

The Diaconal Calling: Heritage, Service, and the Work of Renewal

From the beginning of the church, deacons have existed not to manage an institution, but to embody a calling. The word *diakonos*—servant—does not describe a role that can be switched on or off. It names a vocation rooted in faith, humility, and love for the body of Christ. When the early church named its first deacons, it did so not to create a tier of leadership, but to ensure that care, justice, and community were not lost as the church grew. Deacons were set apart so that no one would be overlooked, so that the daily work of mercy and stewardship would remain central, and so that the church’s witness would be credible because it was compassionate.

That understanding has shaped Baptist life for generations. In Baptist churches, deacons have never been meant to function as a board of directors or a holding pen for future leaders. They are called from among the congregation to model faithfulness, generosity, presence, and service. They are meant to be visible reminders of what it looks like to live the Christian life with intention—people who show up, who listen well, who notice who is missing, and who quietly tend to the relationships and resources that allow ministry to flourish.

When we remember that heritage, one phrase begins to sound increasingly out of place: *active and inactive* deacons.

That language suggests that the diaconate is a status rather than a calling—something you either are “doing” or not doing at a given moment. But the church has never understood ordination or commissioning that way. We do not speak of “inactive” pastors or “inactive” Christians. A deacon does not cease to be a deacon because a season of life limits their capacity, nor does one suddenly become more “real” as a deacon because they are assigned to a panel. The calling itself is enduring, even as the form of service changes over time.

Referring to deacons as active or inactive unintentionally diminishes the depth of the role. It turns vocation into workload and faithfulness into availability. Worse, it implies that some deacons are somehow less faithful or less committed than others, when in reality the difference is usually about structure, expectations, or season—not devotion. A healthier



and more faithful approach is to speak of *how* deacons are serving, not *whether* they count.

This is where the current moment matters.

The proposed RA/GA framework does not create “better” deacons or “lesser” ones. Instead, it names two complementary expressions of the same diaconal calling: **Relational Action** and **Governance Action**. One focuses on the heart work of the church—welcome, care, formation, worship, mission. The other focuses on the housework of the church—stewardship, planning, staff partnership, facilities, communications, and organizational health. These are not hierarchies. They are two necessary forms of service, each essential to the church’s life.

What makes these names especially powerful is that they are not new inventions. They deliberately echo a deep and beloved strand of Baptist formation: **Royal Ambassadors** and **Girls’ Auxiliary / Girls in Action**. For many in our congregation, those programs were the first places we learned that faith was meant to be lived, not merely believed. We learned to pray, to give, to serve, to notice need beyond ourselves. We learned that following Christ meant showing up—with our hands, our time, and our hearts.

By reclaiming the language of RA and GA, the church is not indulging nostalgia. It is reminding us of something we already know in our bones: leadership in the church is service, and service is learned, practiced, and renewed over time. The RA/GA structure draws a straight line from childhood formation to adult vocation. It says that what we were taught as children—to serve, to care, to be generous—is still what the church needs most from its leaders today.

Just as important, this structure offers something we desperately need in this season: **recommitment and renewal**.

For years, the church has asked too much of too many, in too many rooms, across too many committees. The result has not been deeper faithfulness, but fatigue. The new model does not ask deacons to do less because service matters less; it asks them to serve more faithfully by aligning work with calling, gifts, and capacity. By focusing leadership in clear, meaningful lanes, the church creates space for joy, creativity, and sustainability—conditions under which real ministry can thrive.

This is not a departure from our heritage. It is a return to it.

At its best, the diaconate has always been about modeling a way of life for the congregation—a life of attentiveness, generosity, and shared responsibility. The RA/GA framework honors that tradition by refusing to reduce deacons to a roster of tasks or a

calendar of meetings. Instead, it invites deacons to reclaim their identity as servants first, leaders second, and committee members last.

In a moment of pastoral transition and congregational discernment, that witness matters. A renewed diaconate—clearly called, thoughtfully structured, and deeply rooted in our shared story—offers a powerful gift to the church: stability without rigidity, leadership without hierarchy, and service without burnout.

The calling of deacons has always been about more than filling roles. It is about forming people who remind the church who it is and whose it is. By letting go of unhelpful labels, reclaiming our language, and grounding our structure in both Scripture and story, we take a faithful step toward the renewal God is already inviting us to embrace.

This is part of a series of four essays on the Simplify to Strengthen leadership proposal.