

The case of the vanishing

Are deaconesses doomed to join the dodo and the dinosaur? The decision comes next year.

By Muriel Duncan

Almost as soon as she was commissioned this year, Sylvia Hamilton began getting letters addressed "The Rev.". And right away a friend asked her to officiate at a wedding.

"No matter what I say, some people are convinced I'm a 'Rev.', says Mrs. Hamilton.

It isn't surprising that church members are somewhat confused about what a commissioned minister does. The United Church itself is trying to decide what to do about the people it used to call deaconesses.

Perhaps part of the diverse ideas on their future comes from their past. The United Church has two very different models of deaconesses in its history. Before union, the Presbyterian deaconess was a professional church worker, trained for Christian education or missionary work. But the Methodist deaconess was part of what amounted to a religious nursing order. Like a nun, she wore a habit, received no salary for her hospital work, lived with other deaconesses in a church-owned home and after death was buried in a common burial ground.

But today, despite this honorable history, deaconesses in the United Church appear to be on the endangered species list.

Sylvia Hamilton may not be a typical deaconess. First of all, she's very happy with her job prospects, having just been called to be associate minister at Eglinton United in Toronto, where she has been working part time. Secondly, she thinks of herself as a commissioned minister rather than a deaconess.

But when you talk about deaconesses, nobody is typical. There is little consensus among them about their job situation, their pay scale, or even about what they call themselves.

They don't all do the same kind of work. Although they're often thought of as being primarily in Christian Education, deaconesses are also found doing community outreach, serving

church-related schools and colleges, homes for the elderly, unwed mothers or children, in hospital or prison chaplaincy, overseas missions, administrative positions on national or Conference staff. Many are part of a team ministry, functioning as a second minister.

And then there is the title problem.

Some trace it back to a reference to Phoebe, a deaconess in the New Testament (Romans 16). More recent United Church history began when the Methodist order (founded 1880) and the Presbyterian order (1908) merged in 1926. Deaconess was still the title when the women were admitted as full members of United Church courts in 1964. But four years later, the Church adopted in principle a report that said there should be one order of ministry, with two categories—ordained and commissioned. After that, although it was never officially spelled out, the national church began to refer to deaconesses and certified churchmen as commissioned ministers. So now the United Church has 137 people who call themselves variously deaconesses, certified churchmen and commissioned ministers.

But that's not the end of the complications. One recent jolt came at the last General Council when the Task Force on Ministry report suggested phasing out the deaconess category in favor of ordination. Although members could choose to retain their title and not be ordained, no new members would be admitted (which, suggests one member, creates "a dying breed, like the dodos"). The report wasn't adopted but neither was it dropped. So within the United Church there has been, and will be, much questioning of the role of the commissioned ministry, before the decisions of next summer's General Council.

That 1977 General Council also gave commissioned ministers equality with ordained ministers in terms of



Sylvia ↑
Hamilton

Sylvia Hamilton: photo by J. Taylor

deaconess

salary, housing allowance, travel, pensions, telephone, heating and study leave. At first reading that sounds very positive. But while commissioned ministers offer specialist training, they can't perform the sacraments and don't always feel preaching is their ministry. Now the Rev. Bob Shorten, of the Division of Ministry, Personnel and Education, finds some congregations say, "Why pay the same amount of money, if you're going to get a person who can do only part of the work?" At least one deaconess feels the change may have cost her her job and others have complained that it made employment more difficult to find.

That brings up settlement and transfer. If salaries and fringe benefits are equal, placements should also be equal, says Margaret Fulton of Vancouver, who works with senior adults. She would expect if the Church made deaconesses subject to settlement on their first charge as ordained ministers are, it would also help find them positions. That whole question is now under study.

All this shaking of their structural tree has made commissioned ministers a little nervous. To make matters worse, it comes at a time when lay people are being employed by congregations in greater numbers. A study done by the United Church in 1977 found 120 people employed by congregations who were neither ordained nor commissioned. Many were in areas traditionally served by deaconesses — Christian Education workers or pastoral assistants.

A typical lay professional, according to the study, would be a married woman in her 40's with no university degree but about five years' experience in Christian education work, paid about \$5,000 a year to work about 35 hours a week. Some church officials wonder if these people, who are not yet protected by church salary and work guidelines, might become

quasi-deaconesses if commissioned ministers are ordained. Eventually the church could be right back where it started.

It isn't surprising that "frustration" is a frequent word when deaconesses talk about their profession. A number feel that they did not have enough voice in past decisions that affected their lives. Ruth Hudgins of St. Lambert, Que., speaks of changes "sneaking up on us", without "really knowing what is happening or why".

Marion Niven, principal of the Centre for Christian Studies in Toronto, has similar concerns. The Centre, under different titles, has been training United Church deaconesses since 1926.

In a report this year to the Division of Ministry, Personnel and Education (MP&E), Miss Niven writes of the frustration and apprehension among candidates there about their future place in the Church's ministry. "The cost is high in time and energy," she says.

Miss Niven worries that commissioners to next year's General Council may vote to abolish the commissioned ministry without knowing what they are voting for "and that would be sad". At stake in her eyes is the value of diversity in training and in ministry.

While they may not have had much chance in the past to make their feelings known, commissioned ministers have had more opportunity lately. Both the Division of MP&E and Project Ministry in its follow-up of the Task Force on Ministry have actively sought their opinions.

The Rev. Bob McLean of Project Ministry finds some commissioned ministers puzzled as to why the church would recognize this particular ministry and then think of phasing it out.

And he wonders aloud about the problems of ordaining someone who hasn't felt called to the ministry.

Deaconesses surveyed for this article have strong feelings on both sides of the to-ordain-or-not question. "There is a great reluctance on my part to seek ordination, as I have never felt 'called' to the ordained ministry of the church," says Emily Kierstead of Saint John, N.B., a mother of three young children who works part time as Christian education director at Silver Falls United.

However from Stonewall, Man., Elaine Frazer writes, "I believe there is only one call to ministry, as the Report on Ministry states. I am not really concerned with labels, whether lay or ordained, just with being faithful in response to that commitment." She now works as a volunteer with her husband in their ministry at Stonewall United.

And Helen MacDonald, a hospital chaplain in Halifax, maintains, "We are considered neither fish nor fowl when it comes to being recognized by many fellow clergy." She is proud of her title of deaconess and intends to keep it.

While Margaret Smith of Rosedale United in Toronto believes she would exercise the same skills and be the same person, she sees practical benefits to ordination. "The people I work with and the congregation would understand better my place in the life of the church. As ordained persons, we would possibly have more acceptance and recognition. Since deaconesses are few in number, this means our role has to be constantly interpreted."

Despite the changes that are going on around them, many deaconesses felt the very act of studying the role of the non-ordained, the service, ministry was positive both for themselves and for the Church.

And Sylvia Hamilton, newly commissioned minister, isn't worrying: "I guess I have faith that it will work out." ■