



**Diaconal  
Ministry**

in  
The United  
Church  
of Canada

**“Evolving, transforming, empowering” ... the symbol on the cover of this booklet attempts to express something of the essence of diaconal ministry. Signifying a style and vision of ministry which at its core is grounded in community, the spiral moves out expressing openness to join with others, to risk and to be responsive. There is a dynamism, a synergistic energy coming from deep within ... the Spirit rushing forth, seeking to meet immediate needs and to work with others towards creating a more just and loving world.**

## DIACONAL MINISTRY IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

“We are called with all God’s people to  
be responsible agents of creative transformation  
support and caring  
liberation and reconciliation  
justice and mercy  
inviting all into a pilgrimage of  
dignity and well-being,  
and a ministry of accompaniment.  
And we are called with all God’s people  
into a life of discernment and risk.  
Our roots are within the church’s earliest traditions,  
and we exist today within a world-wide  
expression of diaconal ministry.  
Diaconal ministry exists within the ministry  
of the whole community and is the  
responsibility of that community.  
The primary task of diaconal ministry  
is mutual empowerment  
through education, service and pastoral care.  
This includes working together  
to maintain relationships that are life-giving  
and sustaining of community  
to meet immediate needs  
and to work to create a just and loving world.  
We offer an intentional commitment  
to stand and be with others on the periphery.  
Seeking to be faithful to the gospel,  
diaconal ministry remains flexible and  
responsive to the needs of the Church and the world,  
wherever that may lead.”

Statement of Belief adopted in 1992  
by *Diakonia* of The United Church of Canada

**A**s the Statement of Belief explains, "The primary task of diaconal ministry is mutual empowerment through education, service and pastoral care." These three dimensions are woven throughout diaconal ministry which seeks to enable the ministry of the whole people of God by helping people to identify and develop their gifts and skills, to examine and express their theology and faith, and to work individually and corporately for justice and peace in the world.

A ministry of education includes both the activities of education in ministry and the educational perspective from which all the work of ministry is approached. Many Diaconal Ministers serve at lay education centres, theological schools or provide educational leadership in congregations through programs such as biblical and faith study, mission events, Church School or confirmation classes. Diaconal Ministers bring an educational perspective to all of their work, be it expressed in worship, outreach projects, community development, interim ministry or pastoral care.

A ministry of service means responding to the needs of the Christian community and the world. Service, in reference to diaconal ministry, is based on the biblical notion of *diakonia*, as expressed through the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Service means a conscious choice to embrace a ministry which leaves itself open to the pain and needs of others, rather than an act of servitude, subservience or self-denial.

It is a ministry which requires the ability to stand with the suffering, and to work with them for healing, growth, dignity and justice. *Diakonia* involves a willingness and an ability to face injustice, both inside and outside of the Church, to critique oppressive structures and to work for social change. This ministry is rooted in the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian Testament.

A ministry of pastoral care is strongly connected with both the education and service dimensions of diaconal ministry. It involves

responding to individuals and communities in need of spiritual, emotional or physical care by addressing the immediate circumstances and working to change the source of the hurt wherever that is possible.

By walking with another, accompanying another through difficult times, there is a ministry of care. This ministry might also be coupled with an educational perspective through the nurturing of lay visitation teams, the organization of congregational support groups, workshops on violence in the home, grief or addictions. Similarly this ministry might find expression in the service-oriented expression of advocacy on behalf of persons who have HIV AIDS, those experiencing battering and abuse or those experiencing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

In the practice of ministry the three functions—education, service and pastoral care cannot be separated. Diaconal ministry is more than these three functions. Discussion with Diaconal Ministers suggest that they identify more with a style and vision of ministry than with three particular functions of ministry.

When speaking of their shared ministries, Diaconal Ministers usually begin with their commitment to justice as the focal point for ministry. If ministry may be defined as doing God's work of love and justice in the world, then diaconal ministry is to be a catalyst for the involvement of the whole people of the faith community in that work. The style of ministry follows: to walk beside and learn with others, sharing the power of leadership.

Diaconal Ministers are clear that they do not "own" this style of ministry. This is a ministry belonging to the whole people of God. Diaconal Ministers, however, hold this particular perspective and vision of ministry in common as a group and seek to lift it up for the whole Christian community. There is no aspect of ministry that Diaconal Ministers possess and keep to themselves. Collaboration is integral to the perspective and style of diaconal ministry.

Frequently, Diaconal Ministers will despair that diaconal ministry is unheard of or misunderstood in our Church. Explaining who we are is part of our call to ministry. The frequent need to explain promotes clarification of diaconal identity on a personal and communal basis for the Diaconal Minister and the diaconal community. The resultant gain has been an evolving dynamic sense of identity.

This evolving dynamic nature has in part been due also to the responsive nature of diaconal ministry. Over the generations and around the world, Diaconal Ministers have worked at differing tasks. Because of a commitment to *diakonia*, diaconal ministry has always attempted to respond to the varying and different needs in the Church and the world.

Diaconal ministry is a part of a world-wide expression of this call. Diaconal Ministers in The United Church of Canada have a member association called Diakonia of The United Church of Canada. Diaconal Ministers are members of Diakonia of the Americas and the Caribbean (DOTAC) and the World Federation of Diaconal Associations and Sisterhoods. While those in diaconal ministry serve world-wide in various capacities their commitment to *diakonia* is the basis of their work.

Many Diaconal Ministers see themselves as pioneers, on the forefront of change in the Church. Others link themselves to the innovative and daring work done by some of the deaconesses of the past. Some see themselves as located "on the creative edge of the Church." They see their work being most effectively done in a place on the fringe where there is clear view of the need for justice and action.

Working on the fringe can be challenging and exciting. It can also be frustrating and lonely. For the Church to institutionally accept diaconal ministry would mean it would have to adopt a significantly different vision of ministry than it has held traditionally. The sharing of power through mutuality marks a radically

different approach in ministry. Consequently while we are in the transforming process, significant parts of the Church will either devalue or disregard diaconal ministry.

From its beginning diaconal ministry has been focused on the poor and marginalized. Yet the vision of justice is for marginalization to be removed, for all to be included in the circle. The challenge for the Diaconal Minister is how to help the whole Church move towards becoming "this creative edge."

## **EDUCATIONAL PREPARATION FOR DIACONAL MINISTRY**

Educational preparation for diaconal ministry is consistent with this integrative emphasis in ministry which finds its expression in education, service and pastoral care. The methodology in the programs is action/reflection or praxis-based. Academic and practical work is done concurrently.

Educational requirements for diaconal ministry can be fulfilled through The Centre for Christian Studies in Toronto which offers a three year residentially-based educational program and a five year regionally-based national program. The Francis Sandy Theological Centre near Paris, Ontario, and the Dr. Jessie Saulteaux Resource Centre near Beausejour, Manitoba both offer a five-year community-based educational program in the native context.

A five year field-based educational program is currently administered from St. Stephen's College, Edmonton but this was set up as a time-limited program and the final class was admitted in 1991.

All of the educational programs include studies in Hebrew scriptures and Christian Testament, theology, ethics, church history, educational philosophy and methodology, social analysis and mission study, worship, preaching and sacraments, pastoral care, doctrine and church polity and diaconal history.

All programs include practical experience in congregational and community ministry settings and reflection on this experience. All students work with a qualified supervisor who understands and is committed to diaconal ministry. This aspect of the educational preparation is particularly important in the process of identity formation for diaconal ministry.

An emphasis on learning in community, partnership, collaboration and shared responsibility prepares Diaconal Ministers for working with others in the Church and the world. Through the educational process in preparation for diaconal ministry, Diaconal Ministers learn to enable the learning of others, to integrate knowledge and action and to collaborate with others in the search for peace and justice for all.

## **BIBLICAL ROOTS OF DIACONAL MINISTRY**

Diaconal ministry has its roots in the Christian scriptures. Diaconal and deaconess come from the Greek word *diakonia* meaning service. Jesus said to the disciples, "I am among you as one that serves" (Luke 22:27).

As he washed the feet of others, always the task of a servant, and uttered these words, Jesus offered a vision of ministry. In the gospels we see his life portrayed as a life of service. Service on behalf of others was not a series of separate acts but a way of life—a total way of thinking and acting. (John 13:14)

Jesus empowered others. "You go and do likewise," he says to the teacher of the law (Luke 10:37). He speaks of emptying oneself: "If anyone would be first, they must be last and servant of all," he said to the arguing disciple. (Mark 9:35) His service to others is woven through scripture: the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30-44), the healing of the woman who was bent over (Luke 13: 10-14), the woman who touched the hem of his garment (Mark 5:25-34). These are examples of the gift he offered.



Always he was giving of himself for others, and in so doing he was empowering others and advocating for them. True greatness for him was measured in service, and in both word and deed he exemplified this vision for all.

The new church that came to birth, not surprisingly, placed an emphasis on service. The word *diakonia* appears many times in the Christian scriptures. This Greek word which means service is used in various forms in the Christian text: *diakonein* - to wait upon; *diakonia* - office and work; and *diakon* - one who performs this service. *Diakonia* was the word chosen by the early Church to describe the ministry of all. All were called to *diakonia*. *Diakonia* was not something one did, but something one was—it was a form of existence, a Christian condition or lifestyle. All were sent forth for *diakonia*, for ministry which was exercised foremost in service to others. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

Integral to the style of Jesus' ministry was empowerment of others which meant living out a new vision of community where people lived together in love and service. The earliest Christians tried to follow Jesus' example of breaking down cultural/societal barriers. New converts who gathered for worship in house churches were led by both women and men. "It was recognized that different members of the community would receive different gifts and exercise different leadership functions but, in principle, all members of the community had access to spiritual power and communal leadership roles. God's gifts were not dependent upon religious background, societal role, or gender and race."<sup>1</sup>

As the young Church began to evolve, the three-fold ministry—the offices of deacon, presbyter and bishop, emerged. The roles were loosely defined and often interchangeable. Early mention of the role of deacon in Acts 6 intimates that the function of the first deacons encompassed responsibilities later ascribed to presbyters and bishops. The Romans passage that names Phoebe deacon

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<sup>1</sup> Florenza, Elisabeth Schussler, *In Memory of Her*, Crossroad Publishing Co., New York, 1983, p. 286

makes clear that women as well as men were acting as deacons in the early church.

“*Diakonos*, from which the word deacon is derived, usually referred to the table servant, though it also applied to menial workers and slaves.”<sup>2</sup> When Phoebe is given the title *diakonos*, it is the same word used by Paul to describe himself and other male leaders. Those who are named *diakonos* “appear to be not only itinerant missionaries, but leaders in local congregations.... (they also) served in a recognized official capacity as teachers and preachers in the Christian community.”<sup>3</sup> The text of Romans 16: 1-2 does not indicate any limitations of the office of Phoebe by prescribed gender roles. *Diakonos* applied to Phoebe includes her role as teacher, preacher, leader of the Christian community and helper of Paul.

Life in the early Christian community involved a number of tasks: seeing that the widows and orphans were fed, serving the communal meal, teaching, preparing those to be baptized, visiting the poor, sick and imprisoned, preaching and blessing. These were important acts of service in the local congregation and as an itinerant missionary. Those named to the office of deacon performed these tasks.

All those who were “followers of the way” were encouraged to give their gifts for the service of humankind (1 Peter 4:10-11). Service or the work of *diakonia* was given great importance in meeting the immediate needs of the new Church and the world. This work built up the Body and spread the message of Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> The Common Catechism, Johannes Feiner & Lukas Vischer, ed., Seabury, New York 1975, p. 338

<sup>3</sup> E.S. Fiorenza in *Women of Spirit*, ed. R. Ruether & E. McLaughlin, Simon & Schuster, 1979, p. 32

## **HISTORY CONTINUES: THE EARLY CHURCH AT THE END OF THE FIRST CENTURY**

By the end of the first century definite changes occurred in the roles of deacon, presbyter and bishop. They were no longer interchangeable but became hierarchical. Two factors contributed to the change. First, the vision of Jesus' new community diminished in the eyes of the early Christian movement as it waited in vain for the second coming. Secondly, the prevailing social norms and customs of male domination helped to shape this early church. From the pastoral epistles (e.g. 1 Tim 5:1) we know that women presbyters were prohibited from teaching and having authority over men and were therefore denied eligibility for the office of bishop.

Restrictions were placed on women deacons that limited their activities to teaching other women, preparing women for baptism, visiting the sick, poor, imprisoned, widows and orphans, and serving communal meals to women.

Around 600 A.D., the early diaconate with its emphasis on service began to disappear. It was never formally abolished but fell into disuse during the period when monastic life became popular for women. Some women who were interested in service may have been attracted to cloistered life because of its opportunities for learning and serious scholarship. By 700 A.D., the diaconate had entirely dropped out of the western world. In Constantinople, which had been the centre of diaconal work, the office still formally existed in 1200 A.D., but it was available nowhere else in the Orient.

## **EUROPE IN THE 1800s**

As the centuries passed, there were some serious attempts made to revive the diaconate in Belgium, Holland and France, but it wasn't until the 1800s that there is documented evidence that

such attempts were successful. The revival appears to have been a response to two very specific needs: the need for humanitarian service to people who had suffered the social upheavals of the Industrial Revolution, and the desire of an increasing number of young women to play a significant part in the Church. In 1836 in Kaiserswerth, Germany, a training school and education centre for deaconesses was established and a call was sent out for young women who wanted to serve God through a ministry of nursing, teaching and social work. Fraulein Gertrude Reichardt became the first superintendent of both the training school and the hospital it served, and was the first deaconess at Kaiserswerth with the title of "Sister".

The education of such deaconesses was designed to equip them for clearly-defined work in hospitals and humanitarian agencies. They received instruction in theology, Bible and religious education, participated in the community life of worship and daily Bible Study, and were trained to be nurses through supervised work in the community's hospital. Women were attracted to the Deaconess Order because of its unique combination of practical training and meaningful service. By the late nineteenth century Kaiserswerth supported a wide range of social services including many specialized hospitals, social service programs and schools. Based on the Roman Catholic model of a nursing sisterhood, the education and working conditions of the deaconesses were totally under the direction of the Mother House. Kaiserswerth determined and distributed the amount of stipend and set the conditions for all appointments.

Later in the 1800s, the diaconate was also revived in Great Britain. In 1861 Elizabeth Catherine Ferard, who had been trained at Kaiserswerth, became the first deaconess in the Anglican Church. In that day, the definition of a deaconess was "a bit of a minister, with a dash of teacher and a dash of social worker". In 1902 the Wesleyan Church in England formally adopted the Wesleyan Deaconess Order as part of its own work, and established a training school. The period of study was two years, during

which time the women studied Bible, church history, psychology, doctrine, Greek, homiletics, and social welfare work. Following successful completion of a three month field placement they were eligible to become full-fledged deaconesses. This school continues to be the place where most British Methodist deaconesses have been educated.

In the British diaconate there was no Mother House or hierarchical structure. The diaconate functioned as an association of independent women. In England, deaconesses worked mainly in congregational settings as assistants to parish ministers, usually in teaching or evangelism jobs, or in the inner city, functioning as Church-based social workers.

## **THE CANADIAN STORY: IN THE METHODIST AND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES**

The diaconal model of service quickly spread to North America. By 1890, some Canadian women and clergy were mildly agitating for the establishment of such work in Canada. In 1893 the Deaconess Aid Society was established in Toronto and in 1894, the Methodist Deaconess Orders were instituted. In 1897, the Ewart Missionary and Deaconess Training Home was established in Toronto, and in 1909, the Presbyterian General Assembly established a Deaconess Order.

The new Presbyterian Deaconess Order was open to “godly women of mature faith between the ages of twenty-two and thirty-five who had passed High School entrance and who would take the prescribed training in the Deaconess Home.” Deaconess activities included meeting the sick, lonely, bereaved and troubled; finding employment for people; looking after travelers; and conducting Sunday Schools and clubs for women and children. All members of the order were expected to wear a uniform, and in some cases, live in a supervised home. The promotional material of this original Presbyterian Deaconess Order describes its mem-

bers as excellent housekeepers, knowledgeable in music, able to work as religious teachers and to take Sunday services when necessary.

The educational preparation for work as a Methodist or Presbyterian deaconess was both rigorous and practical. The Methodist Training School offered two courses: a general two-year course which emphasized social service and religious education and was required for entrance into the Deaconess Order, and a missionary course for candidates for the Women's Missionary Society. Students in both programs took courses at Victoria University, the Canadian School of Missions, the Social Service Department of the University of Toronto, and at the Methodist Training School itself. The areas studied were: Bible, Philosophy of the Christian Religion, History and Missions, Religious Education, Sociology and Social Service, Homiletics and Evangelism, Expression and Household Science.

The Presbyterian Missionary and Deaconess Training House offered a similar program. The full course covered two sessions of six months each with additional practical training. Students in the Presbyterian program could take the General Course with a Social Service option, or the General Course with a Household Science option. Course areas included study of the English Bible, Christian Doctrine, Church History, Mission, Religious Education, Social Service, Medicine and Surgery, Voice Training, Story-Telling, and Public Speaking. Practical training was provided throughout the term of study in four areas: Religious Education, Social Service, Church and Parish Work, and Medicine and Surgery. All candidates were required to have a minimum of university matriculation or its equivalent followed by successful work experience. If a candidate lacked an equivalent to university matriculation, she could present a case individually and ask for special consideration of the Studies Committee of the School.

Residential living was a requirement of both the Methodist and Presbyterian educational programs. Educators and administrators

of the educational program firmly believed that it was through working, learning and worshipping together that students began to form their identity as deaconesses. Being with others who were also struggling with what it meant to be a deaconess in the service of God was seen as essential to education and growth.

## **THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA**

In 1925 The Methodist Church, The Presbyterian Church in Canada and The Congregational Churches of Canada joined to create The United Church of Canada. The deaconess order continued to flourish within the new Church. Training was offered at the The United Church Training School, later becoming known as Covenant College and now known as The Centre for Christian Studies.

By the 1940s, even though the visibility of deaconess work continued to increase across the Church, deaconesses still had no access to the decision-making courts of the Church. In 1942, the "attendance" of deaconesses at Presbytery meetings had been approved by General Council. It was not until 1964 however that deaconesses officially became members of Presbytery.

From 1955 onwards the General Council and the United Church Training School began to receive requests for the provision of a place and status for men who wished to work in the Church in non-ordained positions. A number of men were already devoting themselves full-time to this work. Thus, in 1965, men who desired to follow a similar call to service were designated as Certified Churchmen.

The 1980 General Council established that there would be one order of ministry made up of those commissioned to a diaconal ministry of education, service and pastoral care and those ordained to word, sacrament and pastoral care. The following General Council, in 1982, approved a recommendation that the name

Diaconal Minister be used to refer to those members of the Order of Ministry who are commissioned to a diaconal ministry of education, service and pastoral care, and who have been previously known as Commissioned Ministers, Certified Churchmen and Deaconesses.

**Additional Resources:**

\*1. *The History of Diaconal Ministry in The United Church of Canada, 1925-1991.* (Toronto: Division of MPE, The United Church of Canada, 1991).

2. Hardy, Nancy. *Called to Serve—A Story of Diaconal Ministry in The United Church of Canada.* (Toronto: Division of MPE, The United Church of Canada, 1985).

\*3. Haglund, D. "Side Road on the Journey to Autonomy: The Diaconate Prior to Church Union," in Davy, Shirley (Ed) *Women, Work and Worship* (Toronto: Division of Mission in Canada, The United Church of Canada, 1985).

4. *The First Fifty Years, 1895-1945: The Training and Work of Women Employed in the Service of The United Church of Canada.* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1945).

5. Thomas, John D. "Servants of the Church: Canadian Methodist Deaconess Work 1890-1926," *Canadian Historical Review*, LXV, 3, 1984.

+6. The United Church of Canada. *Women in Ministry.* (Toronto: Women in Ministry Overview Group, Division of MPE, 1983)

7. *60th Anniversary: The United Church Training School 1895-1955* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, n.d.)

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\*available for purchase from the UCPH Bookrooms  
+available for purchase from the Division of MPE



## STUDY GUIDE:

### Purpose:

To provide an opportunity for participants to explore the history, focus and convictions of diaconal ministry in order to:

- develop greater awareness of *diakonia*,
- discern the ways diaconal ministry contributes to the life and work of the Church,
- connect this ministry of service with one's own experience.

### Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. After having read this booklet on DIACONAL MINISTRY IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA, what do you know now that you did not know before, about diaconal ministry?
2. What are the essential qualities and commitments of diaconal ministry?
3. Where do you experience or see diaconal ministry in the Church and/or the community?
4. What biblical stories are illustrations of diaconal ministry?
5. How does diaconal ministry contribute to the mission, life and work of the Church and the world?
6. Where in the Church and the world do you think the ministry of *diakonia* is most needed at this time? Where is this ministry needed and yet absent at this time?
7. What about your ministry/work in the Church and community is diaconal in nature?
8. What might you do to raise awareness about diaconal ministry amongst others ?

This document was produced by the Committee on Diaconal Ministry, Division of Ministry Personnel and Education through the collective thoughts and contributions of many folk in the diaconal network. Some of the background material for this booklet came from the publications listed in the additional resources section.





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