

A McGeachy
Senior
Scholarship
Project

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Sharing the Stories of United Church Deaconesses

ONE WOMAN'S STORY IS THE STORY OF AN ENTIRE COMMUNITY

"[Jessie MacLeod is humble as she characterizes her diaconal] ministry as simply responding to the needs of the community at the time - whether that community was a larger congregation, or church school leaders across the country, or students struggling to find their place in an educational institution. She has always enjoyed working directly with people and finding ways to enable the growth or learning they are looking for. With a clear warmth, and affection for people in general, Jessie admits that the basis of her approach to diaconal ministry is that she has always had a great trust in people's capacities." ¹

From the time Jessie first entered the United Church Training School to begin her preparation to become a deaconess in 1945, until her retire-

ment in 1987, and beyond in continuing volunteer work, she has been an innovative and exceptionally skilled practitioner of ministry. Jessie was on

Montreal and Sydney, NS.

In 1946 when Jessie was riding her bicycle between preaching points in rural Saskatchewan



Caryn Douglas



Jessie MacLeod

the forefront of educational ministry development for the Division of Mission of the United Church and for British Columbia Conference. She supported and counseled students at Mount Allison University. She was pastor in residence at Atlantic School of Theology. She served in Christian Education with congregations in Ottawa,

there weren't many women in ministry in the United Church. But Jessie was one of the many hundreds of deaconesses who pioneered church work for women, breaking ground, planting the seed that showed women could be ministers. She, like her fellow deaconesses, knew the reality that they were going to be treated as second class, but as she says, "we *knew* we weren't second rate."

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The United Church of Canada is proud of its heritage of inclusion of women in service. There are lessons to be learned as a denomina-

stories of United Church deaconesses. This project is a complement to my doctoral thesis which documents the story of deaconesses who were expelled from ministry when they married and the United Church's apology to them in 2006.³



Deaconesses (with the bows) were active in inner city ministries in growing urban centres, where they embodied the Social Gospel. Staff of All People's Mission in Winnipeg, early 1900s.

I am rooted deep in that community and my familiarity with its history gives me the passion, connections and commitment to undertake this work.

I will be working with Diane Haglund, Archivist for the Conference of MNWO Archives for accountability for the quality of the research. The McGeachy Committee also provides oversight.

The project will result in an online source of information and reflection on diaconal histories.

tion from the stories of these women and their ministries. As First Nation storyteller Thomas King observes, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are."²

Who were these women? What was their background? What motivated them to give a life of service? What was the impact of their witness in the world?

What are their stories? What is the story of the United Church because of them?

McGEACHY PROJECT

In 2010, I was awarded the United Church's McGeachy Senior Scholarship to enable research into the

CREATING A WEBSITE

A tangible result of the project will be an online resource with downloadable print materials. The website (uccdeaconesshistory.ca) will be a repository of biographical data on deaconesses. I also envision story material available through websites such as that of Diakonia of The United Church of Canada.

The resulting resources will strengthen Diaconal Ministry formation curricula, not only for the United Church but for others around the world. The stories, photographs, audio samples and so on, will provide a vital tool in discernment and recruitment and help to educate broadly about diaconal ministry. The research will inform Church and women's historians.

INVOLVING THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

Facilitating the involvement of the broader community, both diaconal and beyond, is another intended outcome of this project and will be achieved through a process of "Community Biography".

Drawing together people who knew/know the deaconess, a community biography will be created.

The process will help to strengthen the diaconal community and those affiliated with it. Deepened engagement in reflection on the collective and on the experience of the individual leads to new group and self awareness. The common shared experience is a basis for further relationship. Some Diaconal ministers and candidates for diaconal ministry, even if they did not know the deaconess, will be included in these circles as a way of sharing diaconal history and to bring newcomer questions to the discussion.

Canadian church historian Ellie Stebner writes, "Conventional biographies study in depth the life of one person: group biographies focus on numerous individuals. Conventional biographies often assume a Great Man (literally) approach to history, whereas group biographies assume that transformation occurs through more than individual efforts. A group biography assumes a community system wherein individuals are both influenced by and influential of one another."⁴

Walter Brueggemann names a theological method that is consistent

with recognizing community storytelling as a authentic means of making meaning. He writes, "We find ourselves in the interface between 'what happened' (history) on the one hand, and 'what is remembered' and 'how it is said' (rhetoric) on the other. Indeed, 'what happened' turns out to be dependent upon and determined by *how* the happenedness is shaped in ... the remembering community."⁵

In keeping with the insights of Thomas King, the stories are the truth. In this project discovering who we are through creating our lives will result for the diaconal community.

1 This text is drawn from Laura Hunter, "Diaconal Profile: Jessie MacLeod", unpublished paper, 2003.

2 Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories A Native Narrative*, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003), 2.

3 Caryn Douglas, "A Story of Lost Opportunity The Apology to Deaconesses Disjoined by the United Church of Canada" (DMin Thesis, St. Stephen's College, 2009).

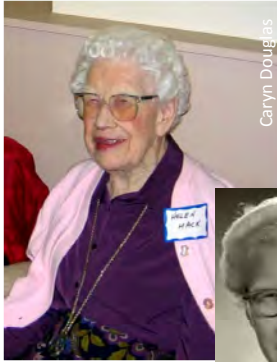
4 Ellie Stebner, *The Women of Hull House*, (Albany, NY: The State University of New York, 1997), 7.

5 Walter Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment Psalms Modernity and the Making of History*, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 13 .

This will be a
powerful
experience of
discovering
who we are
through creating
our lives
together.



Small groups reflecting on the stories of diaconal ministers has proven to be a spiritually enlivening process for the participants and the communities they serve. This is a group from the Maritimes.



Carlyn Douglas



Helen Mack was legally blind when she resigned from teaching in Saskatchewan in 1947 to enter deaconess school. Helen once said, "I didn't need assertiveness training" and never a truer word was spoken. She wasn't daunted by the naysayers, "Church work! Why, you'll never get through the studies—too hard on your eyes. And you'll never get marriedAnd besides, if you did get into church work and decide to get married, you'd have to quit your job."

**In remembering
our stories we
are creating
tools to sustain
women's
culture.**

Helen served with the WMS at All People's United in a working class Sudbury neighbourhood. The people weren't sure what to make of a woman who wasn't a 'minister', but was providing leadership, and good leadership, all the same. ...

But Helen was denied full missionary status with the WMS because of her eyesight. She would have left the church if it hadn't have been... **to be continued ...** uccdeaconesshistory.ca

Marguerite Emminghaus:
Port worker: a welcome to
bewildered immigrants.

Florence Poole: Knocking on
suburban doors in new
church development.

Joyce Scott: "They wanted
me to chair the Presbytery
CE Committee, that's when I
was delighted to say, "I can't!
You won't let us be members
of Presbytery! You should
have seen his face!"



Audrey Connell: The minister
she worked for wouldn't let
her be anything more than
the church secretary.

Etta Snow: Smuggling people
out of war torn Angola.

Jean Angus: Masters pro-
gram at Union, the cutting
edge in the new field of
"adult education".

United Church Training School class of 1952.