

Disjoined Women: United Church Deaconesses Affected by a Marriage Bar¹

Dr. Caryn Douglas, McGeachy Senior Scholar, United Church of Canada, Winnipeg

The United Church of Canada's Deaconess Order came into being in 1926, the year after the United Church was formed.² Originating in the 1890s, in the Methodist and Presbyterian churches, the Deaconess Order provided a venue for women to get a theological education enabling them to carry out a variety of social and educational ministries: in congregations, with a focus on education and church expansion; in domestic or foreign missions, as teachers or nurses; and, in programming with youth and children. Deaconesses pioneered women in public ministerial leadership. They performed amazing and important work that helped to shape Canada's commitment to provide universal social support and education. Their contribution wove a richness into the fabric of the United Church.

But the Deaconess Order was open only to single women. Members of the Order who married were "disjoined" from it and thereby forced to resign from employment *and* membership.³ Marriage bars in professions dominated by middle class women were common in the first half of the twentieth century⁴. These bars prohibited women from entering training or a profession if married and from continuing in the

¹ This paper was original presented to the Canadian Society for Church History, May 2011.

² For a full history of the United Church Order see Mary Anne MacFarlane, "A Tale of Handmaidens: Deaconesses in The United Church of Canada, 1925 to 1964" (MA diss., University of Toronto, 1987).

³ For a more extensive exploration of this topic see, Caryn Douglas, "A Story of Lost Opportunity: The Apology to Deaconesses Disjoined by The United Church Of Canada" (DMin diss., St. Stephen's College, Edmonton, 2009) or contact caryndouglas@shaw.ca

⁴ See Claudia Goldin, "Marriage bars: Discrimination Against Married Women Workers, 1920 - 1950s," Working Paper No. 2747 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research Working Papers, October 1988).

job after marriage. Margaret Wonfor, one of the disjoined deaconesses observed, "So many [church] people, when they hear what the church did to me, they try to excuse it by saying, 'Oh, that happened to teachers too' as if that makes it okay. I think they are saying 'we don't need to be accountable.'"⁵ Margaret continues, "But the United Church policy of disjoining was different, I don't know if people can understand that, *we lost our status too* and that was the part that really stung."⁶ Deaconesses were removed from the profession. 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.⁷ The practice of disjoining was continued by the United Church well into the 1950's when it began to be overturned, but only for some. In 1960 the practice was officially discontinued, yet as late as 1968 disjoining occurred. Yet, even after the last woman was disjoined, the effects lingered. 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 ministry status as that became possible.

In 2006 The United Church of Canada officially apologized to the women affected by disjoining in response to a petition motivated by the story of a disjoined

⁵ Margaret Wonfor, interview with Caryn Douglas, by telephone, 31 December 2008.

⁶ Margaret Wonfor, 31 December 2008.

⁷ Twelve hundred women graduated from the United Church Training School prior to 1960. Gwyn Griffith, *Weaving a Changing Tapestry, The Story of the Centre for Christian Studies and its Predecessors* (Winnipeg: Centre for Christian Studies, 2009). There are no statistics on the percentage who married. While Principal of the Centre for Christian Studies I became familiar with the stories of many graduates and I observed that most of them married.

woman, Joan (Peck) McDonald. The petition called on the church to apologize to the women for the cost to their lives from the evil of sexism.⁸ Elizabeth Eberhart Moffat, an initiator of the proposal explained, "I thought an apology might empower the women who are still alive ... with new life and validate them, it is horrible when things are forgotten and buried."⁹ However, the stories of the women remain hidden and the lessons that could be learned, from the disjoinings and from the apology, remain largely undiscovered.

The vast majority of people in the United Church will not have ever heard of the disjoining rule. Even fewer will know of the apology. Four disjoined women, Wilma (Unwin) Cade, Marion (Woods) Kirkwood, Ruth (Sandilands) Scott and Joan (Cheesman) Willis represented their sisters at the apology given by the General Council Executive in 2006.¹⁰ The women were appreciative of the effort of the church to confess and apologize, but they were also critical. Marion Kirkwood expressed the common feeling of the women:

Many parts of the service were affirming of my story, but, what I really wanted to say [was] ... 'we want to see some action now' ... Before we really accept this apology let's see some ways of moving [the church] ahead.¹¹

⁸ The United Church of Canada, *Record of Proceedings 38th General Council August 10-16, 2003, Wolfville, NS* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2003), 481. The apology was to disjoined deaconesses and ordained women affected by a marriage bar. The understanding of ordination was theologically different from designation as a deaconess and the rules governing the ordained differed as well. Ordained women were not disjoined but were denied access to practice ministry. There were only 27 women ordained in the United Church between 1936 and 1957, when Elinor Leard became the first married woman to be ordained.

⁹ Elizabeth Eberhart-Moffatt, interview by Caryn Douglas, by telephone, 30 January 2006.

¹⁰ Meeting of the Executive of the General Council. Minutes 28-31 October 2006, <http://uccdoc.united-church.ca/weblink7/Browse.aspx>, (accessed 11 May 2011). This apology was to be the first of many, for the original motion also directed each of the thirteen Conferences to hold a service, sometime within the following year. However, only two had a service.

¹¹ Marion Kirkwood, group interview by Caryn Douglas, Toronto, 30 April 2006.

The apology was enacted to fulfill the obligation the church made when accepting the petition, but it largely lacked commitment and was devoid of passion. It was decided with virtually no consultation with those who were most directly wronged by the practice and offered with little preparation among the church membership or even with those participating in the speaking of its words. Couched almost entirely in the past, delivered with no deliberation regarding restitution or reconciliation and enacted with no plan for any contemporary repentance for ongoing discrimination, the apology, perpetuates the poor treatment that the women received in the first place.

Margaret (Brown) Wonfor was disjoined in 1957. Her story illustrates the many effects of the disjoining.¹²

Margaret came from a farm in southwestern Ontario. She and the United Church were born in the same year, 1925. From a family proud of a missionary aunt, also named Margaret, who served in China for 43 years, Margaret long held a dream of being a missionary too. Insufficient money for both her and her brother to go to university meant she went to teacher's college. After eight years teaching in Toronto, Margaret decided to pursue her lingering dream and she went to the United Church Training School. As graduation approached she decided she would respond to a need for a Woman's Missionary Society worker in Alberta. She was designated a deaconess and commissioned a missionary in 1954. After a short period of service in Lethbridge, Alberta she headed to Pincher Creek where she rode the circuit of small isolated

¹² Margaret Wonfor, group interview by Caryn Douglas, Toronto, 24 September 2007. All the details from this story come from this interview

congregations, establishing a new larger parish. Then she met Herb, an ordained minister, serving just about as far north in Alberta as she was south. Their long distance relationship began. When Margaret was asked to consider a Christian Education position in Calgary she told the congregation, "There may be a complicating factor!" She knew she had to decide: marriage or ministry? She and Herb met in Winnipeg at Christmas and she returned with an engagement ring. In recalling those weeks of discernment, Margaret describes a tough decision, and while happy with becoming a wife, she felt a true loss. The head of the Deaconess Order wrote promptly upon hearing the news of her engagement, "we will be expecting your resignation." Margaret became another woman disjoined from ministry, simply because she decided to marry.

But disjoining was not the end of Margaret's ministry. Five children in six years kept her focused on the home front but in recounting her life she talks about the congregations and communities "we" served. "I worked all the time, just not for money," she explains, "but not teaming with my husband, no, I made my own contribution." She established an outreach ministry and held many key leadership roles in the broader church. In her words both she and Herb "retired" in 1990, but continue to provide warm pastoral care and volunteer service to their church.

Margaret conveys a sense of satisfaction with her life. She made up for the lost opportunities of diaconal ministry¹³ through a fulfilling lay ministry. But she feels that the disjoining was unfair, not just for the loss of immediate employment, but most pointedly because she lost her status as a deaconess. In the 1980s, Margaret's

¹³ The term "Deaconess" has been replaced by Diaconal Minister.

husband experienced some serious health problems, and they were unsure if he would be able to resume work. She approached the Toronto Conference staff to see what would be required for her to be readmitted to the diaconal order. "Oh, you're one of those women we don't know what to do with" was the response she received. She was then told that she would have to begin all over again, become a candidate and take the diaconal ministry education program. Margaret explained:

There was no thought that *anything* I had done in the past would be taken into consideration. I'm sure they wouldn't have treated an ordained [man] the same way. [He wouldn't have lost his status]. It was continued discrimination; if they hadn't taken away my status in 1957 I would still have been a diaconal minister. Imagine, becoming a candidate *all over again!*

Herb's health was restored and he was able to return to paid ministry.

Margaret abandoned her quest for recognition in the face of what she experienced.

The 1926 Deaconess Constitution makes the rule explicit: "On marrying a deaconess ceases to be a member of the Order."¹⁴ The same Constitution also assured women that anyone who withdrew and later wanted to be readmitted would, "receive the status that was hers at the time of withdrawal." While the number of women who sought reinstatement in the 1970s and 80s was small, for the majority it did not happen.

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

¹⁴ *Constitution of the Deaconess Order 1926*, The United Church of Canada no date, no pg numbers, Fonds 501, 82.292C, Box 1-1, The United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto. These rules were never removed from The Constitution.

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. Supporting and mirroring the social and economic controls of the secular world the church was effectively able to control this aspect of women's lives.

It is not hard to find stories which demonstrate how disjoining opportunistically served the needs of the church, which was willing to abandon rigidly held positions to suit its own needs, and treating women as disposable. The story of Gwen (Davis) McMurtry is an astounding example. She was the only woman disjoined twice.

Gwen was one of three sisters who graduated from the United Church Training School and became deaconesses.¹⁵ All three of them were disjoined. Gwen was designated a deaconess in May, 1944. Although engaged to Doug McMurtry at the time, no objection was raised by the Committee on Deaconess Work, even though she was upfront that she would be marrying.¹⁶ This was not unusual; the whole system was predicated on deaconess work being temporary. Gwen went to serve the congregation at Lethbridge, Alberta. When Doug got word that he was going to be sent overseas he and Gwen got married in December 1944. She resigned from her position and passed back her pin, but in January, 1945, the Committee discussed the case and decided that:

¹⁵ Irene (Davis) Inglis, graduated 1932; Gwendaline (Davis) McMurtry, graduated 1943; Winnifred (Davis) Henderson, graduated 1948. They are all now deceased.

¹⁶ Doug McMurtry, interview by Caryn Douglas, Winnipeg, 13 February 2006.

since Mrs. McMurtry's husband would be serving in China with "The Friends Ambulance Unit" and considering the fine work she has been doing in Lethbridge that she be continued as a member of the Deaconess Order.¹⁷

Gwen agreed to this offer and was deployed again as a working deaconess. When the Committee became aware of Doug's return to Canada in 1947 they then "agreed that Mrs. McMurtry be appraised of the ruling as found in the Constitution and that she be now disjoined from the Order."¹⁸ Doug McMurtry did not recall his wife being angry at having to relinquish her status again. As he remembers, there was no real debate in her mind because "the option of work and vocation for women was just not possible." But the church had the power to make it possible arbitrarily!

Gwen McMurtry's story is unique, there is no evidence of other exemptions to the disjoining rule during the war period when the shortage of ministry personnel was so acute. She was the first, and only, married deaconess in the United Church until 1956. There is no indication why this aberration to the rules occurred because disjoining seems to have never been officially discussed.

In 1928, the minutes of the Committee on Employed Women Workers in the Church, grant three soon-to-be-married deaconesses an "honourable discharge."¹⁹ The minutes also note, "Another problem is presented in the fact that the average term of service given by women is a short one and that new recruits must constantly be found."²⁰ However, there is no record of whether this minuted concern was

¹⁷ Minutes of the Committee on Deaconess Work, 24 January 1945. Fonds 501 Series 206 82.292C Box 1-6, The United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto.

¹⁸ Minutes of the Committee on Deaconess Work, 20 May 1947, Fonds 501, Series 206 82.292C Box 1-6, The United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto.

¹⁹ Minutes of the Committee on Employed Women Workers in the Church, 21 October 1928, Fonds 501, 4. 82.292C Box 1-2, The United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto.

²⁰ Minutes of the Committee on Employed Women Workers in the Church, 26 June 1928, Fonds

informed by a discussion of their practice of “honourable discharge” for married women. The record is silent. In fact, no recorded discussion of the practice of the marriage bar appears in any extant minutes from the adjudicatory structure, the deaconess and women workers associations or the training school. Only in the 1950s, just prior to its repeal does it appear as an item for debate. Until the 1950s the church, like the women affected by the rule, just *seemed* to accept as a given that deaconesses must be single.

During the post war period, in most professions, marriage bars were officially removed. The churches were one of the last holdouts. Roles for women in the church were being scrutinized worldwide in the 1950s. Yet even the United Church, which was a strong advocate for opening doors for women in social and economic policy, did not readily turn its gaze on its own practices as an employer. Official church documents of the period reveal the ambiguity in the church’s position. As early as 1951 the Committee on the Deaconess Order and Women Workers²¹ without any prior minuted reference, expressed the intention to remove the rule, and voted to recommend that the General Council do so.²² But opposition from within the Committee structure was voiced, affecting its implementation and in 1952 the decision was reversed. There is plenty of evidence that the church’s view on vocation

501, 3. 82.292C Box 1-2, The United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto.

²¹ I have simplified the story here by collapsing the actions of the full Committee and its Sub-Committee on Deaconess Work, which worked most directly with the deaconesses. It is important to note that deaconesses had minimal representation on these Committees; the majority serving in the governance structure were ordained men.

²² Minutes of the Deaconess Work Committee, 14 December 1951, Fonds 501, 82.292C Box 1-6; Minutes of the Committee on the Deaconess Order and Women Workers, 14 February 14 1952, Fonds 501 82.292C Box 2-5, The United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto.

and marriage is what historian Mary Kinnear calls, "fossilized assumptions about women that date back to a pre-industrial economy."²³

It was at this time that that Ruth Sandilands (Lang) became a deaconess (1951) and undertook ministry as a Christian Education Director in a busy suburban church.²⁴ In 1949, while studying at the United Church Training School, she had felt the rule was unfair. When asked by Jean Hutchinson, one of the staff members, if she was prepared to forego marriage for service she instantly said, "Yes". But after a week of reflection she sought out her teacher to declare that she was not going to be put in the position of deciding. "I told her I would fight it." As Ruth remembered the conversation, Jean neither encouraged nor discouraged her thinking. "[The staff] were conflicted, we knew that they didn't like the rule, but they upheld the Church and its authority, things were different then for women. I guess I was a rabble rouser, and Mrs. Hutch[inson] knew it!"

In 1952, after the decision to rescind the rule was reversed, Harriet Christie, the Dean of the United Church Training School, wrote to the Committee:

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

²³ Mary Kinnear, *In Subordination Professional Women 1870 - 1970* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1995), 9. Kinnear does not cite the United Church specifically in this reference. Her critique is of the Christianized social character of Canada. The United Church would claim responsibility for helping to shape that character.

²⁴ Ruth Lang, interview by Caryn Douglas, Oakville, Ontario, March 2005; group interview by Caryn Douglas, 30 April 2006. Details in the following story come from these interviews.

this case. ... It seems to me that this clause in the [Deaconess Order] Constitution contributes to the attitude that women's place is in the home, that women may be classified together rather than individual persons considered for her own merits.²⁵

Ruth recalled sharing news of her engagement with Harriet Christie at an alumni gathering in 1952. Harriet spoke to her about the possible changes coming, but only in a quiet, private conversation.

Earlier the next year Ruth asked the Deaconess Committee for an exemption to the marriage bar.²⁶ She planned to be married in the spring and the congregation she was serving, at her request, had agreed to keep her employed for two years beyond her marriage. The Committee granted the two year exemption for "as long as she continues to perform duties of a deaconess." However, Ruth didn't get married in 1953, but waited until 1955, when her employment with Grace United Church in Brampton, Ontario ended and she was disjoined. Ruth explained:

I don't know why I gave up my idea [of an exemption], Wib [my husband] was ordained, we moved, we were going to have a family, it was the 1950s, it was so different ... Still it seemed unfair, we were just dumped, I had more experience than Wib. Oh well, we just went on doing the work.

When Ruth was asked for her pin back at the meeting of the Deaconess Association in 1955, she said with great passion, "You can't have mine!"

²⁵ Mary Anne MacFarlane, "Background Paper Apology to United Church Deaconesses and Ordained Women," United Church of Canada General Council Executive Meeting Docket, Appendix 4 (21-25 April 2005), p DR55.

²⁶ Minutes of the Committee on the Deaconess Order and Women Workers, January 1953. Fonds 501, 82.292C Box 2-5, The United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto.

Later in 1953, the Committee again decided to support the removal of the rule, but they did not take the revised Constitution to the General Council for adoption, and consequently, disjoining remained officially in place for seven more years.²⁷

Dorothy Naylor, a United Church Training School student in 1957 remembers that the disjoining was like the elephant in the room. "Everyone talked about it, but, we never talked about it."²⁸ Dorothy tells a story about the first year students arriving to dinner, each wearing a sparkling ring from Woolworth's on her left hand. The principal congratulated each one on her engagement. Dorothy explains:

[It] was kind of a joke...[yet] we thought that whenever one of the students was going to be married, that would be considered by the staff as a really bad thing...We never heard a staff person [say] 'Now we want to discourage you from being married because the church needs you,' but in our minds, the staff - the mothers - would not want [us to get married].²⁹

The church did need the service of these trained women. In this period the demand for deaconesses was unprecedented. In one month alone the Committee had received "23 urgent requests from congregations"³⁰ for trained women workers. In the years between 1956 and 1960 the Committee reported the marriages and disjoining of twenty deaconesses and that four students from the United Church Training School were to be married instead of becoming deaconesses. The Committee did grant five limited exemptions³¹, yet, Tena Champion, the Order's Executive Secretary, did not

²⁷ The United Church of Canada, *Record of Proceedings of the 19th General Council, September 1960* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1960), 63.

²⁸ Dorothy Naylor, group interview by Caryn Douglas, Toronto, 24 September 2007.

²⁹ Gwyn Griffith, *Weaving a Changing Tapestry*, 123.

³⁰ Minutes of the Committee on Deaconess Work, 28 June 1954. Fonds 501 82.292C Box 1-6 The United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto.

³¹ Minutes of the Committee on the Deaconess Order and Women Workers, 9 May 1956, 18

share the information about the possibility of applying for an exemption, nor report any of the discussion and decision making underway in the Committee and General Council structures in her bi-annual letters to the Order nor at the annual meeting of women workers. Even students at the United Church Training School, whose Principal was on the Deaconess Committee, were not aware of the exemptions. Mae (Walker) Gracey, who left the Training School before graduation to get married explains, "I don't recall any information suggesting the rule would change. ... we were young, we didn't ask questions, we were kept in the dark."³²

It is, at the very least, ironic that Tena Campion, the Order's Executive Secretary, was herself married. Married women *were* working in the church all the time that disjoining for marriage had been practiced, including working in positions that could be recognized as deaconess work, as this story illustrates. *Mrs.* Pearl (Spencer) Budge, a 1926 graduate of the Methodist school and a deaconess until she was married and disjoined in 1931, wrote to the Committee in 1961, requesting reinstatement to the Order as she began a new appointment in Christian Education at Bathurst Street United Church in Toronto. The minutes outline that Mrs. Budge served as a married "trained woman worker" from 1944 to 1959 in a variety of church positions.³³ The Committee approved her application and granted her reinstatement.

Employing non-statused married women, who had even less protection against exploitation than deaconesses, who had at least the provisions of the Deaconess

October 1956, 8 May 1957 and 7 May 1959. Fonds 501, 82.292C Box 2-5, The United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto.

³² Mae (Walker) Gracey, UCTS student in 1957-58, interview with Caryn Douglas, 12 March 2004.

³³ Minutes of the Committee on the Deaconess Order and Women Workers, 16 March 1961, p 5. Fonds 501, 82.292C, Box 2-6, The United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto.

Constitution, was another plank in the church's strategy to meet its own personnel needs without compromising views of women's proper role. This plank continued to be used after the marriage bar disappeared in 1960, as women continued to be disjoined when they stopped working.

In the 1959 letter acknowledging deaconess Dorothy Naylor's appointment to Glad Tidings Mission in Saint John, New Brunswick, the minister associated with the Mission wrote to her, "As a matter of interest, I may say that according to present plans, Joyce [the deaconess you are replacing] has her wedding scheduled for July third or fourth. I hope yours won't come too soon, nor yet be delayed too long!"³⁴ Women were left trying to navigate a way through the mixed messages that the church sent, that women would commit to lifelong service *and* that they would be temporary workers in preparation for their real vocation as wife and mother.

In December, 1960, Dorothy announced her engagement. She wrote to the Board of Home Missions staff, "I can imagine that by now the Board must consider Glad Tidings a dangerous place to send single women workers!"³⁵ Dorothy continued to serve the Mission as a deaconess for a year after marriage and then left the employ of the church as she and her ordained husband moved for his graduate education to the United States. She recalls, "I always said that being married was not the issue in my case - it was about not working."³⁶ When she left the Mission, her status as a deaconess was revoked.

³⁴ Letter to Miss Dorothy Naylor from Reverend Allison Fraser, 8 April 1959.

³⁵ Letter to D. M. C. MacDonald, from Dorothy Naylor, 3 April 1961.

³⁶ Dorothy Naylor, email to Caryn Douglas, 2 July 2005.

The end of the marriage bar for deaconesses happened in a pivotal period in women's ministries in the United Church. In a complete overhaul that included ending the Woman's Missionary Society, The Committee on Deaconesses and Women Workers was dissolved in 1962 and the Deaconess Order was concluded as deaconesses became ex officio members of Presbytery. In 1964 the courts of the church assumed full responsibility for "the receiving, supervising, designating and settlement of women candidates for work in the Church."³⁷ During this period of confusion many questions about how, and by whom, deaconesses would be regulated arose and individuals and small groups of inexperienced and often ill-informed people had a lot of power to enact the rules as they understood them. The decisions made had life changing impacts on the women affected and they were not even consulted in the process.

The expectation that deaconesses should be single was well entrenched. Awareness of the change in the rule was limited within the church structure. It was limited even among deaconesses, curtailing their educational and advocacy role within the courts. Ordained ministers were accustomed to setting the working conditions for the deaconesses that they hired and supervised. With nearly one hundred presbyteries and no national body to provide education or advocacy, deaconesses were in a vulnerable position.

Wilma (Unwin) Cade was disjoined in 1964. Upon graduation from the United Church Training School in 1960, she was designated a deaconess, and took up her first

³⁷ The United Church of Canada, *Record of Proceedings of the 22nd General Council, September 1964* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1964) 169.

placement in Ontario where she met Peter, whom she married three years later.

Wilma remembers,

[the ordained minister in the congregation where I worked] explained to me that the church really didn't think that women should carry on after they were married. I did carry on for a year, at least he said that was alright, so I did carry on for a year.³⁸

At the end of the year, the minister informed Wilma her time was up. She lost her job and her status. Fifteen years later Wilma was again treated unjustly as she sought to regain her status. As a trained lay worker, Wilma had become a Director of Christian Education. When the congregation experienced financial difficulties she was let go. As she recalls, "it was explained to me that if I had been a deaconess they would not have been able to so summarily get rid of me." She returned to volunteer work and to gain more security, and to enhance her chances of getting a position, Wilma decided to seek reinstatement to the Deaconess Order. She applied to Toronto Conference, but as Wilma explained:

...they were very formal about it and said they didn't reinstate people unless they had a salary, a position in the church, so doing all this work for free didn't qualify, so ... while I had time to jump through the hoops ... the church wouldn't have me because I wasn't being paid.³⁹

The last woman, I believe, to be officially disjoined by the United Church because she married was Joan (Davies) Sandy. She was disjoined in 1968. Joan graduated from the United Church Training School in 1961 and was designated a deaconess and appointed by the Woman's Missionary Society (WMS) to serve as a missionary on a pastoral charge in northern Saskatchewan. When the WMS was

³⁸ Wilma Cade, group interview by Caryn Douglas, Toronto, 30 April 2006.

³⁹ Wilma Cade, 30 April 2006.

integrated into the official structures of the United Church in 1962, Joan was transferred to the Board of Home Missions. During a furlough leave in 1967 she met with the staff from the Board and innocently mentioned she was to be married in the coming summer. Returning home she found a letter informing her that since her appointment had been made under the WMS their rules governed her employment, and, since the WMS did not employ married women, upon her marriage, she would be required to leave the position she had filled for seven years. Further, she was obligated to pass back her pin and was resigned from the Deaconess Order. This latter action was justified by the same explanation as her firing, even though the WMS never administered the rules of the Order; they were distinctly separate entities. Joan was never certain who made the decision to fire and disjoin her, but it seemed to her that it was the decision of perhaps just one person. She recalled that she was angry at the time, but she was about to marry a farmer and was hoping to have a family and dedicate herself to parenting, so she accepted the decision. In the 1980s she applied and regained her status as a Diaconal Minister.⁴⁰

It is difficult to document the end of the practice of disjoining because the situation for deaconesses was unclear for decades. Between the 1960s and the 1980s rules were applied with considerable variance. Clarity is only reached in the 1980s, when diaconal ministry is recognized as a stream of ordered ministry. It becomes a lifelong vocation regardless of marital or employment status.

Disjoining excluded women from a community, from the "family." The rupture from community was painful for many of the women, both those who were disjoined

⁴⁰ Joan Sandy, interview by Caryn Douglas, by telephone, 17 February 2003.

and those who remained behind. Jean Angus, who was a deaconess from 1953 until she was ordained in 1977, expressed this loss.

There were mixed feelings about the girls who got married, like they were jumping ship. At the [annual Deaconess Order] meetings you would hear the news of who was getting married and you would think, just a bit, what a waste of their training ... the old girls like me were left, we had each other.⁴¹

This pattern of clearly demarcating who was in, and out, affected and shaped the experience that deaconesses had. Disjoining contributed to the fragmentation of an already small community of women in church vocations.

The image of a deaconess as a young woman, just waiting for her man was strong. Older deaconesses, particularly those who served in Canada, were viewed as women who had failed to attain the real vocation of wife. Even young deaconesses expressed this negative view. One deaconess who had graduated in the 1960s commented that she was uncomfortable using the title " 'deaconess' ... which smacked of 'old maiden aunts in black stockings.' "⁴²

The ministry of deaconesses has been trivialized over the years. Despite the significant and important work of the Order, much of their efforts and contributions were patronized and undervalued. Deaconesses were poorly paid, viewed as expendable, hired on short term contracts, had inadequate pensions, and were excluded from being involved in making the decisions that regulated their lives. By and large, church authorities argued that deaconesses did not require adequate remuneration or protection against exploitative working conditions because they were

⁴¹ Jean Angus, interview by Caryn Douglas, 25 February 2006.

⁴² Kathleen Heuer, "Calling or Co-optation?: Revisioning Ministry in The United Church of Canada" (D.Min diss., St. Stephen's College, Edmonton, 1999) Chapter 5, 9.

only young women, giving short service until they assumed their vocation of wife and mother, and the financial support of a husband. Even though as many as half of the women designated as deaconesses remained in the service of the church for their entire working lives,⁴³ 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, and, sexist and heterosexist attitudes.

With the apology the United Church had an opportunity to sincerely address the disjoining and its legacy. Validation of the stories and an acknowledgement of the serious cost of the injustice to its victims could have been accomplished. However, it is not what disjoined woman Margaret Wonfor experienced.

In 2007, when London Conference marked the apology by incorporating a time of recognition into a service at their Annual Meeting Margaret Wonfor was one of two disjoined women present.⁴⁴ They were not asked to play any role in the service. Margaret was appreciative of the work that a few women in particular had put into it, especially because she sensed there was some reluctance on behalf of the Conference to have a service at all, sensing a “climate of disinterest”. When asked how she felt about receiving the public apology, she responded:

⁴³ 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", while 181, which is 55% remained. 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.

⁴⁴ London Conference of The United Church of Canada, "A Service of Celebration and Remembering, Friday, May 25, 2007", Ridgetown College, Ridgetown, Ontario.

They didn't apologize. ... It was a brief part of a bigger service, ... but they didn't say, 'we are sorry'. ... I was disappointed, it could have been leaven, it was a lost opportunity.⁴⁵

Caryn Douglas
caryndouglas@shaw.ca
204.487.2076
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⁴⁵ Margaret Wonfor, interview with Caryn Douglas, by telephone, 31 December 2008.