

Apology to United Church Deaconesses and Ordained Women

The “Disjoining” Rule

At the time of Church union, the United Church inherited two deaconess Orders with rich but very different histories – the Methodist Deaconess Order and the Presbyterian Order. An Inter-Board Committee on Deaconess Workers was established to bring together the two groups, and to care for and direct the United Church’s new Deaconess Order. One of the first things the Committee did was to review and make decisions about a number of policies which had historically governed the work of deaconesses and which had been agreed to at the time of Union.

The Inter-Board Committee decided to continue a rule which stated that a deaconess could not continue to work as a deaconess or maintain membership in the Order when she married. The regulation required all deaconesses to resign from their positions and from the Order, by letter, previous to, or on the day that they were married. They were to return their deaconess pins, dispose of their uniforms, and refrain from identifying themselves as deaconesses. The procedure was called “disjoining.”

Created years earlier when Deaconess Orders had been modelled on the organizational principles of European sisterhoods, and included communal living arrangements, the disjoining rule proved incredibly difficult to displace, even though society was changing and deaconesses in the new United Church had more independence and were expected to provide for themselves and to live in the community. The rule remained a part of the Manual and Constitution of the Deaconess Order until the late 1950’s, although its immediate effect on women was softened in 1953 when the Committee on the Deaconess Order and Women Workers, the successor to the original Inter-Board Committee, began to allow individual deaconesses who married to keep their positions and to remain in the Order if both they and their employers wrote letters formally requesting it. Interestingly enough, there was a rigid adherence to the rule when there was an over-supply of clergy after Church Union and during the Depression, and the softening of the rule occurred at a time when women workers were scarce and in high demand.

When ordination became a possibility for women, after the remit authorized by the 1934 General Council passed, the same expectation was applied to ordained women. All were required to resign from their ministry position at the time of their marriage. The persistence of this rule for over twenty-five years, despite several vigorous challenges to it, indicates that the requirement that deaconesses and ordained women relinquish their status and profession when they married was more than just a part of a more communal and segregated past. It was a result of a more current theology and a societal expectation that women could not combine a role as a wife and a worker at the same time. For all women, marriage was seen as the natural and legitimate primary commitment, and work was seen as something that would inevitably interfere with it. Church teachings as well as cultural practices prescribed that women’s nurturing, caretaking capabilities were, first of all, given for family care and maintenance and only secondarily, in cases of spinsterhood and widowhood, could they be applied to wage-earning. Marriage itself was the greatest calling for women, a job of great challenge, and one which, by definition, included economic, social and emotional dependence on a man, and the accompanying role of motherhood. The church’s theology and its practices supported this, legitimated and naturalized it by making it appear as God’s singular will for women, the primary way in which the world was ordered, and by equating deviance from this role with sin.

Expectations and rules that enforced retirement after marriage were not limited to the professions of deaconesses and ordained women in the early years. They also governed other caretaking professions such as teaching and nursing, though both of these professions won the concession that married women could remain in the profession long before deaconesses and ordained women did.

When vigorously challenged, the rule of “disjoining” was justified by some as the only practical way of dealing with women professionals in the church. The understanding of “call,” or service to the Church

equated faithfulness in professional church work with a willingness to be sent anywhere in the country. While this was practical for male ordained ministers primarily because their wives were socialized and rewarded for accompanying them without question, it would not have been possible for married deaconesses and ordained women to present themselves as equally available and therefore “faithful” servants in a society and church in which it was unheard of for a husband to relocate himself for the job situation of his wife. Thus, in practical terms, married deaconesses and ordained women could not be accommodated either within the current theology or practices concerning paid work in the church.

The Removal of the Rule

In 1951 work began on revising the Constitution of the Deaconess Order. With it came a lively discussion of the regulation requiring the disjoining of women from the Deaconess Order when they married. Though the decision was made to leave it in the Constitution, this was openly challenged both by individual members of the Order and by Harriet Christie, the Principal of the Training School, on the grounds that it reinforced outdated, rigid rules of women’s roles in society and was out of step with what was happening in other areas of women’s work. In a letter to the Executive Secretary of the Committee on the Deaconess Order and Women Workers, the Principal voiced her concerns:

“I do not see why marriage, per se, disqualifies a woman from membership in the Deaconess Order. If membership in the Order results from the call of God to serve Him, I do not see why marriage invalidates that call... Marriage in itself does not necessarily alter either the nature or the quality of the work, for many married women in all vocations continue to work after marriage. I can think of no vocation where marriage automatically removes status, and I do not see why it should in this case. One of the tasks of the Committee on the Deaconess Order is to work for a growing recognition within the Church of the place and contribution of women and to develop within the Church the understanding which is increasing in other areas of life that men and women are persons of equal worth in the sight of God and deserve to be so treated, with each person being judged according to his own worth. It seems to me that this clause in the Constitution contributes to the attitude that women’s place is in the home, that women may be classified together rather than having individual persons considered for her own merits.”

Similar cases were made to change the expectation that ordained women resign from their work when married. But change came slowly, and not without controversy and resistance. In the case of deaconesses, the clause remained in the Constitution. The position of the Committee was softened in 1953, when both individual deaconesses who were to be married and their employing congregations began to write to the Committee requesting that they be allowed to continue in their jobs and remain within the Order. The first of these requests came in February of 1953, and after considerable discussion and continuing resistance by some, the Committee agreed that “since it will be possible for (her) to continue to serve as a deaconess after her marriage, that she be permitted to retain her status in the Deaconess Order as long as she continues to perform the duties of a deaconess.” For the next four years decisions such as the previous one continued to be made around specific individuals and congregations who wrote seeking that the rule be waived. Several requests were also being made during this time period for ordained women to remain in their ministry positions after marriage.

The rule remained in force and acted as a continuing powerful statement of what was expected, the desirable, the norm. The allowing of some exceptions did not really make women’s continued participation in professional church work after marriage any more acceptable. And it still meant that deaconesses who needed to relocate at the time of their marriage continued to have no alternative but to resign. And married deaconesses who later left their position, looked for another appointment, and were unable to find a congregation willing to request a waiving of the rule, continued to have to resign. In 1957, after much more inharmonious debate, the disjoining rule was finally removed from the Constitution of the Deaconess Order and deaconesses’ options concerning the combining of careers and marriage were no longer legislated by the church.

Effects on Deaconesses and Ordained Women Who Married

The “disjoining” rule removed from women the possibility of making choices which combined marriage, family and paid service in the Church. Though some women did not see this as a hardship at the time of their marriage, and did not consciously oppose the rule, it nevertheless kept them out of the workforce for long periods of time, removed them from their spiritual and professional community, and made it difficult for them to return to professional work in the church. If the economic circumstances of widowhood or divorce required them to resume paid employment, they frequently found themselves treated as first-time applicants to the Deaconess Order or to Ordained Ministry, and, when finally readmitted, often received no recognition for past accomplishments or experience.

Effects on Deaconesses and Ordained Women Who Did Not Marry

The result of the disjoining rule was a constant decrease in the numbers in the Deaconess Order and in the numbers of ordained women. This reinforced an over-all impression that church work for women was not long-term, not seriously a vocation, and second in importance to the male ordained profession.

For deaconesses in particular, the results were dramatic. Requests to address the pressing issues of workload and inadequate remuneration of deaconesses were easily brushed aside or seen to be low in priority. The disjoining rule served to confirm the belief that deaconess work was not a career or a long-term occupation in women’s lives. It was argued that in the short term, poor working conditions and salaries were not a serious problem because marriage, the real vocation, was not far ahead for most women. The lack of adequate pensions for deaconesses was not taken seriously because the assumption again was that most women would marry and would have husbands to provide for their futures. Deaconess work became seen by many as some kind of preparation period for real life (that is, marriage), and the women who were deaconesses were perceived as a group of young, immature workers, less experienced than their ordained colleagues, and less serious about their work. Notions like this prevented any comparisons of salaries or working conditions with male professional workers, and kept sexism hidden in the church.

The reality was that almost half of the deaconesses at any given period in the church’s life did not marry and ended up spending their entire lives in Church work. Many times they worked for an ordained man who was much younger and less experienced, yet found themselves under his supervision. Questions of exploitation and inferior treatment were never raised because “everyone” knew that deaconess work was temporary and the realm of young women waiting to be married. For example, the following, produced in 1848 stated: “It will be noticed that on the lists (of workers needed) a larger number of women are called for than men. This is natural, as the replacements are inevitably more frequent. Marriage and other types of home responsibility tend to make the average length of service of women shorter than that of men.”

Many deaconesses lived at below poverty levels and, once retired, received pensions that were seriously inadequate. In 1934, for example, there were 35 retired Methodist deaconesses whose pensions, it was admitted publicly, did not provide even basic living expenses. By 1940 the situation was so serious that two special appeals were launched to secure donations to increase their pensions.

Benefits of the “Disjoining Rule” for the Church

There were several ways that the disjoining rule benefited the church. Most deaconesses and ordained women who married ended up becoming involved in volunteer work in the congregations which they joined. They were actively encouraged to accept major leadership positions, particularly in Christian Education programmes and women’s groups. They were, in fact using their educational skills and professional experience in a way which congregations benefited from yet paid nothing for. In this way, church work differed from other professions in which women had to resign upon marriage. Nowhere else were the lines between volunteerism and professionalism so blurred and the pressure to work for nothing

as strong as in the church. The publicity of the deaconess Training School showed both the blurring between women's volunteer and professional work in the church, and the power of the "disjoining" rule. "Many workers marry and serve their communities voluntarily with an effectiveness made possible by their special training. It is important, however, that one consider church work worthy of lifetime service before choosing it as a vocation."