DEACONS’ TOOL KIT

PREPARING FOR MISSION

A FOUR-UNIT COURSE TO HELP YOUR CHURCH PREPARE FOR MISSION

Introduction.

In the Bishop’s charge to us at our ordination we ‘are ordained so that the people of God may be better equipped to make Christ known’, to be ‘heralds of Christ’s kingdom’, and ‘to proclaim the gospel in word and deed, as agents of God’s purposes of love’. This is our primary calling, to be the person on the boundary, connecting the church with the world and the world with the Christian faith. We do this in all sorts of ways, developing projects and taking risks with new ideas as we encourage our church congregations to share God’s love with others, and serve the lostness of the world. We search out need, ‘reaching into the forgotten corners of the world’, and work with others to find ways of meeting those needs. We ‘accompany those searching for faith’, sharing with them the water of life that is Christ. In these and many other ways we ‘serve the community in which we are set’.

We do not do this alone. A deacon works collaboratively, with other ministers and the people of God, with allies and people of good will, living out the Gospel imperative to serve the needs of others with practical help and the good news of Christ. So where to start? How can we find good ways of identifying and meeting the needs of our parish communities?

There are many excellent resources for churches to use, but sometimes we find our efforts in community outreach (mission) or evangelism seem to ‘slide off’ our community as if it was Teflon-coated! Why should this be?
There will be a range of reasons, but sometimes it is because we have not understood the culture – or cultures – of our parishes. We haven’t fully taken on board how people who don’t come to church actually think and feel, or what is important to them. We may not have listened enough. If we don’t understand our people, if we don’t know their concerns, if we can’t ‘speak their language’, then sometimes what we do in mission and outreach is seen by them to be irrelevant to their felt needs.

This is not a mistake Christ made. He was incarnate in our life and culture. He lived for 30 years in his community, speaking their language, sharing their concerns, building relationships, learning to understand human nature, long before he started any public ministry. He calls us to follow his example by incarnating our own diaconal calling to listen as he listened, and to meet people where they are, not where we would like them to be.

It’s our hope and prayer that this ‘Tool Kit’ will help Deacons and others to find ways forward in thinking about mission in the parish. It can be used as it stands, or adapted to your own context, or act as a springboard for other approaches. It could follow an Alpha or Pilgrim course. It can be used by individual deacons for their own reflection, and with parish groups to help them engage more fully with the material and spiritual needs of their communities.

**DEACON’S TOOLKIT NOTES (1) Making connections with our vocation**

Think of your community like a garden. What’s in the flower beds? What’s beautiful? What’s in the vegetable plots? What’s useful? Are there weedy patches? Those are the needy areas. What are the slugs and caterpillars? How can they be controlled? The deacon is the church’s development minister, with a big eschatological vision of what a servant church looks like – the landscape gardener, if you like – and a tight focus to see where and how that might start to happen in practical terms – the practical gardener ready to dig and sow.

As a deacon, you may have been living in your parish for a long time and know it very well. When you read through the units you know where the needs are located, and you’re familiar with what the church is already doing. Appreciate, affirm and encourage others in all they do because, as collaborative ministers, we work with both church and community. This Tool Kit suggests ways of developing what is already happening, and of stimulating discussion.

Or you may be a newly-ordained deacon, wanting to get a handle on mission and evangelism in your parish. Perhaps you already have a bunch of ideas of what needs doing. The Tool Kit is a way of helping to shape those ideas together with God’s people. A deacon is a pioneer.

Or you may be in a church where sometimes you’re tempted to despair. They have so little interest in anything outside the church doors. The Tool Kit could be a way of broadening horizons, providing a challenge and suggesting ways forward which are practical and accessible whether your parish is urban or rural. You are the deacon standing at the doorway, encouraging movement outwards by the church and welcoming people in to experience God’s love.

Finally, as deacons we are called to be intercessors for the world. We model this by the way we work and communicate. Starting to think more about mission needs a great deal of prayer and listening to God together. Depending on your church community, you could consider getting together a small group to pray specifically for this project.
Having discussed all this with your incumbent, keep him or her updated. Feel free to adapt the material. The following notes are designed to be a guide to your own thinking and preparation for running the Tool Kit with a group.

**DEACON’S PREPARATION NOTES (2) Leader’s guide**

**SESSION ONE: EXPLORING THE PARISH  The Deacon as intercessor**

At the start of each Unit, choose a way of praying which will relax your group, give them space for God in their busy lives, and help them to focus. Feel free to pray extempore or to start/finish with a short service.

**Discuss**

How would you personally answer the question, ‘if you were exploring your parishes for the first time, which of Moses’ questions might be relevant?’ What questions would you like to add?

**Explore**

You may have a map of the parish up on your wall already, which makes it easy to do the Exploration exercise yourself ahead of meeting with your group. This can be rewarding, as you see what’s already happening: or it may be frustrating, as you see the huge areas of need not being met! Either way, this is part of ‘reaching into the forgotten corners of the world.’

Does this exercise suggest new ways forward for your ministry? Jot down any ideas.

**Act**

The idea of prayer-walking may be completely new to many congregations. Be guided by their reactions: are they willing to give it a try, or is it a complete no-no? If the latter, be ready to suggest options. Those who are elderly or chronically ill and stuck at home may be delighted if you ask them to pray. If so, ensure they are kept updated, maybe by creating a prayer chain. Consider making a prayer bookmark for all the congregation to use at home, with the ‘Breathe on Me’ prayer on it. Ensure this activity has a regular place in church intercessions.

**SESSION TWO: GOOD AND BAD HISTORY  The Deacon as agent of God’s purposes of love**

**Reflect**

You may already be only too aware of problems in the past that affect the church’s ministry now, and implementing this unit needs plenty of prayer and discussion with your incumbent. If you’re new, or not aware, consider contacting your Area Dean or your Archdeacon, to ask what they know of the church’s history. Forewarned is forearmed!

Be realistic about the negative aspects of your parish history, but also celebrate the positive. Christ is victor, and our job may entail teasing out the component parts of negative experiences and working out what can and can not be done to bring his healing to the situation and possibly to the lives of those affected.
**Explore**

As you listen to negative experiences, don’t take it personally, and resist the temptation to argue! Focus on the person who is talking, on what they are feeling and why. Reflect back to them what they say. Much tension can be defused simply by people knowing they have been listened to. In common with our diaconal ancestors like the Seven in Acts 6, we are called to reconciliation.

You may find some of this personally bruising, in which case, consider talking it over with your spiritual director.

**SESSION THREE: THE ART OF OBSERVATION**

**The Deacon reaching into the forgotten corners of the world**

**Reflect**

How do the non-churchgoers in your community respond to the church? What are their reactions when they attend, eg at baptisms? Are people respectful, or do they continue to talk to each other and look at their mobile phones? (It can be instructive to stand at the back of the church sometimes and observe!)

We may deplore the indifference and sometimes the disrespect that people show the church and the Christian faith, but how much do we know of the reasons? We only find out by listening. It’s our job, as those who reach into the forgotten corners of the world, to take time to hear not only what people say, but what they do not say too.

There are lots of ways of doing the Exploration exercise. You could devise a simple questionnaire and use it with people you know in their homes or at groups you attend. An example is attached. Or you can provide tea and biscuits at the school gate and ask some of the parents as they wait. Pop into the pub, and offer to buy a round if they’ll answer some questions first! Listen to community leaders – how do they see the church? Ask people of other faiths what their experience is of Christianity and the church. Use other questions to find out what is important to them. Be relaxed – people don’t want to feel they are getting the third degree.

**Act**

As the church’s Deacon you’re called to make connections between the church and the community. In the light of the answers you’ve received, what sort of stepping stones could you put down, to make it easier for people to make a connection? Are there things the church could be doing to strengthen relationships already made with both individuals and community leaders? What are they? Is one of them a priority for your own ministry?

**SESSION 4: STREAMS OF LIVING WATER**

**The Deacon as herald of Christ’s kingdom**

Where do you see signs of spiritual dryness in your community?
Explore

List what the church is already doing in the community to meet needs. What ways are there of celebrating this?

Try listing the gifts people have and what you think they may bring to the discussion. It might be instructive to compare this list with what they actually offer.

Act

Be clear about the list of actions, and very practical about putting names next to them. It is fatally easy for people to think that completing the Tool Kit is enough in itself: ‘we’ve done that, now we can go back to normal!’ You’re the one tasked with enabling the church to move outwards, and you’re now in a position to help people turn words into deeds. Agree a time frame and get a date for a follow-up meeting (after three months? Six?) into people’s diaries.

This is not to ‘check up’ on them, but to see how they are getting on, to offer help and support, to work with them on ironing out any difficulties, to encourage them if they are disheartened or stuck, and to pray with them.

The Tool Kit is an introduction to thinking missionally. This needs practice so it becomes a habit for church members. It takes time and patience for an outward-looking mindset to grow and develop in people’s attitudes.

Practice means to perform, over and over again in the face of all obstacles, some act of vision, of faith, of desire. (Martha Graham)
DEACONS’ TOOL KIT: PREPARING FOR MISSION

Session 1: Exploring the parish: The deacon as intercessor

Opening worship and prayer

For fun: compare these two maps. Which do you prefer, and why?
Reflect

Read aloud Numbers 13: 17 When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, ‘Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. 18 See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. 19 What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? 20 How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land.’ (It was the season for the first ripe grapes.)

Discuss:

- What do you think are the reasons for Moses’ questions?
- If you were ‘exploring’ your parishes for the first time, which of Moses’ questions might be relevant? What questions would you add?

Explore

Get an enlarged map of the parish. If you have more than one group, make several copies, sit people round tables and give a copy to each table. Ask them to

- Think about the places where people like to meet, and mark them on the map.
- Which part of the parish do most church members live in?
- Is your congregation mainly educated and reasonably comfortable, or do they struggle to make ends meet?
- Does the congregation reflect the community in its level of material comfort and education?
- Which part(s) does the church find difficult to reach? What are the main reasons?
- Mark your church or churches.

- Pinpoint all the significant buildings on the map, then the agencies and organisations. Using a coloured highlighter, draw a line from the church to the buildings and the groups with whom the church has contact. Using a different colour, draw a dotted line from the church to the groups and places where the church has no contact.
- List the nature of the relationships the church has. For example, what sort of contact is there with school(s)? Do any church members work there? What about the pubs? Where are relationships regular and positive, and where are they weak or non-existent?
- Where are the people or organisations which are engaged with the community and are moving ahead in positive change? What sort of relationship do you have with them?

- Has any of this surprised you or been new to you?
- Does it suggest new ways forward?
- What do you think those might be? Make a list.

Act

Our diaconal calling is to be intercessors and to encourage others to intercede too for the needs of the community. There are different ways of doing so.
o Some group members might like to take the map home, and pray for the parish by sections. Each person in the group could have the map for a couple of days, then pass it on to the next person. If they opt for this, follow up next time you meet as a group. Ask questions: what did you pray for? How did you feel as you prayed? Doing this personalises the activity and creates fellowship too.

o Other Christians find prayer-walking a valuable activity, opening spiritual pathways for the Kingdom of God to be at work in the neighbourhood. It may be done by one person or by a group. Simply choose a street or streets, and pray as you walk along them.

Some tips if you haven’t tried prayer-walking before:

Prayer-walking can be used to describe any outdoor prayer which links to the geographic location, sometimes called ‘praying on-site with insight’.

- As you walk, pray for every person and household to come to faith. Pray specifically for those known to you. Pray generally for those you don’t.
- Pray for the community and the values they hold. Pray for the care and compassion that often exists within the community, that it may grow and spread and be life-giving and that the church will be a part of this.
- Pray for other specific needs as they occur to you. You may feel prompted to focus on something – maybe a specific building or the nature of the street.
- Pray for the witness of the church, for how it is perceived, for its work and its outreach. Pray for Christians you know who are living in the area. Pray for insight, wisdom, creativity, and love for those who live there.
- A prayer to use to BLESS the neighbourhood:
  — Body (health, strength, protection)
  — Labour (work, income, security, school)
  — Emotional state (joy, peace, hope, contentment, — fulfilment, self-esteem)
  — Social life (relationships, love, marriage, family, friends)
  — Spiritual needs (grace, openness, hunger for God, faith)

_A prayer for the neighbourhood

BREATHE ON ME

Breath on me, Breath of God, breathe on me. Give me Your eyes to see this community, these people, as You do.

Give our churches Your ears to listen to their hearts as You hear them.

Give us open and attentive spirits to recognize where You are already at work.

Fill us with courage that we might ask the right questions, learn from the answers and follow Your leading.

Equip and empower us to engage in this place, to live among the people as You did, Lord Jesus, with love, wisdom and generosity.

Our Lord and Saviour, may Your Kingdom come. Amen.
Resources

For a much more detailed analysis of your parish, go to
https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2464886/bromyard_180046_bromyard.pdf

http://exeter.anglican.org/resources/mission/growing-healthy-churches/

For more information about prayer-walking: www.neighbourhoodprayer.net
Information about prayer-walking taken from ‘Prayer, Unwrapping the Gift. Encouraging the local church to pray’ by John Preston. The Teal Trust 2004
Session 2: Good and bad history

The Deacon as an agent of God’s purposes of love

Kit: A3 flip chart, or projector and laptop.

Opening worship and prayer


Reflect

It is important not to dodge negative experiences in the history of the church(es) with their communities. If past hurts are not acknowledged and dealt with, they will continue to undermine the relationship which the church is building with the parish. Minor upsets in relationships are par for the course and are not part of this discussion; but major hurts can run very deep and adversely affect the church’s ministry for many years. If there’s an elephant in the room, notice it, find out about it, mention it, talk about it. The more such an elephant is ignored, the bigger it tends to grow! If the church is in some way at fault, then God calls us to repentance. A refusal to repent holds up the work of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, it may be the church which has been hurt, and needs to receive God’s healing.

Read aloud Galatians 5: 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Discuss

How much do the churches match up to this teaching? (No church is perfect!)
Has there been a lack of any particular quality or qualities? Has it given the church a negative reputation in the community?
Equally, has the church been hurt by the community in some way? What effect did it have?
Explore

How long have the oldest members in your congregation(s) been attending church? What can they tell you about how the church has changed? Which changes do they regard as positive, and which as negative? Collect their stories, or jot down the main points. Is there a theme that is repeated in different people’s experiences? (This can be done as an ‘action’ – see below)

Talk to people who don’t normally attend. What is their opinion about the church?
If the response is mainly positive, make a list of the comments. Fold a page down the middle and put the positives on the left hand side. What strikes you most?
If some of the feedback is negative, what are the reasons? (List them on the right hand side of the paper). Has the church, or some people in the church, been responsible in the past for behaviour which has seriously spoiled relationships with the community? Has it left scars? Is there still anger? What exactly are people angry about? Pin it down.

Take time over this. Let people express their feelings, and be prepared for negative reactions. The church may have hurt parishioners in the past, but such incidents leave scars on the congregation too. Listen to all sides, be ready to echo back to people their opinions and emotions so they know they have been heard. Don’t rush and don’t be too quick to offer ‘solutions’. Ask what they think should be done about it, if anything.

Act

How about organising a coffee morning or a lunch for the older members of the church? Explain that you want to find out more about their history with the church. Ask them to bring a photo or some other memento to share with each other. You can put together a scrapbook with their stories and mementoes. If you are tech-savvy, or know someone who is, you could create a video and show it to them, which will also feed into your explorations.

Where there is good history, praise God for it and pray for the grace and guidance of the Holy Spirit in building on it for the future.

Where there is bad history, it may be appropriate to offer an act of repentance, asking God to cleanse the past, to forgive those involved and to pray for healing of bad memories. If individuals find they are personally bearing grudges or holding on to resentment or anger, offer it to God and let it go.

A PRAYER FOR HEALING OF THE PAST

O Lord of our church, help us to listen to You as You reveal to us the blessings and the sins of our church, and give us grace to own them all in the way that best glorifies You and renews us to be the church You called us to be. Amen. (Russ Parker)

Resources

Healing Wounded History, by Rev Dr Russ Parker DLT 2001


Session 3: The art of observation
The deacon reaching into the forgotten corners of the world

Prepare Kit in advance: counselling cards (see instructions below)*

Opening worship and prayer

For fun: how observant are you? Look at the picture for 30 seconds:

Cover it up and answer these questions:

1. Are there cars parked on the sides of the road?
2. What colour is the pickup truck driving in the road?
3. Any minivans around?
4. What does the blue sign say?
5. What's the speed limit?
6. Are there any pedestrians on the road? (http://www.shodor.org)

Reflect

Read aloud Acts 17: 22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.

When Paul arrived in Athens, he had to wait for the arrival of his companions, but did not waste his time. He walked round the city, watching and listening, seeing how people behaved and hearing what they said. He could speak Greek so this was not a problem to him. In other words, he found out what was important to them and how they thought about the world. In this he was following
the pattern of Jesus, who understood people profoundly and therefore knew how best to communicate.

Sometimes, we can be so eager to offer support and care that we fail to listen, observe and understand people’s real concerns. Our communities now find the church an alien culture, and people can be almost afraid to go inside the church building. Watch what they do before a baptism, for instance – is there a lot of pacing up and down outside the church door, smoking a ciggy to give them the courage to go in?

If we don’t watch and listen, we find we continue to inhabit different worldviews, and then we wonder why people are not coming to faith. God calls us to do that observation and listening, and to use that understanding to put down stepping-stones for people. These are to help them cross the huge cultural divide between them and the church, and by extension, between them and the Christian faith.

Discuss:

- As you walk around your parish, what do you think are the equivalents of ‘objects of worship’?
- What might prevent people from wanting to engage with faith and the church?

Explore

*Counselling* Circles * Put each of these questions on cards, one item per card to form a set. You will need as many sets as you have groups.*

- When you listen to people in your parish, what do they talk about most?
- What is important to them?
- What makes them sad? Happy? Angry?
- If they see something as a problem, eg a close relative becomes ill, how do they explain it?
- How do they try and resolve a problem? To whom do they turn first?
- How do people talk to each other? Do they reason things out, tell stories, repeat themselves?
- Do people read much, and if so, what?
- What is their favourite radio station?
- What is their favourite telly programme?
- Do people stream films? Watch box sets?
- Where do they shop for food? clothes? cars and major items?
- What sort of hobbies do people have? How much time and money do they spend on these, eg football?
- What do they think of the government?
- What sort of people do they look up to?
- What are their ambitions?
- What do they think of the church?

(There may well be different answers for different parts of the parish.)

Put people into groups. You need as many chairs as there are people. Put half the chairs for each group in a circle, facing outwards, and ask people to sit on them. The other group members take a chair each and sit down, facing each member of the inner group.
The inner group are the ‘counsellors’. They are given a set of cards and they ask their opposite number some of the questions on the cards. When you call time, the outer circle rotates so each is sitting opposite a different ‘counsellor’, who asks different questions.

The counsellors then swap roles with the outer circle, who in turn become counsellors and sit on the inner chairs. They now ask the questions. As before, rotate the outer circle until all the questions are asked or time is called.

Discuss with the whole group. Which questions could they answer? Which not? How do they feel about the questions? Would they ask different questions? If so, what?

**Act**

Together, think about your answers to the questions.

- What are the main barriers for people to engaging with the Christian faith and the church?
- Now we know some of the barriers, how should that affect the way we teach and preach?
- What sort of church services would the community find most helpful?
- How would the community like the church to reach out?
- What changes do you think the community might like to see in the church?
- Which change would you choose as priority?
- Imagine you’re singing carols in the local pub at Christmas. Which carol would you choose to give a three-minute explanation of the real meaning of Christmas to people in the bar?

**A PRAYER FOR THE GIFT OF UNDERSTANDING**

Lord Jesus Christ, grant me the gift of understanding.  
Help me to understand the feelings of others, the desires of others, the goals of others.  
At the same time, help me to understand myself in my actions and reactions.  
Widen my vision beyond my own small world to embrace with knowledge and love the worlds of others.  
Help me, Lord, to always see you at work in my own life and in the lives of others.  
Bless me with insight, acceptance and love that is tempered by you in your love for all.  
Help me to understand, Lord. Amen.


**Resources**

[http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/msi](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/msi)
Session 4: Streams of living water

The deacon as herald of Christ’s Kingdom

- Kit: large picture of thirsty desert ground
- Cut out big water drops in brightly-coloured card or paper
- Cut out water drops in blue, as many as are in the group
- Cut out big numbers, 1, 2 and 3 (any colour!)
- Flip chart or screen
- Final act of worship

Opening worship and prayer

Not so much fun

The effects of drought are well-known. Crops shrivel. People get sick and die. Populations migrate.

The effects of spiritual dryness are not so well-documented. What are the signs of spiritual dryness in your community?

Reflect

Read aloud John 7: 37 On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.’ 39 By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.
Discuss

How did Jesus share the living water of the Spirit with those to whom he came?

Jesus calls us not only to receive the living water from his Spirit, but also to share that water with those around us – people who are thirsty for the love of God.

Explore

- Lay the large picture of thirsty desert ground on a table or the floor, then ask people to describe the needs, hopes and aspirations of your community which you have discovered. Write them on the picture.
- You have mentally walked round the parish, repented of any harm done, and listened to people in the community. What now is the best way of sharing the living water of Jesus with them?
- Give each person a brightly-coloured water drop and invite them to write on it what they or others in the church are already doing to meet these needs. Match these drops with the needs written on the desert picture, to form a stream.
- Give each person a blue water drop. Invite them to think prayerfully about the gifts God has given them, the skills they have learned, the time they have available, and then write on the water drop what they can offer to the church’s ministry to the community.
- Invite each person to lay their water drop across the picture of dry ground, adding to the stream.

Discuss: looking at the brightly-coloured drops, how effective are we in meeting community needs?

Which needs are we not meeting?

Which of the blue drops might meet those unmet needs?

In groups or all together, decide on three priorities. Which should the church move on first? Lay a number 1 on that need. Do the same with 2 and 3.

Act

What should happen now, for the living water of the Spirit to meet the priority needs of a spiritually dry community? On flip chart or screen, list:

- The actions we can take now (including intercession and fasting)
- The people who will take them
- A time frame for making it happen.

Finish with a time of praise and prayer, and/or a Eucharist in which everyone recommits themselves to God to be used as he leads.

Three/six month check-up: reconvene for a check to see how things are going. Use this time to iron out any difficulties, discuss and pray; but above all, to encourage people to keep thinking in missional terms. Remember

"The Church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning." Emil Brunner.
A SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE

Questions about values

1. What's the most important thing in your life?

2. What were the saddest and happiest moments of your last year?

3. What do you do to lift your spirits when you are down?

4. What for you makes "a really great evening"?

5. What is your favourite TV programme, and what is it makes you want to watch it?

6. What hobbies do you spend time on?

7. If you had a real problem, who would you share it with?

8. If you could change one thing in your life, what would it be?