

## Ministry or Marriage by Caryn Douglas CCS89

“Prior to the early 60’s women in ministry in the United Church were kicked out if they got married” I explained to a group of ‘20-something’ women one afternoon. They couldn’t believe it. “But like, isn’t the United Church more progressive than that?” someone inquired. While the United Church does think of itself as socially progressive, sexism is still a reality now just as it was during the period when women were “disjoined” from ministry for getting married. Disjoining, symbolized by the requirement to pass back their deaconess pin, was the term applied to deaconesses who married. There was no word to describe the action for ordained women, but they too were required to resign.

Some argue that the church was only acting as the society did; marriage bars also affected the lives of women teachers, bank employees, librarians and others. But after it was dropped in other places, it was still practiced in the church (even when the church was advocating for greater liberation for women.)

Mary Anne MacFarlane CCS73, in a background paper prepared for the General Council, outlines some of the serious ramifications of this practice. “Requests to address the pressing issues of workload and inadequate remuneration of deaconesses were easily brushed aside or seen to be low in priority... 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... 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.”

At the April 2006 General Council Executive meeting, the church formally acknowledged its wrongdoing in an apology to the women. The petition asking the last General Council to apologize originated with Callie Archer of Hamilton Conference. Callie got to know Joan (Peck) McDonald U48, one of the deaconesses who were disjoined. Callie celebrates “Joan’s tireless ministry [as a lay person] in Hamilton Conference, a ministry of advocacy and concern for so many” but laments that Joan couldn’t retain her vocation. “Joan wasn’t asking for this; like many other women she

would find it hard to advocate for herself. I wanted to do it for her and the others, so they could be recognized for their ministries,” Callie explains.

The petition invited the General Council to “find a way on our behalf to formally apologize to these women and express our sorrow for the loss of their leadership to the church”. After debate on the floor, it was moved and carried “that General Council find a

way on our behalf to *offer our sincere regret* to these women and express our sorrow for the loss of their leadership to the church.” The words ‘formally apologize’ were changed. Sally Meyer CCS04 who was a commissioner at the General Council observes, “Despite the voices that spoke in favour of this petition and offered examples, most of the discussion was around ‘let’s not forget the cost factor in such apologies’. This was the deciding factor in the change of wording.



Marion, Ruth, Caryn, Wilma and Joan  
at disjoining apology

However, the action of the General Council Executive was one of apology. Wilma (Unwin) Cade U60, Marion (Woods) Kirkwood U57, Ruth (Sandilands) Lang U51 and Joan (Cheeseman) Willis U56, all of whom were directly affected by the disjoining rule, were in attendance to hear these words of apology during a worship service. Also in attendance were Norah McMurtry whose mother Gwen (Davis) McMurtry U43 was disjoined twice; reinstated while her husband was overseas in the war; she was disjoined again when he returned. Hundreds of women were made invisible to the church through disjoining.

*We grieve over our limited and culturally conditioned vision of the women’s call to serve You. We are sorry for the policies and practices, which denied their ministry and gifts. We repent of the injustices that left many women unemployed, in poverty, and shut out from the courts. We recant the sexism that continues to creep quietly and steadily into our views and practices towards women generally and women in ministry.*

Similar apologies are to happen over the next while in each of the Conferences. Marion Kirkwood will be sharing more reflections on disjoining and the apology in the Fall issue of *Tapestry*. Caryn Douglas CCS89 will also be preparing a video resource exploring the experience of the apology as part of her Doctor in Ministry research.

*(Caryn is Principal of CCS and engaged in part-time study toward a D.Min. degree.)*

## **Ministry or Marriage – Part 2** **by Marion (Woods) Kirkwood U57**

I had mixed feelings when I was invited to attend a service of apology for “disjoining of deaconesses” at the April meeting of the United Church General Council Executive. It had happened so long ago! I remembered that week in 1957 when I had to make a life-changing decision. I was offered a position as Christian Education staff at a church in Hamilton, and Jim Kirkwood proposed to me. I chose Jim, a decision I’ve never regretted, a choice that took me to Saskatchewan, to Zambia, and finally to Toronto. I’ve had a fulfilling career as teacher. I raised four wonderful children. So why do I need an apology? How could I be “disjoined” when I was never “joined” in the first place?

Disjoining is a very awkward word. It reminded me of the old song “Dry Bones” - “de head bone disconnected from de neck bone...”! I guess it’s true that those of us who were not allowed to remain deaconesses when we married were disconnected from the paid ministry of the church. So were we a bunch of disconnected bones, with no connection to each other, or to the church at large?

That may have been how it was for some women. I can only speak for myself. My choice to marry didn’t cut me off from the church; as a volunteer I put the skills learned at UCTS to good use. But it did cut me off from salaried employment, benefits and pension. I was also disconnected from my classmates and other women in diaconal ministry. That I do regret.

When, in the mid-70’s, I was ready to pursue a career, the idea of paid accountable ministry in the church didn’t even occur to me. My calling was different then: to teach music to students who were mentally and physically challenged. Interesting, though, how many of the teaching and pastoral skills I had learned at UCTS were applicable in my new career!

So what about this apology? It was good to be there, to represent hundreds of sisters who were denied the opportunity to exercise their ministry in the church in a formal way. The apology itself was part of a liturgical act of prayer, in which we all participated. It was good to hear the powerful sermon preached by Elizabeth Eberhart-Moffatt, and to hear words from the General Secretary Jim Sinclair, and the Moderator Peter Short.

A highlight for me was meeting three other “disjoined” women: Wilma (Unwin) Cade U60, Ruth (Sandilands) Lang U50, and Joan (Cheeseman) Willis U56. After lunch we had the opportunity to reflect with Caryn Douglas about our experiences and those of others that we knew. Some, like myself, married immediately after graduation, and thus never joined the deaconess order. Others joined, worked, and then married and had to resign. Ruth spoke of her marriage to an ordinand after she had been four years in ministry. She had more pastoral experience than her husband, yet she was the one who had to resign! Other women were disjoined and returned to ministry (diaconal or ordained) when the rules changed. Still others pursued different careers.

We asked ourselves “what does this apology mean?” In her response to the apology at the service, Wilma Cade said, “When I have told friends about this Apology they have all retorted, ‘And what is the United Church going to do to repay these women?’ We all laughed. If this Apology had been made 20 years ago, there would have been many women trained for ministry who were in financial difficulty. Now many have died and

gone to their true reward. I wonder, however, if there are not still some struggling with very meagre pensions. If the Church is truly sorry, would it be so difficult to check the records, and offer even a little help?”

The apology is important as another step in affirming the ministry of women. We can note this apology, but can we really accept it completely as long as there is still so much sexism and hierarchy in the church? I wonder if the organizational changes at the national church provide as much support to women in ministry as the former structure. I wonder about Presbytery and Conference student committees that do not put forward diaconal ministry as a valid choice for potential candidates? Or ministers who advise young women to go for ordination because “you are too talented to be a diaconal minister”. I invite us to consider how affirming we are of women of visible minorities, or of women with disabilities.

*(Marion lives in Toronto where she is an active member of Trinity-St. Paul’s United Church.)*



*Marion Kirkwood*

