

LOST OPPORTUNITY: THE APOLOGY TO DEACONESSSES DISJOINED BY THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

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The United Church Deaconess Order was only open to single women. Members of the order who married were “disjoined” from it and thereby forced to resign from employment and membership. The indignity was symbolized by the passing back of the deaconess pin that had been presented at the time of designation. Disjoining, a violent word, conveys the severity of the rupture for women who experienced it. Hundreds of women were affected by this rule, not only those who were removed from ministry, but also those who chose marriage instead of ministry. The practice of disjoining was continued well into the 1950's when it began to be overturned for some. In 1960 the practice was officially discontinued, yet as late as 1968 disjoining occurred. In 2006, the United Church issued a formal apology to the women.

The apology to disjoined women largely failed in addressing the historic wrong. It completely failed in making the connections to the continuing barriers for women in all aspects of church leadership. Disjoining failed the women. The apology failed them too.

Disjoining was supported by a common theological view that a woman's primary vocation was that of wife and mother, and, to round out the trinity, church volunteer. But at the same time, the church needed the professional labour of women, so it also proclaimed a theology that supported a public vocation for women. In an attempt to fulfill its competing interests the church then established systems that allowed but limited women's public vocations, while protecting the view of marriage as a vocation.

Even though as many as half of the women designated as deaconesses remained in the service of the church for their entire working lives,¹ popular understanding highlighted that the deaconess order offered a temporary staging ground for marriage. Disjoining structurally systemized this minimization of women in the diaconate. Disjoining entrenched into policy discriminatory, sexist and heterosexist attitudes. And the discrimination did not stop in 1960 when the rule was ended, or even in 1968 when the last woman was disjoined. The attitudes and beliefs supported by disjoining proved difficult to shed and were actualized directly for another 20 years, most notably when women sought to regain their status.

I was called to do this work of telling the story of disjoining and the apology. When I was a student at CCS in the 1980s I somehow learned of the disjoining practice. I had no idea that marriage bars existed. My astonished angst led to writing a short paper. The professor invited me to be on a panel at a conference where I shared the history and my ideas. My public truth telling began.

For that paper I spoke to Katharine Hockin.² She identified the church's sexism and

¹ Mary Anne MacFarlane, "A Tale of Handmaidens," 32. In the American United Methodist Church, between 1940 and 1958, 332 women joined the Order, and in the same period "151 relinquished their deaconess relationship to marry." Mary Agnes Dougherty, *My Calling to Fulfill: Deaconesses in the United Methodist Tradition* (New York: Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church, 1997), 230.

² Katharine Hockin was a deaconess/diaconal minister. She served in China with the WMS and

heterosexism. She was angry but she laughed too. She told me how the women used covert strategies for undermining the church's power. They mentored each other about what to say to the Woman's Missionary Society psychologist during their interviews for candidacy. When he predictably asked if they would chose marriage if they had the chance, they all knew to say "Of course," whether they meant it or not.

Katharine's story was formative in shaping my understanding of diaconal ministry. Diaconal ministry is about resilience, and it is about community. It is about analysis and strategy. It is about laughter and outrage. It is about living as if the magnificent promise were true: God *has* brought down the powerful from their thrones. (Luke 1:52)

This is a story. "The truth about stories is that is all we are. You don't have anything if you don't have stories."³

After a particularly passionate rendering of the disjoining story a listener said to me, "Well, it isn't like it's as serious as apartheid." I am not interested in playing a game of "my injustice is bigger than yours," but the comment opened a window of insight for me. Women's stories are easily dismissed. Disjoining is an illustration in the multiple volume history of the systemic injustice perpetrated against women for millennia. For the women disjoining shut out of opportunities to share their passion, exercise their leadership, embody their vocation, it was serious.

Telling the story is vital as a strategy to disempower the dismissal. The times that women have been able to break free of patriarchal holds and be in ministry are few. The deaconess story is one of these. It is an awesome story, so awesome that the church used its power, through disjoining, to keep the movement under control.

For decades the inherent sexism of Canadian culture cloaked the church's injustices toward its women workers. But for a period of nearly 20 years, beginning in the early 1950s, the church ignored its own gains in understanding. Policies were slow to change and old practices were sustained. So many opportunities were overlooked. The affected women deserve the church's apology. The whole church suffered through this diminishment of women's full participation. The church has reason to lament.

When the disciples took up a conversation with the stranger on the Emmaus road they had no inkling it would end by witnessing the risen Christ. (Luke 24:13-32) The stories that the stranger told captivated their attention. Passionate stories of the history of a broken but faithful people kept them in relationship long enough to have a life changing insight. My hope lies in sharing the stories, the story of the disjoining, and the story of the apology, so that one day the community of the United Church will come to be changed.

taught at the United Church Training School. She was a champion of social justice, an articulate missiologist and a feisty character. She died in 1993. See Mary Rose Donnelly and Heather Dau, *Katharine* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1992).

³ Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: a native narrative* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003), 2.