral care assistance when needed and other tasks outlined by the elders.

Does the Bible encourage women to serve as deacons?

Yes, we believe it does. Our elders, including Pastor Samra, are convinced that the apostle Paul’s discussion of Phoebe in Romans 16 indicates that she held the office of deacon for church in Cenchraea, rather than (merely) being referred to as a servant of Christ. Additionally, the elders believe I Timothy 3, which speaks about the office of deacon, supports the notion that women as well as men can serve in the office of deacon. A rigorous study of the passages, support from commentaries, as well as the evidence from church history, has led our leadership to be convinced that the Bible does indeed encourage having women serve in the office of deacon (or deaconess, as they were sometimes later referred to). For a full discussion of these passages, along with the theology and history surrounding this topic, see Jim’s teaching on Romans 16 from Spring of 2017 (<http://calvarygr.org/sermons-resources/sermon-detail/phoebe-and-women-in-ministry/>), as well as the recent teaching event on Women as Deacons in spring 2018 (calvarygr.org/womenas-deacons).

What other evidence do we have that the Bible encouraged having women as Deacons?

As Jim recounted in his teaching series this Spring, there are multiple external sources outside of the Bible who supported women serving as deacons, including Origen, John Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrus, Pliny the Younger, Alexander of Clement, Epiphanius of Salamis, and others. The fact that women served as deacons is noticed and attested to by early historians is powerful evidence that the Bible does indeed support having women in the office of deacon. In other words, one would expect that early church leaders would seek to follow, very closely, the teachings of Paul as they were handed down; and so, in that sense, seeing evidence of women actually serving as deacons provides strong support for the fact that this is indeed what Paul meant to teach.

A more in-depth discussion of the historical evidence and theological perspectives throughout church history is part of the 2018 teaching series.

Will women ever be able to be elders? Will we consider this in the future?

The elders believe and maintain the Bible clearly teaches that final spiritual authority is the responsibility of the elders, or overseers, which is reserved for male leadership within the church. We have no leading from God and no sense from the Scriptures that women are to function in the role of elder at Calvary Church. In fact, our study of 1 Timothy 3 has strengthened the position that the Bible limits the role of elder to men. The church is only deciding whether to allow women to act as servant-leaders in the office of deacon.

Are we sure we're not merely responding to culture?

We have, and always will, be guided by God's word as the final authority for Calvary Church. If anything this decision might be viewed by the culture around us as *not* progressive, because by making the decision to allow women to serve as deacons and *not* elders, we are still taking a very conservative stand on spiritual leadership in the church.

Is this just a slippery slope toward things that the Bible does not allow?

As Jim pointed out in his teaching this spring, the "slippery slope" only occurs when someone is acting in disobedience to God, not when acting in obedience to God's teaching and leading. In this case, with this direction we're pursuing, we are seeking to align ourselves *even more* to the biblical model, and also to respond in obedience to what we believe God is calling us to do. We believe there is no better and safer place to be than in the center of God's will and seeking to follow his teaching.

Would they be called women deacons or deaconesses? Does it matter?

To be candid, we haven't decided exactly what the title of women serving in the role of deacon will be. There are pros and cons to each direction. At this time, we are simply requesting the congregation vote on whether to change the constitution to allow for women to serve in this office, but not specify whether they'll be called a deacon or deaconess. Once the decision has been made regarding the structure of the deacon board, there are many issues that will need to be considered. That said, the elders welcome your input on issues such as the titles of male and female deacons.

How will this work? How many women deacons might we have, how will they be selected, and what will be the mix of men vs. women?

The only *real* change to the constitution is that certain wording needs to be changed, such as "choosing men" to "choosing men and/or women." The constitution also specifies "there will not be less than twelve" deacons but does not say how many can be on it, nor does it say anything about the composition of the deacon board. The elders are evaluating and may be piloting various approaches going forward. One would be to simply keep the number of deacons on the deacon board the same, and merely select and choose from a group of men and women to serve in those roles. In that sense, we could simply decide to "leave it up to God" to see which stones get pulled from the bag, as we cast lots for deacons, whether male or female, and trust God has selected the composition of the deacon board in his providence.

The only thing the elders are asking the congregation to consider is a change that would *allow for the possibility* of women serving in the office of deacon. Certain details on size, structure and composition are matters that can be worked out over time, and may need to change to better reflect the needs for servant-leaders. These policy details do not need to be codified in the constitution.

What are the next steps?

In fall 2018, the elders will be providing additional resources on the Women as Deacons website and organizing ways of reaching out to our congregation. The elders are also considering having an additional town hall meeting with Q&A and facilitated discussion to fully engage the church family. The elders are also drafting proposed changes to our constitution.

Ultimately, these efforts are leading up to a special congregational meeting and a vote on changes to the constitution that will likely take place in October/November 2018.

Who is on the Women as Deacons Task Force (WAD)?

The following people have been faithfully serving on WAD, helping to plan and execute communication related to this direction to the congregation, organize the Spring 2018 teaching sessions, engage congregants and offer input to the elders:

Task Force Members: *Patty McGinnis, Arika Roelofs, Dale McNinch, Darla Van Dyke, Allen VanHaitsma, Jackie Rice, Steve Doren, Lisa Samra, Bob Bass* and Scott Bowman.**

*Bob Bass (former elder and deacon) and Scott Bowman (current deacon) are serving as co-chairs.

How can we become more involved in this topic? What should we do next?

First and foremost, pray. The elder board will be continuing to pray, trying to gain clarity on when and how this change might be implemented. They currently have weekly special prayer meetings to seek the Lord's direction and pray for unity and grace as we move forward. The deacon board is also engaged in prayer and discussion of this topic.

The elders would like to ask you to also be in prayer about this issue. Pray for God's leading. Pray that he would move in all of our hearts on this issue. Pray for wisdom for both boards as we seek God for timing and implementation details. And, pray for unity in the Spirit, among all of us.

Secondly, please review the materials on the Women as Deacons website (calvarygr.org/womenasdeacons). Carefully consider the information, and the heart and motives you hear from our leadership as they seek to help us conform even more fully to the Biblical model and serve God even more effectively at Calvary. Share these with your friends and family, who may also need to hear and process through this information.

Finally, if you have any questions or comments that weren't addressed, or if you would like to talk with anyone about this further, please contact the elders at elders@calvarygr.org.