

**Why Women Deacons?
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For the first time in our long and rich history, the members of Midway Baptist Church on Sunday morning, October 14, 2001 duly elected two women to serve the congregation as deacons. The purpose of this report is to help guide our church through this time with fairness, sensitivity and clarity. May all read this document with open hearts to the Holy Spirit as we seek to follow God's will for our church and our lives.

So, why women deacons?

The clearest and most direct answer to this question is also the simplest. We will have women deacons because the will of the church has chosen to have women deacons. As free and faithful Baptists, we locate the ability to discern the will of God through trusting relationships within the membership. These individuals testify to a common saving relationship they share with God through faith and obedience in following, Jesus Christ their personal Savior and Lord.

In Baptist circles, we believe that no individual or sub-group can make a legitimate claim to any closer relationship with God even if it is based on greater training or holding special office. Proclaiming Galatians 3:28, Baptists believe that all persons are equal before God in Christ and as such, all persons are to have an equal voice in the congregation's decision making process.

When the people of Midway Baptist Church elected women deacons, they were not only carefully following the Constitution and By Laws of our church (which has been in effect since 1976 and has allowed for women deacons since its introduction), they were also proudly following this crucial Baptist heritage.

It is this history that encourages Baptists to call forth Deacons only and NOT to favor a Board of Elders or a Presbytery. Deacons are known to be a servant body to the congregation, rather than a ruling party over the congregation. Baptists elect and ordain Deacons for special service to the needs of the congregation, but have always been clear that the decision making power resides with the church as a whole and the equal voice of each member of which it is comprised.

But, is it biblical?

As much as they are intent upon the power of the people, Baptists are not led by the mere whim or mood of agreed opinion. As a people of faith, they are encouraged to pray continually and to study and follow God's word faithfully. They are called to embody the spirit of Jesus Christ into the world and realize that being the church is not permission to do only as one pleases.

The Bible is the authoritarian source for all Baptist faith and practice. Baptists know that members can interpret Scripture differently. But they always seek to be very fair with the complete biblical witness, favoring the whole counsel of God and the example of the living word, Jesus Christ which guides a local congregation together operating under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Three main scriptures are listed in our Constitution that give direction to our procedures for electing Deacons. They are Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:8-13 and Romans 16:1. The Philippians passage provides a list, including deacons along with others in the church naming saints, servants and bishops. It offers no clear direction on the practice of women serving in any of these capacities.

1 Timothy 3:8 and following is ambiguous in the Greek text (which is the most direct link we have with the original composition of New Testament scripture) and verse 11 can be interpreted differently to mean either "wives of deacons" or "women who are deacons."

The clearest and most direct passage of Scripture that addresses this topic is Romans 16:1. Because of its compelling and unequivocal precedent, those who do not favor women serving as deacons often avoid it. Yet, the Greek text could not be more explicit. It mentions Phoebe, who the apostle Paul (the undisputed author of Romans) greets as a deacon (there is not a word for deaconess in the Greek) at the church at Cenchrea.

Several things are clear in this passage. First, it is clear the Phoebe is a woman. She not only shares a women's name, but is greeted by Paul as a "sister" and referred to again in verse 2 by a feminine personal pronoun. Second, it is clear that the word that describes her standing in the church is the same word (diakono) that is used in these other cited passages where it is translated "deacon." Thirdly, the historical context and the structure of the sentence clearly implies that this is not just a description of service (which might be the case if the word had not been used as a noun or if it had not been used in reference to "the church"), but represents a more formalized period of time in the development of the early church when official roles and responsibilities began to emerge.

This precedent for women deacons has been followed unevenly throughout church history. From the 3rd to the 7th Century, we have records of explicit instructions to the church on installing women as deacons. In other periods of Protestant church history, women have served other women as deaconesses. It was only during the Industrial Revolution that Deacons began to resemble a "Board of Directors." which has served as the model most Baptists today remember in growing up.

So, why women deacons?

This study returns us back to our original question. We are confident to move ahead with women serving as deacons because it is fair and consistent with the broader witness of Scripture and church history. Further, it is not in violation of our Constitution and By Laws, which in fact has been followed carefully and completely by allowing the congregation to express their authority as the final decision making body for our life of faith and practice.

Making this change is not without difficulty. Some are uncomfortable with this unconventional move away from recent tradition. Some interpret scripture differently. Some see these roles as exclusive and only for men in the church. To these individuals, special care and patience must be extended. From them, special care and patience is also requested. This transition requires an extra measure of prayer for us all, as we seek to listen intently to these scriptures and open our hearts for possible change under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

We are at a great place in our church's history. God has been blessing our church in new and surprising ways. We enter the future with the confidence that the way God has led this church in the past will continue as we stretch our faith and do our best to follow God's will. May this development in our life of faith lead all of us to not fear change, but to again allow the Holy Spirit to blow fresh winds of grace into our fellowship by strengthening the way we are equipped to minister to our community and our world.