

The background of the entire cover is a solid green color. Overlaid on this green background are numerous thin, white, straight lines that radiate from a single point at the top center of the image, extending downwards and outwards towards the edges, creating a sunburst or starburst effect.

# *Called to Serve*

*A Story of Diaconal Ministry in  
The United Church of Canada*

*by Nancy Elizabeth Hardy*

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## P R E F A C E

In 1968, Glenys Hughes, Elinor Armitage and I attended Manitoba Conference where Elinor and I were to be designated deaconesses and Glenys was to be appointed as Christian Education director at Westminster United Church in Winnipeg. When we went to the registration desk, we found that the name tags for the conference delegates were colour coded—blue for the ordained and grey for the lay. We quickly made up red ones for ourselves and spent a good deal of time at the conference explaining them to people—“you see, we’re not ordained and not quite lay—we’re somewhere in between.”

Well, that category of being “somewhere in between” has been a good experience for the most part, but I have found the ambiguity sometimes wearying, and at one time last summer, considered the possibility of offering myself as a candidate for the ordained ministry of word, sacrament, and pastoral care.

Writing this book has once more convinced me of the validity of diaconal ministry and its unique value within the Christian church. I have been inspired by the devotion and commitment of the diaconal ministers over the years and have been reaffirmed in my own call to be one of the enablers in ministry. The challenge of interpretation remains, but the distinctiveness of the diaconal ministry is no longer in question for me.

N.E.H.



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## INTRODUCTION

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*Called to Serve* has been produced, as a story of diaconal ministry in the United Church of Canada, by the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education in light of the need perceived by both the Division and the newly founded Diakonia of The United Church of Canada that the time has come to integrate the richness of the past with the growth of the present in written form.

At critical points in their history, the Hebrew people of the Old Testament, and the subsequent generations of Judaeo-Christians deemed it essential to record their rich experiences in print. Consistent with that Biblical tradition, persons involved in diaconal ministry in The United Church of Canada believe that they also have arrived at such a critical point.

A coordinating group: Eric King (Diakonia); Margaret Smith (the former sub-committee on Diaconal Ministry); Laurie McKnight Walker (Centre for Christian Studies graduate); Harry Oussoren (Deputy Secretary, Division of Ministry Personnel and Education) began to work together in May, 1984. Emmanuel College was also invited to participate. In September, the group was joined by Virginia Coleman (Associate Secretary, Diaconal Ministry, Division of Ministry Personnel and Education). Together they designed a process by which a story of diaconal ministry could be produced, outlined the possible audience and invited Nancy Hardy, a freelance writer and diaconal minister, to research and write the manuscript.

As the former editor of "Mission" magazine, *Living Between Memory and Hope*, *Jesus Means Life*, and *Women, Work and Worship* and the writer (with R.C. Plant) of *Worship Around the World* Nancy brought to the task valuable experience. After teaching music and English, Nancy attended Covenant and Emmanuel Colleges where she was graduated in 1968 and subsequently designated a deaconess by Manitoba Conference. Nancy served in Fredericton, New Brunswick and then in the national office of The United Church of Canada. Education has always been, and continues to be, the focus of her ministry.

The first draft of the manuscript sent out across the church to a number of persons for comment, was revised accordingly. The layout and design have been done by Heather Dau and the completed effort is now before you. The task was not an easy one since the church is more inclined to remember its ordained ministers, so much of the history and story of diaconal ministry has been passed on by means of oral tradition and so many persons have been involved at various points—all with their own perception of the story.

Diaconal Ministers in The United Church of Canada represent the diaconal ministry of education, service and pastoral care being carried out by the whole people of God. Through the publication of this book the Division hopes to provide a resource of interest to the church at large as it tells a story of this ministry.

Kathryn Virginia Coleman  
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Frank Meadows  
Chairperson,  
Division of Ministry Personnel and Education

## CHAPTER ONE

# A SERVANT RECOGNIZED



*Helen Mack*

"Mr. Chancellor, I present to you Helen Elizabeth Mack, Confidant, Friend, Pastor, that you may confer upon her the Doctor of Divinity (Honoris Causa), knowing that she will be a most worthy graduate of St. Stephen's College."

The tall, white haired woman walked to the chancel of the church. What a night it was—another deaconess to receive a D.D. from St. Stephen's College in Edmonton! She thought about her good friend, Margery Stelck, who had been so honoured in 1980, two years earlier, and Ruth Simpson who had received similar recognition in 1972.

Margery had served as a director of Christian Education, producer of radio programs and finally as the director of Bissell Centre, an inner city mission in Edmonton. She had been described as one with qualities of "commitment, concern, love, and dedication to others." Ruth's dedication, joy, and skill with people had taken her from coast to coast, first of all as supervisor for Sunday School of the Air, then as Dean of Women at Naramata Centre in British Columbia and staff member at the Atlantic Christian Training Centre (ACTC) in Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia. In addition, she had served in congre-



gations in Ontario and Alberta.

As Helen listened to Dr. Charlotte Dafoe read the citation honouring the work she had done, she thought back over her career.

She thought about the exclamations that had greeted her announcement that she was going to resign from teaching in Saskatchewan and go into full time service in the church.

"Church work! Why, you'll never get through the studies—too hard on your eyes. And you'll never get married—where would you meet anyone in the church? And besides, if you did get into church work and decide to get married, you'd have to quit your job. Don't they make church workers quit when they get married?"

She had gone ahead anyway, and her life had been enriched. The years at the United Church Training School had been good ones, times of discovery and deepening of her faith, times of forming friendships that would last throughout the years, times of forging the fellowship that would sustain her through difficulties in the days ahead.

She remembered with fond-

ness the United Church Training School in Toronto. She was not lucky enough to attend the school at 135 St. Clair Ave. West; during the Second World War, that building had been leased to the Canadian Women's Army Corps and the students of the Training School were housed at 214 St. George Street. Helen lived there and at 25 Bedford Road. (Some earlier graduates of the school remember how the basement at 135 St. Clair Avenue West had a home economics lab. Katharine Hockin recalls that "in China I lived with one of the people trained there—

Ethel Virgo—her memory of the School included institutional management and a recipe book for feeding fifty people. Her marmalade was very good!") Helen found the studies at the Training School both practical and challenging. As well as classes at the Training School, she took courses at Emmanuel College, then affiliated with the Training School, at the Canadian School of Missions, and at Knox College. Some of the instruction was taken with women from the Presbyterian and Anglican training schools.



*Ruth Simpson, far left*

In 1950, Helen was sent by the Woman's Missionary Society (WMS) to work in an aid receiving charge in Sudbury, Ontario, as well as do church extension work. All People's United Church was located in a working class section of the city and ministered to families employed by INCO, the powerful nickel producing giant. Blasts from nearby Frood Mine were heard each day at noon, and occasionally the ministers would be called to bring comfort and the Word of God to the family of someone who had been injured or killed in a mining accident.

At first, the young people of All People's didn't quite know what to make of this woman who wasn't called a minister, but who taught them a lot of new songs ("Do your ears hang low?" was a favourite) and seemed to bring some kind of order into the Sunday School and mid-week groups. Those children didn't know that Helen had struggles, too, because of her poor eyesight and that she was glad of the friendship of colleague Evelyn Oldham at nearby St. Andrew's United Church.

While she was in Sudbury, she applied to become a full

missionary under the WMS and was keenly disappointed when informed by letter that such an appointment was not possible. She threatened to leave the WMS, and it was at this time she became especially grateful for the support of Genevieve Carder, wife of Jim Carder, the ordained minister at All People's. She still maintains that it is "thanks to Genevieve that I have stayed in ministry."

The days at that little red brick church in the middle of "the Donovan" and the two new congregations (St. Peter's and St. Stephen's) that had been established seemed like another lifetime, and her mind went from that congregational experience to her work at St. Columba House in Montreal and the Fred Victor Mission in Toronto. It was in the sixties while she was in Montreal that the WMS and the WA (Women's Association) amalgamated to form the Board of Women within the United Church. Although she was a member of the Fellowship of Professional Church Workers and under the appointment of the WMS, she had never been a deaconess (even though performing a diaconal ministry). In Ottawa in 1962, she was formally "designated" a deaconess within The United Church of Canada.



*Margery Stelck*

Through the years, Helen continued with her education, with courses at Columbia University in New York, McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Selly Oak in Birmingham, and William Temple College in Manchester.

Just as important as the training was the continuing fellowship with her United Church colleagues. The United Church Fellowship of Church Workers was an important element in her life, and the support and care she received from members over the years helped her through difficult times. (When Harriet Christie, former principal of Covenant College and the United Church Training School died, cards, letters, and tele-



phone calls helped to ease the sense of loss and isolation she felt living in Edmonton, far from the Toronto Memorial Service.) The biennial meetings were both occasions for joyful meeting with good friends and for serious discussions of issues of the day and the place of diaconal ministry in the United Church. In addition to her Canadian colleagues, she cherished the new friendships of those she met at gatherings of the Diakonia of the Americas (the deaconess association of North and South America and the Caribbean) and the world Diakonia.

She still marvels at how, in 1968, she went to her first

international meeting in Europe and experienced the excitement and joy of meeting members of the world Diakonia. The German Lutherans, in particular, were distinctive in their grey uniforms, while others from such countries as Britain, India, Italy, New Zealand, and the United States, dressed in the fashion of the day. Although the groups differed in language, dress and sometimes function, they were united in their concept of service and loyalty to the ministry of Jesus Christ.

And then to Edmonton in 1972, and a whole new career in hospital chaplaincy. Her ministry of pastoral care to out of town patients has been very satisfying

(one newspaper reported with awe that she did 3,735 calls in one year!), and she has enjoyed calling on patients, doing follow up work with ministers and families, and training teams of visitors.

It has also been good to work in the west, where the work of diaconal ministry seems to have more recognition and support than she found in the east. Although diaconal work in the west is not much different from anywhere else, it seems to her to have gained more understanding and acceptance by the Church. The recognition given by St. Stephen's is a good example of this support. She has been somewhat disturbed by what she sees as the weakening of the community of deaconesses, but hopes that the formation of the United Church diaconal association, and the appointment of a diaconal ministry staff person will strengthen the community and help the church recognize the importance of this ministry of service.



*International Assembly of Diakonia, 1975.*



## CHAPTER TWO

# FROM BAPTISMAL ROBES TO BIBLE TEACHING

If deaconess Helen Mack and deaconess Phoebe (mentioned by Paul in Romans 16:1) were to meet at a biennial gathering of the Association of Professional Church Workers, they might feel they had not that much in common: the functions of deaconesses today have changed a great deal from those in New Testament days. If they were to talk about their understanding of ministry, however, they might find that they did share some basic things: their nurturing role; their devotion to the poor; their understanding of Christ's call to the *diakonos*, a church called not only to witness but also to humble itself in service.

### The Early Church

Diaconal ministry appears to have been part of the Christian Church since its earliest days. In Acts 6, we read that "widows were being neglected in the daily distribution" and that "seven men of good repute", among them Stephen, were chosen "to serve tables" so the apostles could devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. Paul, in Romans 16:1, commends "our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae . . . a helper of many and of myself as well."

As the early church became more formally organized, the diaconate continued to be recognized as a clearly defined office. Deaconesses were consecrated by the bishop, the chief pastor of each parish, and were the connecting links between the bishop and the women of the congregation. In the early church, the increasing importance of the sacraments and the numbers of converts to be cared for meant a division of responsibility within the church's ministry. The social codes of the day also meant that the new female converts were required to be cared for by women.

Women like Phoebe assisted the new converts in their Christian instruction before they joined the church, prepared them for the elaborate early church baptismal services, carried communion to the sick, visited women in "heathen" homes, and distributed food and gifts to the poor and the needy. Some members of the deaconess office lived alone; others lived in a community. They were, however, always servants of the parish, responsible to the bishop.

The diaconate in the early church combined liturgical and social responsibilities in one office. At first, deaconesses and (male) deacons were regarded

equally; later, the office of deacon was seen as a stepping stone to the priesthood, and the two offices were separated in both function and recognition. Even today, in some churches, the diaconate is a stepping stone to priesthood; other communities have stressed ministry in health, social, welfare or parish work, without any liturgical functions.

At some time during the middle ages, the early diaconate disappeared. It was not abolished, as some would have us believe, but simply fell into disuse. By this time, religious orders had appeared, and the sisterhoods took over many of the social responsibilities of the early deaconesses. As well, the great adult baptisms of Easter and Pentecost were no longer observed, and there was not the need to prepare women for their place in the church in this way.

## Nineteenth Century Revival

Surprisingly enough, the diaconal ministry of women was not encouraged at the time of the Reformation. Perhaps Martin Luther's background did not give him a vision of a church which would use women's gifts in this way. Whatever the reason, during this period of time, we find that the importance of women's life in the home was stressed, and a gap was left in the corporate life of the church where a valuable contribution might have been made.

The diaconate reappeared in the complex social environment of the nineteenth century, part of the larger "evangelical revival" which spawned city missions, overseas missions, Bible women, and mass education. The revival of diaconal ministry revolved around two areas: service to those who suffered the social upheavals of the Industrial Revolution, and the desire of women to serve the church.

In 1836, Theodore Fliedner and his wife, Fredrika Munster, founded a deaconess training school in an old castle at Kaiserwerth, Germany. The Kaiserwerth Order took the form of a sisterhood centred in a Mother House and designed to resemble family life.

By the late nineteenth century, Kaiserwerth supported a wide range of social services including specialized hospitals and schools. (One of Kaiserwerth's most famous graduates was a young woman named Florence Nightingale. It is said that Florence Nightingale, a member of a wealthy and respected English family, approached the Church of England to offer her services to the church and was told to go home and embroider altar cloths!) The Kaiserwerth House was inspired by the Roman Catholic model of the nursing sisterhood. All aspects of the life of the deaconesses were under the direction of the Mother House which set the amount of stipend, condition of appointments, the institutional character of the organization and its



concentration on nursing and care of children.

The establishment of Kaiserwerth, with its Mother House independent of the organized church, its emphasis on evangelism, nursing, and "works of mercy" commands our admiration, but we in the United Church have not used it as a model for our own diaconal ministry.

The diaconate in Great Britain perhaps more closely resembles the work of diaconal ministry as we know it. In 1861, Elizabeth Ferand "offered herself" to revive the Deaconess Order in England, and in July, 1862, was "set apart" to become the first deaconess in the Anglican Church. A description of the British diaconate may sound familiar to us. There was no Mother House, but an association of independent women, affiliated with one another as a group in any profession would be. Since the diaconate was a "child" of the church, the deaconess was closely related to the church's governing and ministerial bodies. As well, the

diaconate in England carved out its own pattern of ministry, becoming more specifically involved in the work of the congregation. Deaconesses often functioned as assistants to parish ministers, or in teaching and evangelistic roles. In addition, they worked with the poor as early social workers.

Although both the German and British styles came to the United States in the 1800's, the British model has probably been the more enduring and well recognized form of ministry in North America. In 1885, Lucy Rider Meyer founded the Chicago Training School (CTS) and in doing so laid the foundations of the diaconate within North American Methodism.

The Chicago Training School was intended to train women for social service within the United States, and as part of their courses, the students carried the gospel to the Chicago slums. Lucy Rider Meyer also chose the diaconate as the appropriate model for the work of her students and saw the

office as an entry into the life and work of the established Methodist church.

The idea of a school for women was not new; the religious training school was a phenomenon of the later nineteenth century. Initially established to provide training for women missionary candidates, more than sixty of these institutions existed in North America prior to 1916. The woman's missionary societies were particularly important and powerful organizations, training women to serve in many capacities overseas.

In May, 1888, Bishop James Thorburn presented the case for the diaconate at the General Conference of the American Methodist Episcopal Church. The diaconate was endorsed and for many years existed side by side with the Woman's Home Missionary Society in the American church.

## The Canadian Picture

The work of the deaconesses and Woman's Home Missionary Workers in the United States did not go unnoticed in Canada, and by 1890, some Canadian clergy and a few women were mildly agitating the pages of the *Methodist Magazine* and the *Review* for the establishment of the deaconess office. In 1893, the Deaconess Aid Society, modelled on the Chicago Training School was established in Toronto, and in 1894, the Methodist Deaconess Orders were instituted. At the same time, the Presbyterian Church was formulating a similar kind of ministry. In 1897, the Ewart Missionary and Deaconess Training Home was established in Toronto, and in 1909, the Presbyterian General Assembly set up a Deaconess Order.

The Presbyterians methodically set up the terms of the Deaconess Order, 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; after graduation, they would work as missionaries or deaconesses, would wear a



*Turning sod for the Methodist Training School at 135 St. Clair Avenue, October 23, 1908. Miss Ora McElbentie, Principal, (left) and with the spade, Mrs. Lucy Rider Meyer of Chicago. In the carriage in the background is Superintendent of the Methodist Church, Dr. Carmen with Mrs. Massey Trebble, benefactor of the new school, who because of ill-health was confined to the carriage.*

plain, simple costume, receive a salary in keeping with the cost of living, have a month's holiday each year (as well as one day in seven) and submit a yearly report to the committee relating to the recruiting, training, and supervising of deaconesses. Unlike their Presbyterian counterparts, the Methodist deaconesses prior to 1918 received only spending allowances (usually about \$10.00 per month). In later years, there was much concern expressed about the church's responsibility for the retirement income (or lack of it!) of these early Methodist deaconesses.

Although the Congregational-

ist churches had no deaconess order, members were second to none in doing diaconal work within the community.

In addition to the Deaconess Order, each of the founding churches of The United Church of Canada had a well established Woman's Missionary Society which trained women to work in evangelistic and social service ministries in Canada and overseas. Within The United Church of Canada, the two strands of WMS workers and deaconesses existed side by side until after 1962 and the amalgamation of the WMS and WA (Woman's Association) into the Board of Women and United Church



Women. (Although it was possible for most WMS workers to become deaconesses, many did not choose to seek designation into the Deaconess Order.)

Expectations of the early twentieth century deaconesses were unreasonably high and their duties many and varied. They visited the sick, strangers, lonely, bereaved, and troubled; found employment for people; looked after travellers; conducted Sunday schools and clubs for women and children. The deaconess was expected to wear a uniform, and in some cases, live in a supervised home where she was required to devote all her time to her appointed duties as well as do part of the housework in the residence. She was to be a consecrated Christian and an excellent housekeeper with a knowledge of music; she was to know the basics of nursing and typing, be able to work as an exceptional teacher and take Sunday services when necessary. In addition, she was required to retire after marriage.

In spite of the hard work, in spite of the unrealistic expectations and the images connected with diaconal ministry, the deaconesses prior to church union were appreciated by the church and the people with whom they worked. The following sketches of two early

deaconesses are taken from the 1926 minutes of the Deaconess Association of The United Church of Canada. The memorials to these pioneers might help to bring the work of these early women into focus.

### **Ida Maria Webster**

"Miss Ida Maria Webster, born in Prince Edward Island, attended Prince of Wales College in Charlottetown for a time. She had some experience as a Public School Teacher. She also had two year's training in Nursing. In 1919, she entered the Presbyterian Missionary and Deaconess Training Home to fit herself for any work in the church. She graduated from the School in the spring of 1921. Her designation to the Deaconess Order by the Presbytery of Truro followed on June 5th, and she entered upon service in the First Presbyterian Church, Truro, where she continued to serve for six years almost to the day of her death.

"Her minister's report of her service from year to year was always enthusiastic, commending the spiritual (sic) that wrought itself out in that congregation in many ministries—most important perhaps through helpful service in homes that needed the nursing, womanly, domestic touch of this singularly selfless visitor."

### **Emma Louise Cunningham**

"Miss Emma Louise Cunningham graduated from the Deaconess (Methodist) Training School in May, 1903. Her first appointment was as Travellers' Aid at Union Station in Toronto, where she worked until 1906 when appointed as visiting deaconess in a church in Palmerston. In 1909, Miss Cunningham was stationed in Picton, Ont. being employed by the WCTU (Woman's Christian Temperance Union) so that her work was not confined to any one church or denomination but extended all over the city with a centre at a mission where she organized Children's classes, girls' clubs and Mothers' meetings. She helped all not only materially, but by giving ideals which lifted many from sin and discouragement to a life of high Christian endeavour."

These two memorials not only bring the work of these early twentieth century women into focus, but also show that these deaconesses, Helen Mack and Phoebe all have more in common than we might have guessed at first meeting.

## CHAPTER THREE

# A NEW CHURCH—A NEW BEGINNING

Stella Burry has seen a lot of United Church history. Now in her late eighties, and living in St. John's, she is able to look back over the years and recall with pleasure her graduation from the national Methodist Deaconess Training School in 1922, her designation as a deaconess by the United Church Toronto Conference in 1926, and the years of difficult but satisfying work, both in downtown Toronto and her beloved Newfoundland. She fondly remembers about her early days as a child in a Newfoundland outport village, nurtured in the Methodist Church, president of the "Whatsoever Band" at the age of twelve and becoming interested in being a deaconess with the support and encouragement of her local minister.

Stella's story tells us something about the training, work, and perceptions of deaconesses in the early days of the United Church. She speaks highly of her training at the National Training School. "I remember getting off the street car at the school on St. Clair Avenue, pushing the bell... it was beautiful!"

For Stella, the school was a "great place," linked up with Victoria University, with a broad education given "... the Bible study, my dear!..." She found Dr. Winnifred Thomas, the principal of the Training School "a mighty woman," and still today "can't say too much in praise of the school."



*Stella Burry*



Stella still contends that although deaconesses at that time did important work in the inner city ("the deaconesses just about ran Fred Victor Mission"), it would be wrong to say that they just did social work. They had an important spiritual task, too, counselling, helping people, finding that there was "always someone who had troubles."

## Church Union

Stella was working in Toronto at the time of church union and was fortunate to get a seat for the inaugural service of The United Church of Canada on June 10, 1925. Those heady days of union also meant a great deal of work to amalgamate the structures of the uniting denominations, and the early United Church Year Books are filled with organizational details. At the time of union, the Methodists reported 500 graduates from the National Training School (from 1894 to 1925), with 125 women entering the Deaconess Order up to 1925. The Presbyterians reported 47 deaconesses at the time of union, 10 of them serving in self-supporting congregations.

The curriculum of the training schools for deaconesses of the two denominations combined the academic and the practical. The Methodist Training School offered two courses: a general two year course with social service and religious education options required for the Deaconess Order, and a missionary course for candidates for the Woman's Missionary Society. The students took courses at Victoria University, the Canadian School of Missions, the Social Service Department of the University of Toronto, and at the National Training School itself.

The Presbyterian Missionary and Deaconess Training Home gave a similar mixture of subjects in

a two year missionary and deaconess course. A list of the courses gives us some idea of the many duties deaconesses were expected to perform when they graduated. Instructions were given in Old and New Testament; Christian Doctrine and Church History; Home Nursing and First Aid; Hymnology; Public Speaking; Missions; "Social Economics, Ethics, Treatment of Poverty and Kindred subjects of basic importance to deaconess (sic) and other students preparing for service in the social order."

(United Church *Year Book*, 1926)

Presbyterian deaconesses had a choice of schools. In addition to the Toronto school, they were also able to study at Manitoba College in Winnipeg, which had opened a department for training in 1920. United College continued this training for a number of years after union.

In 1925, a recommendation to unify the two Toronto training schools was accepted, and the building at 135 St. Clair Avenue West in Toronto became the home for women preparing for service within the WMS or the Deaconess Order. Jean MacDonald was the first principal of the institution which became known as the United Church Training School.

## Support for Women Workers

While the schools and training were being amalgamated, some important studies about the work of women in The United Church of Canada were going on. The result of one of those studies was the creation in 1929 of the Inter-Board Committee on Women Workers in The United Church of Canada. This committee, made up of representatives of the various boards of the new church, was formed to

bring about higher and more uniform standards for women workers in the church; co-ordinate the efforts of co-operating boards in recruiting candidates; consider training and preparation of women for work in the church; give consideration to questions of appointment, recruitment, remuneration, and superannuation; and give care and direction to the Deaconess Order. This Inter-Board Committee eventually became the Committee on the Deaconess Order and Women Workers and was an important source of support and direction for many years.

Another important source of support and fellowship was the Association of Deaconesses of The United Church of Canada which met for the first time in 1926 to hear Dr. Peter Bryce give the main address on "The Evolution of Deaconess Work." In the first few years, the Deaconess Association met annually, then formed a pattern of meeting biennially. (When asked if the deaconesses ever met together, Stella Burry said "My word, we were always having conferences, always learning.") The conferences were a combination of continuing education with outstanding speakers on issues of importance of the day, and practical matters pertaining to the Deaconess Order—the designation service, the uniform, the purpose of the association, the nature of deaconess work itself.

In 1934, there was a feeling that the Deaconess Association should include not only workers who had been designated to the Deaconess Order, but also those women serving in other capacities (e.g. WMS workers). Like all changes, this move took time, and it is not until 1940 that we read about the formation of the Fellowship of Professional Church Workers in The United Church of Canada.

It would be a major omission not to mention a

third important element of support given to deaconesses in those early years: the executive secretary of the Inter-Board Committee. She was the liaison between the representatives on the committee and the women workers, as well as the person who interpreted church polity, screened applications for admission to the Deaconess Order, helped with placement, and in general acted as a "mother" to her charges across the country. At first the position was one-third time; later, it became a full time position. A letter from Mary Eadie, executive secretary of the committee in 1933, gives us a glimpse of her responsibilities. She talks about the need for deaconesses to obtain railway certificates which would give them half fare tickets (even if they did not wear uniforms), notes the marriages, family deaths and other personal news about deaconesses across the country, and ends "Be sure to drop me a note if you need a friend at any time." We can be certain that kind of caring would be welcome to many single woman in an undoubtedly demanding and sometimes isolated situation.

## Functions and Perceptions

The work of deaconesses in the 1920's and 30's was varied. They found themselves working in uptown congregations "presenting a spiritual outlook on life as over against a materialistic viewpoint"; doing social service in downtown areas of cities; working among non Anglo-Saxons; doing hospital visitation; working at schools for girls; serving at the Toronto Strangers' Department; acting as secretary for the Children's Work Board of the Maritime Religious Education Council; producing the radio program "Sunday School in the Home by Mail and Air." Stella Burry and Mae





*Stella Burry, Founder of Emmanuel House, St. John's, Newfoundland.*

Laycock provide two good examples of work done by deaconesses at this time.

Mae Laycock, born in Guelph, Ontario, and raised in Ponoka, Alberta, attended the Methodist Training School in Toronto in 1923 and 1924. Her work over the years included being a religious education worker; a matron of the Ruthenian Girls' home in Edmonton; taking pastoral responsibility at St. Thomas-Wesley Church in Saskatoon; doing Visitation Evangelism; and finally working as a hospital chaplain.

Stella Burry began her ministry after graduation in Toronto where she worked for four years with Dr. Peter Bryce in a new church development in the country near the Danforth (just outside of Toronto). She saw herself as the "assistant to the Minister" who took it for granted that "we could do a lot of things." She began the cradle roll, the primary Sunday School, was asked to lead at prayer meetings and "never know what he (Dr. Bryce) was going to ask me to do."

Stella moved from that position to spend the

next ten years at Carlton Street United Church in Toronto and found herself working there during the Depression when men from the west coast came looking for jobs, and many people lost their homes. She did counselling, organized camping for the children from poorer homes in the inner city, did everything we would associate with the congregational ministry except pulpit work. For her that was natural—"It was easy for me to organize. If I saw a job that had to be done, and the need was there... well, my dear, that was my job."

Churches across the country had praise for their deaconesses and from their comments, we can appraise their perceptions of deaconesses' work. The 1934 *Year Book* lists some of their reactions.

"One minister in the East writes, 'My experience has been unique, for I was prejudiced against deaconesses for reasons which I need not enumerate. But after seven years experience with my deaconess, I am a complete convert. I simply could not have covered anything of the ground I have covered, had it not been for the always ready help and generous co-operation of her...'

"Another wrote... 'We have tried different kinds of assistants in the church. We are convinced that a good deaconess is the best kind of assistant that a church or minister could have!'"

"And yet another reported from the west: 'We have had a very loyal deaconess. Her work is quite diversified. Among her many tasks she directs our church school work in general (Sunday school and mid-week). She teaches a Bible Class; she is convener of the Missionary Department of our school; she has secretarial duties in the church office; she visits the homes; she cares especially for the women and children of the congregation; she gives her evenings over to church and committee meetings; she welcomes people to our church services—all of which to my mind is of tremendous importance in the life of a church!'"

One can understand that she would be of tremendous importance in the life of any church!

Even while the work of deaconesses was receiving these accolades from the ministers with whom they worked, concerns about the work of deaconesses and the church's understanding of their role within the church's ministry were beginning to appear in *Year Book* reports. The 1935 *Year Book* talked about how "distressing" it was to hear comments about the Deaconess Order dying—"it is not true"! Even while the Committee on the Deaconess Order and women Workers talked about recruitment of mature women and described deaconesses as "highly trained Christian women serving the modern Church in modern ways", they seemed to be content to regard deaconesses as a secondary "assistant" ministry. That same committee was happy to have the Rev. Lydia Gruchy (first woman ordained in The United Church of Canada)



appointed executive secretary of the Committee in 1938. As an ordained minister, she would be able to give deaconesses representation on official levels, since at this time, deaconesses were not members of the church courts.

## Reports of Women's Work in the Church

This chapter would not be complete without some reference to two very important studies regarding women's work made in the early days of The United Church of Canada. The 1926 *Report Concerning the Ordination of Women* and the 1928 *Report of the Committee on Employed Women Workers in the Church* recommended the formation of a new diaconate which would replace the existing Deaconess Order (and in doing so might satisfy calls for the ordination of women if women were not admitted to the ministry of Word and Sacrament). The *Report on Employed Church Workers in the Church* said that "the authority to preach and where necessary to baptise" should be given to members of the diaconate. The diaconate would be recognized as an order of ministry, with higher status than the existing Deaconess Order. The committee recommended that if the new diaconate were not formed, the church should continue with the existing Deaconess Order, but with more training demanded for the candidates (approximately the same as for candidates for the ordained ministry). As well, members of the existing Deaconess Order should be members of the courts of the church (at least ex-officio members of official boards and corresponding members of presbytery). They felt that at that time, employment situations were inconsistent and low standards applied regarding education, appointment, salary, furlough and superannuation. They concluded by

stating that more co-ordination and co-operation were needed between employing, recruiting and educational boards.

It would be interesting to speculate why the proposal for the diaconate did not meet with approval. Perhaps all that was involved in setting up a new church made it difficult for the General Council to think about anything as radical as the proposal for the new diaconate. Perhaps the committee (and the Report) failed to deal adequately with the nature and ministry of the diaconate. Perhaps a male dominated church (which took eight years of debate to grant ordination to women) could not conceive of an order (mainly female) which would have equal status with male ordained clergy. Whatever the reason, the General Council of 1928 did not set up a diaconate, and it would not be until 1964 that deaconesses would become members of the courts of the church. The church did, however, comply with the request for better management procedures in the formation of the Inter-Board Committee on Women Workers in The United Church of Canada.

Today, Stella Burry lives in St. John's, Newfoundland where she continues to think about her past, her work in Toronto, her return to Newfoundland and the work she did there. She still sees herself as an "assistant to the minister," her call to diaconal ministry confirmed because "there was something in me that wanted to help." And perhaps for her that was enough.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# GROWING TOGETHER

Phoebe would have been amazed! The period of time between the forties and the seventies saw unprecedented activity in the diaconal ministry. Phoebe would have marvelled at Nancy Edwards broadcasting a daily radio show from Berkeley Studio in Toronto that went all



*Mabel Brandow*

across Canada; Carol James directing the Christian Education program at Central United Church in Calgary; Addie Brown doing inner city work in downtown Toronto; Mabel Brandow working with women in Trinidad; Olive Sparling and Marion Brillinger preparing Church School and midweek curriculum resources at the United Church national office; Helen MacDonald doing hospital chaplaincy work in Halifax; Elinor Armitage ministering to a pastoral charge in Saskatchewan. Ferne Graham, who began her ministry in 1951, comments about the "feelings of 'self-worth' in us 'old girls' when we were new graduates. There was no way we could fill all the requests for missionaries and deaconesses, and really started off feeling that we had a contribution to make to the life and work of the



*Ferne Graham*

church. I think that's why we didn't become concerned about low salaries—we knew that there wasn't enough money in Canada to pay what we were worth!" Her feelings were echoed by many women (and men, for men were admitted to the diaconal ministry during this period) whose call to diaconal ministry and enthusiasm for the task ahead reinforced their



belief that they "had a contribution to make to the life and work of the church."

The changes in diaconal ministry were related to the historical, social, and economic needs of the time. The shortage of ordained ministers during the Second World War created a need for deaconesses to do pastoral work within the congregations; as well, the placement of women in war industries created new opportunities for ministry in that situation. The post war "baby boom", the unrest of the sixties and seventies, the concerns of the eighties about increasing gaps between the rich and the poor and the threat of nuclear war have all had their effect on the preparation and response of those in diaconal ministry. Willa Kernan, sent to South Korea in 1954 to function in an educational lay training role, has found herself increasingly involved in the complex struggle for human rights within the repressive South Korean society. Margaret Fulton, designated in 1948, and Linda Ervin, commissioned in 1973, have seen changes in inner city work as their task in downtown Vancouver changed (and continues to change) from

social work to social change, trying to get at the causes of problems and helping people to organize, to make their needs known to an increasingly heavy government bureaucracy.

The "baby boom" of the fifties, with its unprecedented church growth, created a particular demand for educational ministers, and the 1955 *Year Book* reports that "of the urgent requests from congregations and church boards this year, not one-fifth could be met." Members of the diaconal ministry also found themselves needed outside the structures of the established church, working with the poor and the disadvantaged, whether in downtown institutions or in homes for troubled teenagers.

The admission of men into the diaconal ministry signified another change during this period. In 1962, at the instigation of the Board of Men, the diaconal ministry became open to men who were first known as Certified Employed Churchmen. The name was later shortened to Certified Churchmen and then, along with the other diaconal ministers of the late sixties and seventies, they became known as commissioned ministers. Don Reid, the first male graduate of Covenant



*Don Reid*

College, was commissioned in 1963 and became the director of the Atlantic Christian Training Centre at Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia. Today, Don is the administrator of Windsor Elms, a senior citizens' home in Windsor, Nova Scotia.

Brian Jackson, who considers being "a lay person in full-time United Church work a privilege", became a Certified Employed Churchman through an arrangement with the Board of Men which recognized his previous experience as a commissioned lay missionary in India and a Director of Christian Education in Calgary. After serving on the staff of Hamilton Conference and then as director of Five Oaks Christian Workers'

Centre (near Paris, Ontario), Brian moved to the congregation of Trinity United Church in Vernon, B.C., where he works in a team relationship with an ordained minister.

### Changing Together

From the perspective of the eighties, we may be tempted to look back at the early work of diaconal ministers and shake our heads at those who saw themselves merely as "someone who was there to help" and who worked under the direction of an ordained minister who had higher status (and presumably more wisdom). The *Constitution of the Deaconess Order*, approved by the 1942 General Council shows us that this was indeed the perception of the day.

"When serving in a local congregation, a Deaconess is assistant to the minister, and may be expected to assume some of the following responsibilities... visitation, organize social and welfare work... train



*Olive Sparling*

leaders for Sunday school and week-day activities... assist with camp and vacation schools... take charge of the Junior Congregation... attend to correspondence, files and records and prepare material for congregational letters and Church Calendars." (There was some latitude given: "Deaconesses should not be expected to do so much clerical work that they cannot take a vital part in the leadership of the church.") In other appointments, e.g. to the Board of Christian Education or the Board of Evangelism and Social Service, the deaconess seemed to have more autonomy, but in the congregational setting (where most would see her at work), she was definitely "the assistant."

The changes that took place in perceptions and in United Church policy and polity can be discerned in the minutes of the meetings of the Fellowship of Professional Church Workers, for it is evident that the women (and later men) met not only for fellowship and continuing education, but also to discuss the role, function, and the changing place of women church workers. They were concerned about the designation service, the field activities of the executive secretary, and the new design of the uniform (which gradually disappeared, leaving only a pin and a gown for liturgical functions). In addition, there were many discussions about the place of women ministers, particularly deaconesses and WMS ministers in the church.

As early as 1940, the Deaconess Association recommended consideration of representation of deaconesses in presbyteries and conferences, and in 1942, the *attendance* of deaconesses



at church courts was approved by the General Council. In 1947, a discussion at the meeting of the Fellowship recommended a new order (diaconate) which would be open to men and women who would be members of the courts of the church. In 1954, the General Council authorized a remit which, if passed, would allow deaconesses membership in the courts of the church. They finally became members of the church courts in 1964.



*Willa Kernan*

The support structures of the Deaconess Order at national office were also changing. Tina Campion had acted as executive secretary to the Deaconess Order for many years, faithfully keeping in touch with deaconesses across the country, supporting them, listening to their difficulties, and defending their concerns. Her position ended when the Committee on Deaconesses and Women Church Workers was disbanded. With the admission of deaconesses into the courts of the church in 1964, it was felt that deaconesses (and Certified Employed Churchmen) would find their support within the presbytery and conference structures. Whether or not this was a helpful move depended on the individual situation, and even today, some women workers look back with regret on that particular decision. Others saw it then (and still do) as a step toward fuller participation in the church as a whole. Still others regret having lost staff support and their network even though they appreciate the intent of the move.



*Nancy Edwards*

In 1962, the WMS and the WA amalgamated to form the Board of Women, and that particular change of structure meant another change for WMS workers. An order of service was provided so that commissioned missionaries like Helen Mack could be received into the Deaconess Order. Overseas WMS workers became part of the Board of World Mission; some of them chose to be designated deaconesses, others did not.

This period of time also saw a change in the understanding of the work of diaconal ministers, a change from "assistant" to "team member," "working with" rather than "for". Today,

some diaconal ministers work in team ministries in large cities; others function in "larger parish" rural settings (where a team of ordained and diaconal ministers work in a multi-point charge). In some places, there is a real change in understanding of the role of the diaconal minister. In other situations, change takes a little longer. One deaconess reported that although she had performed a variety of functions in her church including initiating a seniors' group, setting up a library, working with creative liturgy including drama, arranging several large congregational mission events (in addition to her leadership training and Christian Education organization), at the end of two years, she was still being introduced as "the person who looks after the little ones in the nursery."

We can understand her discomfort: her congregation had experienced the many roles of the deaconess first hand. Could



*Winnifred Thomas*

she have better interpreted her ministry? What did that comment say about her congregation's view of ministry (especially diaconal ministry)? Her dilemma was not new. Discussion about the need to clarify and interpret the nature of diaconal ministry had echoed down the years. The 1947 *Year Book* reported a discussion of the status of employed women (the third since union); in 1959, the Fellowship of Professional Church Workers called a business meeting to study and clarify the nature of the Deaconess Order; in 1963, the Fellowship minutes acknowledged the need to clarify the meaning of the deaconess in The United Church of Canada, while in 1965, the group decided that

the distinctive nature of the deaconess should be defined by the church itself... "just as it (the church) determines what the distinctive elements of the (ordained) ministry are." Even to-day, groups in many countries of the world are struggling to define the role of a distinctive diaconal ministry.

## Training

Any discussion of training for diaconal ministry must begin with a note of gratitude to some of the great women of the past who provided a model of women in ministry as well as educational leadership. People like Winnifred Thomas, Gertrude Rutherford, Jean Hutchinson, and Harriet Christie provided vision and new understandings in the whole area of non-ordained ministries. Students preparing for diaconal ministry under their leadership gained a sense of the church's global ministry through the missionaries and international students who visited and studied at the United Church Training School and Covenant College. Teachers like Katharine Hockin at the Ecumenical Forum opened many students' eyes to the world around and beyond them.

Harriet Christie, in particular, stands out as one who fought



for women's rights within the church and for human rights in general. Supervisor of field education and then principal of the United Church Training School and Covenant College, she constantly kept in touch with graduates of the school. In addition, she travelled across Canada in the early fifties visiting churches, especially UCW groups, and raising \$740,000 for a new building (now the Centre for Christian Studies). Although not a deaconess herself, Dr. Christie's contribution and encouragement to countless prospective deaconesses and commissioned ministers cannot be measured.

Like so many other aspects of diaconal ministry, the nature of training has reflected changing functions and perceptions. In the early days, students combined academic studies with a variety of practical subjects ranging from instruction in home nursing and first aid to public speaking. Today's training is more likely to emphasize the dynamics of the teaching-learning process with the practical subjects found in field education experience.

Affiliations between teaching institutions have also changed over the years. In 1930, the United Church Training School was affiliated with Emmanuel College. This arrangement



*Principal, Gertrude Rutherford (fifth from left).*



*Harriet Christie, Jean Hutchinson, Katharine Hockin.*



*Jean Hutchinson teaching New Testament. Betty McColgan in the background.*

continued for many years, with expressions of appreciation from the UCTS students for the calibre of both teaching and care they found from Emmanuel professors. In 1960, new terms of affiliation were approved and a Bachelor of Religious Education degree course instituted whereby a university graduate could enrol simultaneously at both Emmanuel and Covenant Colleges, obtain a diploma from Covenant College (and with it the right to be designated a deaconess) as well as a BRE degree from Emmanuel College (and with it the right to do post graduate studies in theology). This arrangement worked fairly well, although students sometimes reported inevitable tensions arising from conflicting loyalties in being students at two parallel institutions. Others found the dual enrolment a stimulating and enjoyable experience.



*Harriet Christie*

In 1969, the Anglican Women's Training College and Covenant College combined their work by forming what became the Centre for Christian Studies, and the affiliation with Emmanuel College was terminated. (Another reason for ending the affiliation was the founding of the Toronto School of Theology, a federation of seven Theological Colleges; Emmanuel was one of the founding members.) Since then, the Centre for Christian Studies has offered a two year course for diaconal candidates, while the MRE (Master of Religious Education) course has continued at Emmanuel. Part of the reason for coming together in 1969 to form the Centre for

Christian Studies was the need for a new program for lay and professional workers. Volunteers and staff worked over a number of years to design a revised program which has been in effect since 1974.

The program of the Centre for Christian Studies offers learning experiences in two programs: the professional study action program, preparation for those who wish to work professionally in the educational ministry of the church, and the continuing study and action program which provides short courses (one or two weeks, weekends, or series of evenings) for both volunteers and professional workers in congregations and in the community.

The professional study and action program is offered to candidates for diaconal ministry, and combines three foci: academic studies at colleges within the Toronto School of Theology or at the Department of Religious Studies in the University of Toronto; the Core Group, which provides an opportunity to work in a group setting in integrating biblical, theological, and life experiences with practice in an educational ministry; field experience in congrega-



tional and social service ministries. The Very Rev. Clarke MacDonald, past moderator of the United Church, has reflected on the Centre's approach: "The thing that surprises me about the program at the Centre for Christian Studies is its unique integrating of three areas. . . . As I reflect on my own ministry, especially at the beginning, the lack of this integration was a weakness in training for ministry—especially the middle one—the 'core group' reflection, evaluation, and sharing."

The two year Master of Religious Education program offered at Emmanuel College within the Toronto School of Theology is intended to equip persons for leadership in educational ministries. The program includes biblical and theological studies as well as courses in church history, worship, pastoral theology, psychology, Christian Education, and involvement in Field Education.

The goals and objectives of the MRE program include the following: the ability to reflect upon and interpret the meaning of the documents and heritage of the Judaeo-Christian tradition; the ability to communicate the concerns of the church; and

understanding of the human situation as set forth in theology and other disciplines; the ability to plan and carry out different facets of ministry. These might include multi-generational worship, crisis counselling, group discussion, Bible teaching, political action, and ecumenical dialogue.

The United Church of Canada recognizes the Centre for Christian Studies' Diploma program as preparation for diaconal and lay professional ministry. The present United Church Manual states that in order to train for diaconal ministry, a candidate should have a university of arts degree *or* one year of an arts course in addition to work experience *or* personal maturity arising out of business or professional training and experience. The basic program of study should include biblical and theological studies, including ethics, church history, pastoral theology including worship, Christian development, Church policy and administration, and supervised field education. In addition to the Diploma course at the Centre for Christian Studies, the United Church also considers the Master of Religious

Education from Emmanuel College "one of the acceptable training alternatives for diaconal ministry." (United Church *Manual*, page 176)

In the 1983 *Women in Ministry Research Report*, writer Janet Sillman concluded that "Diaconal women (and men) appear to have been the most satisfied (with their theological training) which is a reflection largely on the Centre for Christian Studies in Toronto, the principal training centre for diaconal ministers."

Theological education must continue to change to meet the forms of ministry that are required today and in the future. Some of the tensions between a concept of "theological education" or "training for service" remain. The church needs to ask itself whether diaconal ministry requires education similar to that required for ordained ministry or education that develops its own style.

Many are also asking why training for diaconal ministry is confined to Toronto. Perhaps the relatively small numbers of students preparing for diaconal ministry, as well as historical

tradition (except for a brief period when women could also study at United College in Winnipeg, preparation for diaconal ministry has always been carried out in Toronto), has meant that diaconal education is most practically done in the Toronto setting. Perhaps education for diaconal ministry will become part of other United Church seminaries or other educational settings so that students not able to travel to Toronto can have access to training closer to home.

### Ecumenical Ties

The coming together of Covenant College and the Anglican Women's Training College naturally brought closer ecumenical ties with the Anglican women workers, and in 1970, a proposal for a new organization to include graduates from both former colleges as well as the Centre for Christian Studies was approved, and the "Association of Professional Church Workers" (APCW) came into being. Members of the Association looked forward to

working more closely in the proposed new "Church of Christ in Canada", and in spite of the failure of union talks between the Anglican and United Churches, the Association of Professional Church Workers has remained intact, meeting every two or three years for support, fellowship and continuing education.

Another important aspect of APCW is its international links. In 1955, the (then) Fellowship of Professional Church Workers joined the Diakonia, the World Federation of Deaconess Associations, and links with this organization and with DOTA (the Diakonia of the Americas: Canada, the United States, South America, Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean) have remained strong ever since. Lydia McCullough, while deaconess at St. James United Church in Montreal, was particularly active in these ecumenical organizations, serving as president of DOTA and a member of the executive of the world Diakonia.



*Lydia McCullough*

Those who have attended meetings of these world ecumenical organizations have never failed to be moved and inspired by meeting with sisters and brothers from such countries as South India, Germany, France, Jamaica, and New Zealand. They find that they share many of the same concerns, that they do indeed serve the same Lord, that they are all part of the Christian church in mission.



*CHAPTER FIVE*  
*THE SERVANT MINISTRY*

**FEET**

Feet!

Just plain,  
ordinary  
tired  
feet!

Jesus cared  
about feet.

He didn't ignore  
the head,  
the heart,  
the soul  
—spectacular things like that  
But I'm especially glad  
that he cared  
about feet.  
Not many messiahs  
ever did that.

You can wax eloquent  
and be beautifully abstract  
about people's  
hands, and hearts, and souls.  
But it's hard to be  
removed from human need  
when you're kneeling on the  
floor  
washing another person's  
feet.

Dusty roads are scarce  
and very few sandals are  
worn  
these days,  
but feet trapped in leather  
are just as tired  
—and just as ignored.  
There still aren't  
many messiahs around  
who care about  
feet

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"Jesus . . . rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded." (John 13:4-5 RSV)

The image of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples is a powerful one and serves to reinforce the servant ministry of bringing "good news to the poor and sight to the blind."

The foot washing image is powerful, but it can also be troublesome for us today. It is, first of all, a symbol of servanthood, an unpopular image in our time. (Anyone who has tried to hire dishwashers or other service people can tell you about the difficulty of "getting good help.") Any Greek would recognize the term *diakonia* as a term of inferiority, reference to one who waited on tables, serving food and wine. It was not a symbol of power, nor of popularity.

The servant image can also be troublesome because although it can be used as an expression of genuine humility, it can also be used as one of self-abasement. We can run the danger of equating the *diakonia* with hiding our talents, rejecting opportunities to influence situations which need changing. We can also find ourselves in situations where the role of service is laid upon us, where service becomes subservience rather than servanthood.

What, then, are we to make of the servant ministry and of those who feel themselves called to be part of the *diakonia*? Where is the line between servanthood and subservience?

### Called To Serve

The preceding chapters have shown us that the story of diaconal ministry is not a neat one. The dimensions of Phoebe's work in New Testament days disappeared, and although the work of the diaconal minister today is founded on the ideas and ideals of her ministry, throughout the years the diaconate has changed, remaining on the "cutting edge" and taking different shapes according to the needs of the church and the constraints of society. In early days, deaconesses distributed food and brought comfort to the poor. Today, diaconal ministers may distribute food, but as well, they



help the poor to organize, to learn about the structures of the society in which they live so that they can fight "City Hall". Once the diaconal minister spent a good deal of time visiting the sick and the shut-in. Today, he or she may visit, but may also spend a good deal of time training teams of lay people to visit in homes or hospitals.

A serving ministry means caring for the spiritual as well as the physical, attacking attitudes that keep people in bondage and trying to change structures (both inside and outside the church) that prevent people from feeling like persons of dignity and worth. It means working with people in their search for meaning, faith and hope, and making the church a community, a family of people who accept and love one another.

This is not to say that only diaconal ministers are called to serve. Service is an essential aspect of the mission of all God's people. Jesus called the whole church to *diakonia*, to reach out to others, both at home and overseas. Yet early in its life, the church recognized the need to embody this service dimension of the community in the diaconate. (Similarly, the dimensions of oversight, baptising, preaching, teaching and presiding at worship were embodied in the office of bishop and later the presbyter.)

Diaconal ministers, then, cannot be considered substitutes for the church in service. Rather, they are called to intensify and make the ministry of the whole church more effective. *Diakonia* is at the heart of who Jesus Christ is and what Christ called

the church to be. We are, first of all, people who have been served. We are people whose feet have been washed by a Servant Lord.

### Called To Enable

Even while we speak of a *diakonos* and try to understand the meaning of servant for our times, we need to struggle with the meaning of power—our power and the power of the diaconate. In comparison to many in the world, we are rich and powerful and must confess our part in keeping the excluded out, the downtrodden low, and the vulnerable powerless. We need to recognize that God's mission is biased toward the poor, that we must rid ourselves of the "claim to fame" mentality.

At the same time, there's the danger of sliding comfortably into the role of serving because it's all we feel we can do. In a society where women are expected to serve the needs of men, it is difficult to know when service is taken on as a way of life or when it is imposed by society's expectations. Because many (most in The United Church of Canada) diaconal ministers are women, there's the danger of feeling that service is appropriately "women's work". We need to allow ourselves to be in positions of power and leadership, positions where we can influence and change oppressive institutions and policies, even when we don't wish to be in those positions. Although Jesus sided with the poor, he also taught with authority and used his power to support the lost, the afflicted, those who were seeking the abundant life.



*Barbara Elliott, second from left, with committee members Shelley Finson, Ina Snelgrove, Eva Manly, Dolly Lansdowne.*

Perhaps the power of diaconal ministry is best found in its commitment to education and the enabling and empowering ministry that education implies. For the minister ordained to the church's ministry of word and sacrament, education is *one* of the tasks of ministry. For the diaconal minister, *all* tasks are carried out within an educational context. Barbara Elliott, a diaconal minister and staff member of Saskatchewan Conference says:

"Surely we need at least as many 'bridges' as proclaimers, persons who can ask the critical questions as to how planning might happen, how groups can make decisions, in general enabling persons to take ownership for their own growth and life in community, and affect structures accordingly."

It's sometimes easier to say what diaconal ministers do rather than what they are. The difference between diaconal and "word and sacrament" ministers is often characterized by a difference in style, a working with, rather than proclaiming to. Diaconal ministers have been trained to think educationally, to consult, to work with people in groups, so they are enabled to think and talk about questions of faith. In his letter to the young church at Ephesus, Paul says that the aim of the faith bestowed by God on people is the "equipping of saints." Diaconal ministers are in a unique position to enable the "equipping of the saints" for ministry.

One deaconess said:

"It seemed to me that when I worked in a congre-



gation, one of my main jobs was to provide a sense of vision, a picture of what was possible in the church and the community. Then I found the important thing was to help people realize that they could do all kinds of things they never thought they could."

When people work together and "do all kinds of things they never thought they could", a community is created, a community where people can question, argue, struggle, and know that they will be loved and cared for no matter what.

## Called To Risk

Diaconal ministers don't fall into neat categories. For many years, they have been called upon to explain themselves or their ministry, to justify why they might be essential in the church. Only after a long struggle have they been recognized as members of the Order of Ministry within the United Church, and even the move of General Council in 1977 to grant ordained and diaconal ministers equal salary and benefits, along with equal status, has been a mixed blessing. Some diaconal ministers have found placement difficult in a significant part of a church which suddenly no longer considers their ministry crucial. It's difficult not to become cynical about congregations who look for a second ordained minister rather than a diaconal minister because they want a "real" minister (whom they can get for the same price). It's difficult not to give up ministering in a church which at times does not seem to recognize that diaconal ministry offers a different, but essential style of leadership.

Those who work within the structures of the church as Christian Educators or congregational visitors sometimes encounter confusion about their role and status. The need for recognition and affirmation everyone needs has, in many cases,

been lacking. Those who work outside the structures of the church have an even more difficult time. If they seek to strike out at causes of hurt, poverty, and loneliness, they may be misinterpreted and misunderstood.

When the necessary risks are taken, however, and the ministry is continued "in spite of", we find that there are compensations. We find, first of all, that the diaconal minister is in a unique position. A church which has ministers who are ordained, diaconal, or lay either runs the risk of being very hierarchical or has the opportunity to blend and affirm those ministries. Those in diaconal ministry have the opportunity to change the patriarchal and hierarchical assumptions of the church because they do not fit neatly or readily into the system.

Then, too, the diaconal minister often finds him or herself at the cutting edge, with the opportunity to initiate and innovate ministries within the church or in the community. The story of diaconal ministry is the story of those whose ministries have moved them to new frontiers in pastoral and prophetic roles both in Canada and overseas. If we understand ministry as the ministry of the whole people of God, then perhaps diaconal ministry, with its emphasis on bringing comfort to the afflicted, nurturing in the faith, enabling people to do what they never thought they could, may be the truly powerful ministry.

"...but whoever would be great among you must be your servant... For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10: 43-45 RSV)

## CHAPTER SIX

# “WAITING AS FAST AS WE CAN”

Last summer, a deaconess visited one of the churches she had served about ten years before. She looked forward to seeing her old haunts; the years she had spent there had been intense, busy, and productive, and she had been able to initiate many new activities in the congregation.

The Christian Education wing had been remodelled and she wandered from room to room, thinking about how it would look in the fall. In the main hall, she stopped to look at the pictures of the former ministers hanging there, as they always had. There they were—formal, serious... all male. All male... how could that be? She distinctly remembered being asked to send her picture to be added to the line-up of former church staff. The caretaker, noting her confusion said, “Oh, are you looking for your picture? It’s up in one of the back rooms.”

Sure enough, there it was, along with three of the church’s missionaries, on the wall between the small library and the kitchen. She wondered aloud why the deaconess had not been “hung” with the church’s ministers and was told “you’re lucky you’re even there... we haven’t bothered with the deaconesses who came after you!” What troubled her even more was the fact that those she talked to did not seem to understand why she was disturbed,

that her anger came not just from her desire to be remembered, but from the feeling that the church did not think that her work, the work of diaconal ministry in that church was recognized as a “real” ministry and acknowledged as such.

The United Church has had an ambivalent attitude toward the diaconal ministry for many years. On the one hand, churches have been grateful and pleased with the work of the diaconal ministers. On the other hand, they have often relegated them to an area somewhere between the library and the kitchen!

We might also say that the United Church has officially done a kind of “two-step” as it has vacillated between recognition and near extinction of the diaconate.

### Two Steps Forward...

During the period of the sixties to the eighties, a good deal of progress was made in the recognition of those in diaconal ministry in The United Church of Canada. In 1964, deaconesses and certified Churchmen were made members of the courts of the church. This was indeed a forward step, but it was followed by the discovery that since those in



diaconal ministry were technically regarded as lay people, their membership in presbytery and conference was at the expense of lay congregational representatives. The 1968 recognition of diaconal ministers as members of the Order of Ministry solved that particular problem, and in 1977, the General Council passed a recommendation that commissioned ministers (as they were then known) be subject to the same personnel policies as ordained ministers regarding salaries, housing allowance, travel, pensions, study leave, etc.

The Commission on Church Union between The United Church of Canada, The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Anglican Church of Canada meeting about this time showed some understanding and recognition of the validity of the diaconal ministry in their proposal for a three-fold ministry of bishops, presbyters (word and sacrament ministers) and deacons. They proposed that the deacons would be ordained to a ministry of Christian service in healing, teaching, pastoral care, worship, and dialogue between the church and the world. The diaconate would be a distinct ministry, not an apprenticeship to the presbyterate and would be considered a distinct order of ministry in the proposed Church of Christ in Canada.

There was a good deal of negative reaction to the recommendations and the seeming omission or reference to the work that had been done by the United Church deaconesses in the history of The United Church of Canada. This was probably due to the unfortunate use of totally male terminology in the union documents. In a memo to the commission, Dr. John Webster Grant, United Church historian and member of the commission, was quick to point out that the new diaconate would indeed include deaconesses, and that United

Church deaconesses provided a more obvious model for the new diaconate than Anglican or Congregationalist deacons. At any rate, the union talks collapsed and although the formation of a diaconate ordained to a ministry of service went with them, the recognition of a valid diaconal ministry in the new church could be considered a "step forward".

### ... And Back Again

Even while progress was being made in the recognition of the diaconal ministry, the church was busily engaged in a "two step"—forward, then back again.

The "naming" of diaconal ministers is one example. From 1968 on, the term "commissioning" began to be used and "commissioned" ministers appeared on the stage. The move confused and hurt many who had been designated deaconesses, but they learned to live with it. Somewhere in the seventies, it was discovered that the term "commissioning" had never been officially discussed or sanctioned, and the term had simply "seeped" into usage. The sessional committee of the 1977 General Council urged the General Council to "take action to clarify once and for all the terminology to be used."

The diaconal ministry probably reached its lowest ebb with the 1977 *Task Force on the Ministry Report* which saw no need for the continuation of commissioned ministry in the United Church. The report recommended that no new persons be admitted to the commissioned category, since the three functions of ministry (episcopal, presbyteral, and diaconal) could be carried out by the lay and

ordained ministry. Those who were already functioning in the commissioned ministry would be offered ordination. The authors of the Report were undoubtedly sincere in their efforts to redefine the ministry of the people of God, but, nevertheless, their recommendations were seen by many in diaconal ministry as a denial of their vocation.

Many women (and men) had strong convictions about the work of diaconal ministry, choosing to be designated or commissioned, not ordained, and the Report was greeted with strong reaction by commissioned ministers. Many felt that if they had wanted that route (ordination), they would have chosen it; since many had done post-graduate study (not in courses required for ordination), they wanted to continue in the path they had set for themselves.

One also wonders at the amount of consultation that went into that decision (of 14 members of the task force, *two* were deaconesses). Dr. Harriet Christie, speaking to the North American Diakonia Association in 1974, talked about the exciting developments and proposed changes in the diaconate in many denominations. She said "All are for both men and women and all that I have looked at *except that of my own church* (ed. italics), The United Church of Canada, have been prepared with the full co-operation of deaconesses."

The Task Force's recommendation regarding ordination was opposed by the 1980 *Project Ministry Report*, but nevertheless, it offers a prime example of the church's ambivalent attitude to the diaconal ministry. We can understand the feeling expressed by church workers at that time that diaconal ministry had been ignored and that the "lack of understanding... suggests that the report was written from a standpoint of dealing with the

problem of how to get rid of the deaconess order rather than as trying to deal with the problems of the attitude toward the women in the order."

The question of ordination has always been a troublesome one for those in diaconal ministry. The United Church of Canada, like most patriarchal hierarchical institutions (and like most churches!), has not valued its women (diaconal ministers) as much as its men (ordained) ministers. In the early days of the United Church, women were excluded from ordained ministry, and male norms of this ministry are still strong.

Perhaps this is why more men have not been attracted to the diaconal ministry. Perhaps they do not understand the diaconal ministry as playing a unique and valuable role within the ministry of the whole church. The ordained ministry seems to be vested with a "mystique of holiness and authority" and perhaps because of this, diaconal ministry has been seen to be a "second, if not second class" ministry.

One diaconal minister reported having a conversation with a nephew about to enter training for ordination. The young man confessed that although he had a call to ministry, he had difficulty seeing himself in the pulpit and functioning within traditional forms of ministry, as he understood it. He thought he might be better suited to an institutional or educational ministry. When he was asked why he didn't train for diaconal ministry (since that was the ministry he had described), he looked blank: he had never heard of the diaconal ministry. We might ask whether men (and women) are offered alternate routes when they become candidates for ministry within The United Church of Canada.

Since 1975, the numbers of women in the ordained ministry (or training for the ordained ministry) have doubled; in 1983, fifty percent of students studying theology were women, with a high of seventy-three percent enrolled at the Van-



couver School of Theology. Why are women seeking to be ordained rather than commissioned to diaconal ministry? Are they seeking ordination because of their models of ministry (mainly word and sacrament)? Because of what they see in the struggles of diaconal ministers for acceptance and in some cases, job security? Or because they don't know enough about diaconal ministry?

The increased numbers of women being ordained within The United Church of Canada may have a negative effect on the diaconal ministry. Although women have been ordained since 1936, they are still having difficulty in being placed in churches. In a number of cases, they are being called to serve as "second" ministers, for educational/outreach/pastoral roles which by training and vocation have been traditionally filled by diaconal ministers.

It will be interesting to observe the effect of the greatly increased numbers of women ordained ministers, and to see whether their acceptance by the church might mean greater or less acceptance of the diaconal ministry. Perhaps the future of diaconal ministry lies within the laity. On the other hand, perhaps we will see a time when candidates for ministry (both men and women) take equal amounts of training for a particular path—and are ordained to a diaconal ministry of service, education, and pastoral care or a ministry of word, sacrament, and pastoral care. The issue of ordination remains unsolved and poses another question for the future.

## Signs of Hope

The *Report of Project Ministry* in 1980 must have been greeted with sighs of relief and hope by some commissioned ministers, for the report vigorously opposed the 1977 Task Force recommendation that commissioned ministers be ordained. Even though some members of the

diaconal ministry were still troubled by some of the Report's recommendations and definitions regarding focus of ministry, they were heartened by the fact that the Report acknowledged and even "apologized" for the past actions of the church.

"Among the deaconesses, who are one group among the commissioned ministers, the most characteristic response (to the Task Force Report) is one of disappointment and frustration and sometimes, anger. This comes from their feeling that the church does not seem to recognize or appreciate this particular form of 'ministry'. The deaconess 'order' or 'movement' has deep roots in Christian history beyond, as well as in, The United Church of Canada. It gained recognitions among us through a long struggle and has made a significant contribution in many areas of the church's life. To suggest that they now be ordained seems to many of the deaconesses a 'clericalizing' or 'homogenizing' action which they find particularly surprising in a time in the church's life when we claim to be wanting to recognize the variety of gifts and assignments that the Spirit generates in the church."

"...One thing however is clear: that the category of 'commissioned ministry' is clouded does not alter the fact that we have a considerable number of people in 'full-time' service in the church who have prepared themselves for this service, have been recognized by the church, and given a role of leadership within it. To these the community has a genuine obligation.

"Further, many of these persons feel that they have not been adequately consulted about their understanding of ministry and their summons to ministry. We note, in particular, many deaconesses felt that in accepting (or being moved into) the category and terminology of 'commissioned minis-

try' they gave away a sense of their historical identity as deaconesses and lost a base from which to affirm their self-understanding. It is ironic for them to hear now that the category of 'commissioned ministry' is in some doubt! We believe it important just now for the church to recognize that in recent years we have demonstrated insensitivity to the deaconesses and the history of the deaconess order. We need to hear their claims, and that of others in 'commissioned ministry' who tell us they feel a certain institutional violence to their personhood in the options with which they are faced i.e. be ordained, or continue in an 'order' or category which is being officially extinguished." (The *Report of Project Ministry*—pages 52 and 54)

Consultations and General Council actions which followed that report continued its momentum. In March, 1980, a consultation of deaconesses, certified churchmen and commissioned ministers met for one day to consider a number of recommendations made by the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education. That meeting, the first of its kind, was an anxious, divided, and painful experience for almost everyone. The General Council had the wisdom to hear the pain and to realize that the commissioned ministers should have been consulted earlier. They postponed any decisions and gave that diverse group two years to work with all the deaconesses, certified churchmen and commissioned ministers across the country in preparation for a second consultation. That consul-

tation, which took place at Cedar Glen in February, 1982, was a highlight experience for all the participants and included group decision making, caring, and community feeling. Group members found that they could work together and speak to the church, rather than just reacting to what the church had decided for them. The General Councils which followed reflected the tenor and recommendations of that consultation.

The General Councils of the 1980's were important ones for the diaconal ministry and significant policies were made or affirmed:

- the affirmation of one order of ministry consisting of persons ordained to a ministry of word, sacrament, and pastoral care, and commissioned to a diaconal ministry of education, service, and pastoral care;
- the offer to include qualified commissioned missionaries as diaconal ministers;
- the decision that the entrance into the order of ministry be an act of commissioning to a diaconal ministry of education, service and pastoral care;
- the naming of deaconesses or commissioned ministers as diaconal ministers, and the manual and all official documents changed accordingly;
- the granting of a license to administer the sacraments by application to presbytery or presbytery executive (if the diaconal minister is part of a team where sacraments are seen as a shared function; where the diaconal minister is the only order of ministry person on the pastoral charge; where the diaconal minister is in a pastoral function, e.g. chaplaincy; if the context warrants it);
- the affirmation of the same conditions for transfer and settlement as for ordained candidates.

Other things have happened. The Division of Ministry Personnel and Education has set up a standing committee connected to diaconal ministry; Virginia Coleman, half time staff person, has been



engaged to co-ordinate and supervise activities and policies of diaconal ministry; and a new United Church diaconal association has come into being. Called the Diakonia of The United Church of Canada, the new group was formed in June, 1984, at Five Oaks Center, near Paris, Ontario. It differs from the ecumenical Association of Professional Church Workers (APCW) in that it sees itself as a group which provides not only support and understanding, but also works to formulate and recommend policy to the national church, act as an advocacy group to individual members of those in diaconal ministry and make recommendations for training and continuing education. It hopes to have a close working relationship with both APCW and with the national Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, with a member of the Diakonia on the MP&E Diaconal Ministry Committee, and the MP&E staff person on the co-ordinating committee of the Diakonia.

Even while we applaud these changes, there is a danger of becoming too complacent, of letting the church slide back into its "two step." At the 1984 General Council, for example, a petition from Belleville Presbytery (through Bay of Quinte Conference) asked that the granting of license to administer sacraments by diaconal ministers be changed and allowed in cases of "extreme isolation". The petition was not granted, but it may represent the kind of fear that some have in seeing diaconal ministry as "equal and different." Only time will tell whether the United Church, at both the national



*Kathryn Virginia Coleman*



*Carol Stevenson Seller,  
Chairperson, Diaconal  
Ministry Committee.*



*Cheryl Kirk*

and congregational levels has abandoned its two-step in favour of a circle dance!

### **Cheryl Kirk: Diaconal Minister**

In comparison with Helen Mack who began her work in 1950 or Stella Burry who was designated in 1926, Cheryl Kirk is relatively new to the diaconal ministry. A university graduate, Cheryl went to the Centre for Christian Studies and was commissioned by London Conference in 1979.

Cheryl's background and work can perhaps illustrate for us some of the facets of diaconal ministry today. She is married and worked for five years at Central United Church in Unionville, Ontario before taking time out for maternity leave. Her part in the team ministry at Central United included responsibility for the Christian Education program, new family visitation and counselling,

and participation in worship. She preached one Sunday in six and took part in the weekly liturgy, where she was a full participant, having been granted a license to administer the sacraments.

Cheryl is also what you might call a "church activist", working to effect changes on behalf of diaconal ministry. She chaired the Taskforce on Commissioned/Diaconal Ministry which functioned between the 1980 and 1982 General Councils and which planned the consultation at Cedar Glen. As well, she's been a member of the sub-committee on Diaconal Ministry, which reported to the Candidature Committee of the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education and was part of those discussions about educational preparation, sacraments, transfer, and settlement.

Cheryl was present at the founding meeting of the Diakonia of The United Church of Canada and said that she felt a sense of excitement as this new structure for policy making, education, support, fellowship and advocacy was formed. "There was a great spirit of celebration and a sense of reclaiming our identity as well as creating structures which will foster the growth of diaconal ministry. We danced Sarah's circle as we celebrated the long history that has brought us to this point and as we visioned the future of diaconal ministry."

Phoebe, Emma Louise, Stella, Helen, Brian, Don, Nancy, Elinor, Cheryl—and many, many more have made up that committed minority, that distinctive ministry within The United Church of Canada. The circle has not been perfect, the lines have been blurred, and the picture has sometimes been out of focus, but members of diaconal ministry have worked for the love of God and Jesus Christ in the mission of the church. The story of diaconal ministry can never be complete, for as the church changes, so will its ministry change to meet challenges that lie ahead. Even so, we can celebrate both our past and present with a sense of thanksgiving and look forward to the issues and questions of the future.



## *APPENDIX*

### *DIACONAL MINISTRY IN OTHER DENOMINATIONS*

The understanding and practice of diaconal ministry varies greatly among major Canadian denominations. In some churches, the diaconal ministry is performed by the laity; in others, the form resembles that of The United Church of Canada. The following statements reflect the understanding of the diaconate in the Canadian Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic Churches. They were made by spokespersons in answer to the questions: what is the present concept of diaconal ministry? How is diaconal ministry practised in your church?

#### **Anglican Church of Canada**

The Anglican Church has three historic orders of ministry: bishops, presbyters, and deacons. Until 1976, these orders were open only to men; since then, with the granting of ordination to women, they are open to both men and women, although the practise varies across the country.

Within the Anglican diaconate, there are two categories: the transitional and the permanent. Anyone wishing ordination to the priesthood is first ordained a deacon and undertakes a kind of apprenticeship (six months to one year) before becoming ordained to the priesthood. When women were admitted to the priesthood in 1976, many Anglican deaconesses chose to become ordained as deacons and then as priests. Others, feeling that they did not want to become members of the priesthood, chose to remain deaconesses, even though that category will eventually disappear.

Members of the permanent diaconate perform an auxiliary ministry, preaching, taking sacraments to the sick in the absence of or under the supervision of the priest. The membership of the permanent diaconate

has traditionally been male, although women are being ordained to the permanent diaconate in parts of the country where women are not yet allowed ordination to the priesthood.

## **Canadian Baptist Federation**

The diaconate in the Federation Baptist churches takes the form of a lay service ministry. Deacons are elected by the congregations, usually for a three year period on a rotating basis. They serve as spiritual advisors to the congregation and to the minister, and have the responsibility of serving communion as well as representing the concerns of the deacons on the congregational committees. In the majority of Baptist churches, men serve as deacons and women serve as deaconesses. Some congregations today, however, are electing women deacons.

Deaconesses in Baptist churches have traditionally looked after the preparation of the communion elements and have done visitation under the supervision of the pastor. Like deacons, deaconesses are elected by the congregation. Non-ordained people who work full time within the Baptist church are known by the title of their function: Director of Christian Education, Director of Youth Work, etc.

The Baptist Federation includes the Maritimes, Western Union, and the Convention of Ontario and Quebec churches. There are other Baptist churches, sometimes called "Fellowship" or "Evangelical" Baptists who have a variety of approaches to diaconal ministry.

## **Presbyterian**

The order of Diaconal Ministries of the Presbyterian Church in Canada involves men and women who are called to special tasks in the equipping of the whole people of God to participate in the reconciling work of Jesus Christ. The majority of the membership work in the field of Christian Education; others are involved in hospital visitation and in social work in institutional settings. The members of the order may take the title of deaconess or a title according to function, such as Director of Christian Education or Pastoral Assistant.

The ministry of the order will develop and evolve as it seeks to serve the church in the world in the ministry of service, education, and pastoral care.

## **Roman Catholic**

The special call of deacons is to the ministry of charity, to the call to journey with their fellow brothers and sisters in their search for meaning. This might be in the area of liturgy, in being a leader of prayer, in explaining the Word or in a living out of any of the spiritual or corporal acts of mercy.

The Roman Catholic Church in Canada has two categories of deacons: those who are ordained to be deacons before becoming priests, and those who belong to the permanent diaconate. Most members of the permanent diaconate are married, older men who either work within a parish setting assisting in liturgy under the supervision of an ordained priest, or function in a social service setting. The diaconate as a stepping stone to the priesthood has always been part of the Roman Catholic Church. The permanent diaconate was part of the early church, fell into disuse, and then was reinstated around 1964.



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