

Gathered by the River

*Reflections and essays of
women doing ministry*

Edited by Gertrude Lebans

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THE UNITED CHURCH PUBLISHING HOUSE

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Chapter 8

Diaconal Ministry as a Feminist Model of Ministry

*It is not coincidental that diaconal ministry,
which has been primarily a women's ministry,
would not only advocate a relational style
of ministry but that this style of ministry
would be deemed weak and ineffectual
by a church with a patriarchal history.*

Kay Heuer and Teresa Jones

“women’s work” of service to ministries as ministry in the diaconal ministry, we then

Feminist Principles

There is no one feminist perspective or set of feminist principles. Like all living belief systems, we have struggled with what it means to be a feminist in the life of our sisters, while calling a time there has been a gradual realization that it is the community defining the cultural contexts, our life experiences and as communities have we want to invest energy. We have learned from life and in our philosophical stance. Intentional in our commitment to

In order to be clear about the criteria we are using we have articulated a set of feminist principles new to the feminist movement. We have named those principles we believe which we have discovered to be a journey toward integrity.

- A feminist perspective is one that values Women’s experience—practices are valued and honoured. Different ways women are respected. In addition, analysis and diversity in the community. This is a life that is possible. There is a deliberate intention that can bring life to the
- A feminist perspective is one that values more than some persons hold. It critiques structures of power

Diaconal ministry, sometimes dismissed, often held in suspicion and frequently misunderstood, is a ministry which grows out of a passion to do justice. Historically the diaconate was the only avenue for paid ministry open to women. It is chosen primarily by women still. While always affirming women’s ministry—lay and professional—diaconal ministry in recent decades has gradually evolved towards a greater articulation and practice of a feminist model of ministry both in style and vision. This evolution towards a feminist model means that diaconal ministry emphasizes a collegial, consultative, mutual approach, along with other principles of feminism. There is a commitment to value the experience of women, to critique structures of power, and to live in global solidarity with all those who are marginalized in church and society. Modelling a feminist style itself, the educational preparation for this ministry deliberately affirms and enables the development of skills and gifts of a feminist nature. The conviction to work collegially and to seek justice are intentional commitments of the diaconal community in The United Church of Canada. These feminist convictions are integral to diaconal ministry and are the basis for our claim that diaconal ministry is essentially a feminist model of ministry.

Writing this chapter jointly, we are two diaconal ministers describing the vision of ministry we try to live, along with our communities. We begin by offering a set of principles which underlie the feminist stance we have adopted. We follow that with an interpretation of diaconal ministry as it has evolved in the United Church of Canada, from

"women's work" of service to doing education, pastoral care, and justice ministries as ministry in the round. Having explored feminism and diaconal ministry, we then proceed to the dialogue between the two.

Feminist Principles

There is no one feminist perspective since there is no one absolute set of feminist principles. Like all liberationist perspectives, feminism is not a monolithic belief system. Over many years women have pondered and struggled with what it means to take seriously our own lives and the lives of our sisters, while calling a misogynist society to justice. Through this time there has been a gradual evolution in feminist thought. One of our realizations has been that it is not helpful to have only some women in the community defining the parameters of feminism. Depending on our cultural contexts, our life experiences and choices, each of us as individuals and as communities have had to decide what is life-giving and where we want to invest energy. We have also come to accept and revel in what we have learned from life and from each other with its resultant changes in our philosophical stance. The feminist community has become intentional in our commitment to on-going critique and revisioning.

In order to be clear about our particular liberative feminist perspective and the criterion we are using in order to reflect on diaconal ministry, we have articulated a set of feminist principles. These principles are not new to the feminist movement, nor is this an exhaustive list. We have named those principles we believe to be central to a liberative feminism which we have discovered together with our feminist sisters while on the journey toward integrity.

- A feminist perspective is developed out of the experience of women. Women's experience—personal and collective—is sought out, valued and honoured. Differences within the commonality of being women are respected. Intuition is validated. The gift of story, emotion, analysis and diversity are given a recognized place in the life of community. This is a life-centred perspective in the broadest sense possible. There is a deliberate valuing of all in women's experience that can bring life to the earth and all its inhabitants.
- A feminist perspective intends for leadership to be shared. Rather than some persons holding power over others, a feminist model critiques structures of power with the intention of undermining and

replacing hierarchy with a communal, collaborative, consensual style of leadership. The community is called upon to be accountable to one another by challenging and inviting each other to be responsible in our attitudes and behaviour. All members are expected to bring gifts and skills to the life of community. Decision-making is to be shared. The ideals of feminism are to be met not through the "lone ranger" but through the efforts of the community, or persons acting on behalf of the community.

- Through socio-political analysis and a commitment to societal change, feminism stands in opposition to oppressive structures. Feminism has risen from women's experience of oppression. Women, in becoming aware that the symptoms we experience in our personal lives are rooted in the political and economic structure of society, strive for systemic change. Feminism enables women to correlate the personal with the political. Feminism makes the inter-weaving connections between systems of domination, such as sexism, racism, ageism and class exploitation, all of which degrade, discriminate and demean human beings and the environment. Feminism seeks to stand in solidarity with all women who are oppressed, taking a revolutionary stance in favour of those who are on the underside of society.
- In a liberationist feminist model, solidarity demands action. As an activist-based philosophy, feminism is committed to a transformative vision not just for self, not just for women, but for all of society. This is not a vision that is fait-accompli. Feminism acknowledges that we cannot know what the vision looks like in concrete terms. We do know, however, the concreteness of oppression in women's lives. *The goal is to undermine and replace patriarchy with a new way of being. With this in mind, feminism sets life-affirming goals and challenges the patriarchal assumptions and traditions of the status quo.* The promise in the vision is the enhancement of life for those who have been denied it. Feminism believes that there is a way for human beings to live in community where all persons can live in dignity and mutual respect, sharing all of the resources that the earth affords.
- Feminism espouses mutuality, with the ensuing commitment to interpret what that means for a variety of community circumstances. Mutuality, as we understand it, means the power of shared relation.¹

Mutuality in relations each person and encourage a perspective of mutuality takes time. Moreover, following patriarchal being. Within the feminist privilege and experience challenge is to cultivate differences. Only through and hierarchy within relationships.

- A feminist model is for others who are discriminated women will see ourselves the collective discovery and justice for all. Sit untapped resources and processes of becoming the globe to the tune of political lives.

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What is Diaconal Ministry

The primary task of diaconal is mutual empowerment through education, service. This includes working to maintain relationships

Mutuality in relationship honours the inherent value and power of each person and encourages a full personhood of each. To integrate a perspective of mutuality into a personal or communal lifestyle takes time. Moreover, it is difficult to avoid getting trapped into following patriarchal assumptions that are deeply rooted in our being. Within the feminist community there are vast differences in privilege and experience which lead to differences in outlook. The challenge is to cultivate ways of sharing resources and respecting differences. Only then does it become possible to dissipate competition and hierarchy within a community and to learn to live in mutual relationships.

- A feminist model is intended to empower and energize women and others who are discriminated against in society. The hope is that all women will see ourselves as full participants, needed and wanted, in the collective discovery of our power to enable abundant life, dignity and justice for all. Strength and courage, as well as all of the other untapped resources of those marginalized, are to be celebrated in the processes of becoming community. Together we seek to dance across the globe to the tune of creative transformation in our personal and political lives.

Diaconal Ministry in The United Church of Canada

In the United Church of Canada, diaconal ministry is part of the order of ministry along with ordained ministry. There is salary parity as a basic minimum wage. Diaconal ministers are commissioned to the ministries of education, service and pastoral care. Despite many attempts to clarify diaconal ministry and to validate its approach to doing ministry, there remains within the church a widespread confusion about the nature and place of diaconal ministry.

What is Diaconal Ministry?

*The primary task of diaconal ministry
is mutual empowerment
through education, service and pastoral care.
This includes working together
to maintain relationships that are life-giving*

*and sustaining of community
to meet immediate needs
and to work to create a just and loving world.²*

This excerpt from the Diakonia of the United Church statement names the importance that is given to mutual empowerment. It represents the emphasis in perspective and style that diaconal ministers embrace. Diaconal ministry is committed to bringing wholeness to individuals and society-at-large. Responding to the needs of the world for just and loving relationship, diaconal ministry works primarily through empowering others.

At the same time, diaconal ministers lift up the three specific functions which bring definition to this ministry: education, service and pastoral care. The three functions are used in the Service of Commissioning to Diaconal Ministry. They describe much of what diaconal ministers do. The essential role of diaconal ministry however, is contained in the goal of mutual empowerment. Diaconal ministers speak of an emphasis in what they do. The way in which we approach our tasks in ministry is crucial; in fact, our identity as ministers has more to do with our approach to ministry than with the tasks or functions we perform.

The style and emphasis of this ministry embodies feminist ideals such as mutuality, the valuing of each person's experience, collaboration and consultation. Central to this style is a transformative stance that instills passion and hope for ongoing liberation, both personal and societal.

Official United Church structures and documents do not represent a commitment to this particular emphasis in diaconal ministry; church structures can only recognize diaconal ministry structurally as performing the functions of education, service and pastoral care. The style or approach for doing ministry is not easy for an ecclesiastical bureaucracy to understand or categorize. This means those in diaconal ministry are continuously left with the struggle to interpret our approach to ministry and the vision that informs this emphasis, while feeling boxed into limiting functional categorizations.

The three functions—education, service and pastoral care—are woven throughout diaconal ministry. In the practice of ministry these functions cannot be separated. For those of us in diaconal ministry, these

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Diaconal Ministry as a Feminist Model of Ministry

functions inform and are informed by the style or method by which ministry is offered.

A ministry of education includes both the activities of education in ministry and the educational perspective from which all ministry is approached. Diaconal ministers bring an educational perspective to all of their work, whether it is expressed in worship, administration, outreach ministry or congregational study groups.

An educationally-focused ministry enables and empowers the vital ministry of the laity. Starting with the experience of the people in order to set the agenda for learning, the experience of the group is intentionally sought out to provide resource to the learning. The process is fundamentally participatory. Learning is considered life-long and mutual; thus, those in designated leadership roles are seen as learners as well.

A ministry of service entails responding to the needs of the Christian community and the world. To serve means to make an intentional choice to embrace a ministry which leaves itself open to the pain and needs of others. This style of ministry requires the ability to stand with the suffering, to work with them for healing, growth, dignity and justice. Through educational consciousness-raising programmes, support groups, individual counselling, community development, or ecumenical coalitions acting to change government policies, diaconal ministry advocates with and for those with less power and encourages others to do the same.

Pastoral care is strongly connected with both educational and service dimensions in diaconal ministry. This work involves responding to individuals and communities in need of spiritual, physical or emotional support by addressing the immediate circumstances and working to change the source of the hurt whenever that is possible. Diaconal ministers are intentional in sharing the leadership for this ministry by not only stressing the importance of the community to care for one another but by educating and encouraging groups, such as lay visitation teams or volunteers in women's shelters. From this educational perspective of pastoral care, issues such as incest, spousal assault and addictions are addressed as symptoms of a society needing structural change.

Integral to feminism and likewise to a diaconal style of ministry is the assumption that change—personal and systemic—is necessary if the world is to become a more fair and just place. Learning involves change.

Often, addressing the source of the hurt involves making a change. Consciousness-raising and advocacy involve change. Although diaconal ministry is a style of ministry that places an emphasis on change, we know many people prefer to follow familiar ways, fearing the loss of privilege that change may bring. The task for diakonia is to uncover the blocks to growth and change and then to work to remove those obstructions within ourselves as well as in the world.

Despite our passion for this style of ministry, we know that this style does not belong to us alone. Some lay persons and some ordained ministry personnel embrace and embody similar approaches to service. For the good of community and the world, we encourage it and celebrate it wherever diaconal ministry happens. Diakonia is a ministry belonging to the whole people of God. Everything we do belongs to the whole faith community and everything we do needs to be done in co-operation with others.

Diaconal ministers however, are deliberately and intentionally committed to this style of ministry; for us, it is not optional! We hold this particular style and vision of ministry in common as a group and seek to lift it up for the whole Christian community—the diakonia of all believers. As ministers, our diaconal role is to ensure that others are encouraged and enabled to participate in the ministry of diakonia which we believe to be vital to the vision of authentic life intended for God's world.

The roots of diaconal ministry

Diakonos, from which the word deacon is derived, usually referred to the table servant, though it also applied to menial workers and slaves.³ Significantly, it is this devalued notion of service called diakonia which has been used consistently in the biblical text to speak of the ministry of service. This was the word chosen by the early church to refer to the ministry of all persons, and in the records it was the word chosen by Jesus for his own ministry.

Christian scriptures give us a picture of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples in a curious reversal of leader/servant roles. This was not an unusual act for Jesus; much of his ministry is portrayed as a life of service. The gospel of Luke records Jesus saying of himself, "I am among you as one that serves" (Luke 22:27).

Clearly the early church placed an emphasis on service as ministry.

Those who are named itinerant missionaries served in a recognized Christian community seeing that widows, teaching, preparing, imprisoned, preaching service in the local

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Those who are named diakonos such as Phoebe, "Appear to be not only itinerant missionaries, but leaders in local congregations...[they also] served in a recognized official capacity as teachers and preachers in the Christian community." ⁴ The tasks assigned to the early deacons—seeing that widows and orphans were fed, serving the communal meal, teaching, preparing those to be baptized, visiting the poor, sick and imprisoned, preaching and blessing. These were significant acts of service in the local congregation.

By the end of the first century changes had occurred in the roles of deacon, presbyter and bishop. These roles became hierarchical and were delineated on the basis of gender. Restrictions were placed on women deacons that limited their activities to teaching other women, preparing women for baptism, visiting the sick, poor and imprisoned, widows and orphans, and serving communal meals to women. By 600 C.E., the early diaconate with its emphasis on service began to disappear.

In the west, the diaconate did not reappear as a permanent part of the order of ministry until the mid-1800's when it was revived in both Great Britain and Germany. The revival appears to have been a response to two very specific needs: humanitarian service to people who had suffered the social upheavals of the Industrial Revolution, and the desire of an increasing number of young women to play a significant part in the Church.

The diaconate quickly spread to North America. In 1893 the Deaconess Aid Society was inaugurated in Toronto, followed by the institution of the Methodist Deaconess Orders in 1894. Training homes for deaconesses were immediately established by both Methodists and Presbyterians. The Presbytery General Assembly established a Deaconess Order in 1909. Deaconess activities included meeting the sick, lonely, bereaved and troubled; finding employment for people; looking after travellers; and conducting Sunday Schools and clubs for women and children.

When The Methodist Church, The Presbyterian Church in Canada and The Congregational Churches of Canada joined to create The United Church of Canada in 1925, the deaconess order continued. In response to concerns raised by the Order, the Committee on Employed Women Workers in The Church began its study of working conditions for deaconesses in 1926. In 1928, the Committee reported that women were working in an endless variety of places and were making an effective

contribution but, in many situations, were experiencing extremely poor working conditions.

Salaries for deaconesses at this time were kept at abominably low levels, often less than half the salary of an ordained minister, who also received a free manse. The educational and service work of deaconesses was valued in the sense of being appreciated by local congregations and agencies, yet there was an expectation that women would be "self-sacrificing", giving no thought for themselves. An identification with the suffering servant prevented their personal needs from receiving attention. Issues of salary, pension, and work overload were not even seriously considered since women were expected to marry and be provided for by a husband. The fact that almost half of the deaconesses did not marry somehow did not come to the attention of the male-dominated decision-makers.

Add to this the chaotic situation where women were hired by several different church bodies⁵ with no common employment policies, and the position of deaconesses worsens. Women were kept isolated and disempowered in the struggle for fair treatment by the church.⁶

At the same time, deaconesses were not able to affect policy through participation in the church courts and committees because they were not voting members of presbytery. The "fight" to get the vote in presbytery, beginning in 1946 and concluding in 1964, was a long hard battle. Until the reversal of the policy in 1964, deaconesses could obtain a presbytery seat only by unseating a lay delegate. True to the principles of diakonia, they refused to displace the laity's influence and chose to struggle for their own place in the church courts.

Ironically, and we think significantly, the vote (full membership) was accorded to deaconesses only after men were permitted to become diaconal ministers. The first man began the educational program in 1963, after negotiations had been made to provide a route for men to serve in a non-ordained ministry position. They became Certified Churchmen. Although their numbers have always been small, the extension of diaconal ministry to include men has been significant. Since this time, men have had a choice of emphasis within the Order of Ministry.

In the 1970's the term "Commissioned ministers" unofficially began to replace Deaconess and Certified Churchman as a more appropriate and current title. At that time commissioned ministers saw themselves

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as complementary to ordained ministry. Education and service to the world balanced worship and preaching. Together these tasks of ministry provided for the nurture of the faith community and for a prophetic challenge to change the world.

By 1980, the General Council decided that there would be one order of ministry composed of those commissioned to a diaconal ministry of education, service and pastoral care and those ordained to word, sacrament and pastoral care. After a series of consultations of deaconesses, certified churchman and commissioned ministers, a new name was chosen by consensus: diaconal ministers. The name connects The United Church of Canada with a world-wide federation of diakonia, and it gives a historical-theological meaning to this ministry. It became official following the General Council in 1982.

Evolving, transforming, empowering

Because we are few in numbers and because much of the work we do is not valued by the mainstream of the church, diaconal ministers in The United Church of Canada are constantly asked to explain ourselves. The ongoing need to interpret and thereby justify this ministry, especially to church officials, continues to be a frustrating and a demeaning experience. This has meant an ongoing self-examination of who we are. "What does it mean to be in diaconal ministry anyway?"

As a community, diaconal ministers have been forced to reflect continuously on our ministry and how to communicate it. The meaning of diaconal ministry is refined with each discussion. The diaconal community has come to value this ongoing deliberation as essential to our vocation. The benefit is an evolving intentional interpretation of our role as diaconal ministers. It has given us an opportunity to evolve along with our interpretation. Similar to the feminist movement there is a sense that we are "in process." As well, we are part of a larger transformative process towards the realization of justice and dignity for all persons.

From earliest times, diaconal ministry was created to meet the emergent needs of people such as caring for the poor, the orphans and widows of the community. As needs change, and as our understanding of service changes, the focus of diaconal ministry changes. Change is, in fact, integral to the diaconal movement. Diakonia by its nature must be

responsive in order to serve where there is need in the world. For instance, shortly after the Second World War, diaconal ministers played an essential role in assisting immigrant families in settling and finding their place in Canadian society. During these economically challenging times in the world of the late 20th century, those in diaconal ministry are serving as chaplains and organizers with poor persons and street youth in the inner cities, working with refugees, and ministering in rural areas where farm bankruptcy, depopulation and community disintegration is prevalent.

Diaconal ministry has always been responsive to the changing needs of the church. "The baby boom" and the church's resultant need for Christian education particularly in the 1950's, led to the present emphasis on enabling the ministry of the laity through using an educational approach. Teaching has been a central function of diaconal ministry since the early church. Today, education remains a primary concern of diaconal ministry. Administrative tasks, pastoral care, community organizing, and worship leadership are offered from the critical vantage point of working with people to learn, to grow and in doing so, to change our communities and society.

A reading of United Church documents, such as the liturgies that were used for designating a deaconess (1930) and for commissioning a diaconal minister (1993), demonstrates an evolving interpretation of diaconal ministry. The change in role, in the church's understanding of that role and the understanding we have had of our role, is quite dramatic. We have evolved from seeing ourselves in the 1930's as assistants, to the 1960's when we became complementary to ordained ministers, to the 1990's where we offer a distinctive perspective within the ministry of the church.

Diaconal ministry is called to be flexible in order to meet emergent needs. This ministry embodies an openness to new possibilities. *Diakonia* relishes inventiveness and creativity, and celebrates "doing a new thing" when it means fullness of life for those who have known only injustice. Feminism embodies a transformative vision of liberation for all. Diaconal ministry shares this vision. One way of participating in this vision is through deliberately evolving and transforming our own ministry role, as we seek to join with others in bringing to birth a larger societal transformation.

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A communal ministry

Community is of central importance to diakonia. There is concern for all members of the circle. The powerful story of Jesus creating community out of five loaves and two fishes is indicative that reaching out in loving service to our neighbour is the essence of diakonia. As we serve our neighbour's needs, community is born.

The Belief Statement of The Diakonia of The United Church of Canada is exemplary of the diaconal commitment to community.⁷ This communal statement defines who we are, where we have come from, and what we are about. The power to do this naming belongs to the community. All persons in the association are welcome and expected to participate fully in this process of naming. This Statement is assumed to always be open to change. When the community meets bi-annually, the Statement of Belief can be revisited, and it usually is revised! Decisions about the Statement or any matter of business on the national gathering agenda of DUCC are made by a consensus decision-making process.

As the writers of this chapter, we are conscious that we are seeking to represent the collective thoughts of the diaconal community as their thinking has evolved to this point in time. As such, we remain accountable to our sisters and brothers in Diakonia of The United Church of Canada. This is not to say that the beliefs of our community are monolithic or that all diaconal ministers would agree with everything we claim here. We are seeking however, to share the intentions of diaconal ministry in a broadly-based representational manner that is open to dialogue, critique, reflection and change.

In our educational preparation for diaconal ministry, learning through community is not left to chance. An integrative community learning model invites the participants to set learning goals as individuals and then seek to integrate these goals into a communal curriculum. Participants learn how to hold the tension between the needs of the individual and the collective in a very intimate way.

The diaconal model, as with a feminist model, trusts in the potential and the power of the collective to meet the needs of all persons. Key elements such as collaboration, consultation and critique become essential in the context of community life. These elements are necessary to ensure that there is to be broadly-based commitment to the decisions and directions the community takes.

Diakonia believes in the synergistic potential of community. Energy and creativity are released when two or more gather together. This is the presence of the Spirit which we believe works in relationship. This is not to negate individual works of creativity. Diakonia lifts up however, the oft forgotten and devalued style of working together which we believe is inherently Christian. Working together is usually more creative, more attentive to varying needs, and more accountable to a wider community.

The valuing of community also bears itself out in the diaconal emphasis on working in team. It is not by coincidence, for example, that a chapter on diaconal ministry would be written collaboratively by two women! Although this style of writing is time-consuming and often frustrating, we feel that what we are creating is far more significant than what we could have done on our own. With the "sparking of ideas" and the "spinning of thoughts" that has gone between us, we have pushed one another to greater insights and clarity. As well, we have entered into conversation with diaconal colleagues to gain a wider vision. It is our hope that the diaconal community will be more fully represented in this chapter through such a joint effort.

There is a tendency in our Church to see diaconal ministers as being incapable or weak because of this stated preference to work collegially. Unfortunately, the image of strength which is normative is embodied in the sole, male figure who single-handedly leads an enormous group of people in the direction he believes to be right. This "lone-ranger" style of ministry does not embody community nor foster community. Diaconal ministry, like liberative feminism, operates from a different set of values, almost a different culture from the mainstream. It is not coincidental that diaconal ministry, which has been primarily a women's ministry, would not only advocate a relational style of ministry but that this style of ministry would be deemed weak and ineffectual by a church with a patriarchal history.

The essence of ministry is relational.⁸ For the diaconal community this is critical to our understanding of who we are as a community and of how we work with others; it also applies to the broader focus of our efforts. Diaconal ministry embodies the dual context of diakonia—the church and the world. Diaconal ministry seeks to enable ministry with others not only for the joy of connecting with others in community, but

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Diaconal Ministry and Feminist Principles in Dialogue

A Story of Women's Experience

In The United Church of Canada and the Reformed tradition which spawned the United Church, diaconal ministry was historically done by women. This factor was critical to the evolution of diaconal ministry as a feminist model of ministry. Until 1936 in The United Church of Canada, diaconal ministry was the only route for women to enter paid accountable ministry. The experience of women throughout the decades is a source for the emphasis on justice-seeking that is integral to diaconal ministry.

In the life of the early church both men and women were deacons, but after women were gradually squeezed out, the diaconal order began to decline. Instead, to be a deacon was to be on the way to priesthood. When diaconal ministry re-emerged in the mid-1800's in western Europe and Britain, it opened up a way for women to have a career serving in and through the church. In The United Church of Canada, this career was seen as a limited one for most women. Upon marriage deaconesses were "disjoined" from the order and not allowed to serve except as volunteers. Only minimal pension support was provided for those who continued in life service as deaconesses.

While diaconal ministry provided a route for women to enter full-time ministry, this ministry was defined as "women's work": care for the needy, the poor, the sick, and education of the young. As "women's work," the deaconess was relegated to second class status. These women were also romanticized—another way in which their ministry was not taken seriously by the Church structures. Deaconesses were portrayed as angels of mercy:

The Deaconess visits in [cheap] rooming-houses—she goes down in little basement rooms—she goes up to the attic rooms where people freeze in the winter and swelter in the summer. She goes to the home of dirt—physical, mental and moral. She goes to happy homes—sometimes to rejoice with those who have found a job—sometimes to have

*tea—sometimes to admire the new baby—and to share the happiness of that house. She goes to the home where there is tragedy, sickness and death—always with a prayer in her heart and the knowledge that God will make her a channel of blessing and comfort and things will change.*⁹

This ministry was devalued by the institutional church from the outset. While the term "servant" was used for male ordained ministry as well as diaconal ministry, a different value was attached. For the men, "servant" connoted leadership and power. For deaconesses, the term "handmaiden" was in current use, deriving from the United Church's Order of Service for their installation, and before that, from biblical interpretations of pious women's role.¹⁰

Handmaiden, in contrast, connotes being oriented to other's needs, knowing one's place, being available for limitless quantities of menial work, maintaining an unquestioning attitude with no pretensions to power or decision making, and no expectation of financial reward. The deaconess became, in effect, the "wife of the church". In fact, a recruitment pamphlet for ministry, produced in 1947 described diaconal ministry in exactly such a way. "Her work and her position in the church were compared to the interests and position of the typical wife, and the suggestion was made that she came to her work with a "wifely" natural affinity for nurturing and for working with women and children, and for supporting the work of others."¹¹

The history of the diaconal movement is a history of struggling for justice against a wall of institutionalized sexism. Barb Elliott and Betty Marlin, two diaconal ministers with many years experience in the United Church, describe their view of our history:

When we consider the history of the diaconal ministry in the United Church we see that those in diaconal ministry 1) were called to serve in the church but were not seen as part of the court of the church until 1964, 2) were expected to work as partners in the church's ministry but were not seen as equal in salary and benefits until 1977, 3) were expected to minister in the church but have never been accepted as a ministry that benefits from protection of the church in terms of job security, and 4) were virtually ignored throughout the struggles and reporting on The Studies on Ministry in the 20th Century, The Task Force Report and

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Project Ministry. The service or diaconal ministry aspect was present to a limited extent in the dialogue of the reports but the assumptions appeared to be that the role of diakonia or service was between the lay and ordained ministry. And so we bring to the church a history of primarily women whose call to diaconal ministry is somehow less than the call to ordained ministry. One asks the question: Is it because we are primarily women or is it because the call to education, service and pastoral care is a lesser call?¹²

The fact that the diaconal movement has survived is a testimony to the ingenuity and tenacity of the women who have gone before us. Their history and experience has given considerable shape and direction to current understandings of diaconal ministry in The United Church of Canada. Despite their servant role, or maybe because of it, the diaconal movement today is oriented towards mutuality and justice. When some feminist women dismiss earlier deaconesses as subservient and lacking in consciousness, we need to recall their context. Their reality placed immense obstacles to equality in their way, yet it was their commitment to service in a behind-the-scenes style that has laid the foundation for enabling others. Out of their persistent ministry of care for the marginalized has emerged a vision of ministry as empowerment, and it is this vision which shakes the patriarchal assumptions about ministers as "next to God".

The passion for justice

The work of diakonia, beginning with the life of Jesus, has been focused on caring for others in social, physical, and spiritual need. Influenced by this tradition, by the life experience of those in the diaconate who have been primarily women and by feminist and other liberation theologies of the twentieth century, diaconal ministry continues a strong commitment to serve with those with limited power in society. Through the years the understanding of service has evolved from a charity model which maintains the status quo to a justice model which upsets the balance. This ministry is not for the faint-hearted. A ministry of service means a conscious choice to embrace the kind of ministry which leaves itself open to the pain and needs of others. In a two-way ministry, we are touched and challenged by those we hope to serve. This is not a call to servitude,

subservience or self-denial. It is a call to relate in a way that brings authentic life to all, both personally and structurally.

The story of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples in John 13 serves as a vivid self-emptying story in which to ground our compassion for others and for this world. Louise Williams says:

This is a humble, slavery service on bended knee. It requires girding ourselves, getting out of the way whatever would encumber us. It requires giving up our status to touch what we would perhaps rather not touch—the dusty, smelly, blistered, “becorned” parts of humanity. It is awkward work—hard on the knees and the back. It puts one in a vulnerable position. When you are there on bended knee, someone could easily kick you, and you can’t easily or quickly run away when you are on your knees. It is personal, almost intimate.¹³

The motivation to do this work comes in part from the life experience and perspective of those who are drawn into diaconal ministry. For example, women, gay and lesbian people, low income earners, persons of colour and single parents are drawn to the focus of diaconal ministry. This is not coincidental. Persons of marginalized status understand the essence and necessity of this ministry. These persons know what it is to be undervalued and oppressed and thus, understand the hunger for justice at a deep level.

The theological education that those who are preparing for diaconal ministry receive enables participants to reflect on their life experience. Students are encouraged to identify and name their experiences of marginalization and discrimination and their experiences of power and privilege in order to be able to connect that with the experience of others. Tools for doing socio-political analysis, consciousness-raising and community development integral to this education, enable the student to make the connections between their life story, the stories of others and the story of the world. Of crucial importance is how reality is named through theological reflection. To see the activity of God in our lives and in the lives of others is not only preparation for ministry but it becomes the basis for action in the world.

The additional risk that occurs to those who become diaconal ministers is further marginalization. Those who seek to strike at the causes of

hunger, poverty and alienation are often marginalized and not trusted. Those who are often marginalized and not trusted are women are commonly pat-
 traditional patterns of ministry are avoided. Those who seek to challenge from and unsupported by the church become identified with the church in diaconal ministry augments the world. In fact, this passion

For some persons, the motivation is that there is no choice but to commit to diaconal ministry. The pursuit of justice itself is life and a way of being and interacting with the world then but to stand with the oppressed out of the recognition that we are bound up with our own life

The work of diaconal ministry is a challenge. Diaconal ministers make connections in their locale but the motivation is for well-being and dignity. This preferential option for the marginalized that this perspective is integral to Diaconal ministry acts to challenge. With diaconal ministry engaged in the church and the world—diaconal ministry become too introspective, too sacred and the secular and the sacred. Diaconal ministry uses its power to challenge, raise questions, and engage the church and the world on a time of peace with justice.

With seeking justice the point of diaconal ministry is to challenge the community to be open to diaconal ministry, as Lynn Rhodes says, accountable and to be challenged

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hunger, poverty and alienation are frequently misinterpreted and mis-trusted. Those who are committed to the well-being of children and women are commonly patronized and ignored. Those who don't fit into traditional patterns of ministry can be overlooked, misunderstood and avoided. Those who seek new ways of being the church can feel cut off from and unsupported by the rest of the church community. They become identified with the less powerful. Thus, the experience of being in diaconal ministry augments the desire to eradicate the hurts of the world. In fact, this passion becomes an ethical imperative.

For some persons, the consciousness about seeking justice means that there is no choice but to adopt a lifestyle that reflects one's commitment to diaconal ministry. Diaconal ministry is about giving life. The pursuit of justice itself is life-giving. This is not a profession or career but a way of being and interacting that is being chosen. There is no choice then but to stand with the oppressed to press onwards for societal change out of the recognition that the liberation of all persons is intimately bound up with our own liberation.

The work of diaconal ministry holds both a local and global perspective. Diaconal ministers may serve in programmes, projects or congregations in their locale but the vision of seeking justice is global. The concern is for well-being and dignity for those on the underside, the world over. This preferential option for those with limited power in our world means that this perspective is integrated wherever there is diaconal ministry. Diaconal ministry acts to awaken the social conscience of the church. With diaconal ministry embodying the dual context of diakonia—the church and the world—diaconal ministry challenges the church not to become too introspective, to overcome the artificial split between the sacred and the secular and to reconnect with the origins of christianity. Diaconal ministry uses its position on the edge or fringe of the church to challenge, raise questions, to push, prod, nudge, love and move the church and the world onward on the journey towards God's Shalom, a time of peace with justice.

With seeking justice through mutual empowerment as the focal point of diaconal ministry, there is a constant need for the diaconal community to be open to challenge and change. In a feminist style of ministry, as Lynn Rhodes states, there is a need to be able to be "held accountable and to be challenged to continue to reformulate practice in

light of our commitment to end all forms of oppression."¹⁴ As the diaconal community leaves itself open to critique by those who take diaconal ministry seriously, there is the opportunity to sharpen our vision, to be relevant and to stay accountable to the broader community of diakonia in the world context.

Diaconal ministry: enabling reflection on the sacred

Although deacons led worship in the early church, the diaconate has not given significant public worship leadership within the Reformed tradition. In the last couple of decades in the United Church, diaconal ministers have started to become more visible in public worship. This has happened because of a shortage of ordained personnel, particularly in rural areas, and in some cases, to intentionally provide greater exposure for diaconal ministry and/or women in leadership roles.

More visibility is needed for the work of diakonia. Diaconal ministry also seeks to influence the approach and content of worship. Consistent with a feminist perspective, the diaconal hope is to enable the full participation of the people and to create liturgy that is relevant to the experience of all people, especially that of women and children and those generally excluded. Furthermore, the diaconal concern is not only that justice be done in the process of worshipping but also to motivate all persons to engage in justice-making.

At this time, in many urban congregations, diaconal ministers get only token exposure in liturgy because of the perceived need for a division of labour based on a "functional" split between ordained and diaconal roles. This does not honour the ministry of diakonia which is far broader than doing the tasks of education, service and pastoral care. This does not lift up the ministry of diakonia as integral to the work of the church and all its' people.

Generally, the Sunday morning worship setting is believed to be the primary time that the congregational family gathers. If this is so, then it is absolutely essential that the ministry of diakonia plays a significant role in that gathering in order to lift up this ministry as belonging to all. Diaconal ministry's emphasis on community development strengthens congregational participation in the faith community and the church's participation in the community at large. In reference to the diaconal role in worship, The Anglican Church of Canada states " that, "Deacons do

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not have a service ministry because they have a liturgical ministry first; rather they have a liturgical ministry because they have a service ministry first...."¹⁵ Diakonia of the United Church would concur with this perspective. The service of liturgy cannot be separated from service ministry.

In the last few years, the diaconal community of The United Church of Canada has been seeking to articulate a diaconal style of preaching. The feminist approach of starting with experience engages the people to reflect on their own faith experiences. This, too, is a diaconal approach. Some diaconal ministers use the Centre for Christian Studies learning spiral, based on Kolb-Fry's theory, to write a sermon. Beginning with the identification of a significant experience, reflecting on that for the feelings that this experience evoked and naming the theological language that gives meaning to the experience, the spiral takes the sermon to action based on the learning that has come out of the reflection. This experience-based approach is dialogical and encourages people to seek truth in their own lives and the life of community in order to act upon that truth in the world in which they live.

Deriving from a holistic vision of life, the feminist sees the liturgy as having organic unity. The message is one part of that unity. Despite the enormous emphasis in the Protestant tradition on the sermon, diaconal ministry seeks to create liturgy that is organic, giving prominence to all people, to the whole of life and to all we do. In addition to placing significant emphasis on creating a liturgical order that is participatory and ensuring that language is inclusive throughout the service, diaconal ministers often experiment with alternative forms of offering a message; for example, through an intergenerational activity, through two persons having a fishbowl conversation or through having folk form small groups to reflect on the biblical passage of the day. This enables the involvement of a variety of persons as they offer the good news to one another. There is greater sensory stimulation. More life experiences are engaged in this truly communal experience.

Liturgy, which means "the work of the people," is extended in the diaconal mind to the administration of sacraments. The sacraments belong to the people and as such should be administered by the people, namely those designated by the congregation to do so. Diaconal ministers in some parts of the country have found themselves called upon to

administer sacraments due to a shortage of ordained personnel. Others have been licensed when it is significant to the team ministry relationship that they are attempting to build and nurture with an ordained minister. Yet, the long term vision of diakonia is the "priesthood of all believers", as well as the "diakonia of all believers".

As diaconal ministers go about the work of mutual empowerment, we have this long term vision in mind. Through education and advocacy with the whole faith community, diaconal ministers do not seek to obtain the license to administer the sacraments for itself, but seek to widen the circle of access and participation in our sacred traditions in order to enhance the meaning of them in relation to the life of all persons and the life of the world.

Worship in the Protestant tradition is in need of transforming, and needs to be transformative. Ritual has an inherent power to touch the sacred spaces in human experience. These sacred spaces are waiting to be shared, to be cherished and to be reflected upon for meaning and direction. Diaconal ministry offers to be a catalyst in the transforming and transformative process of worship.

A commitment to mutuality: ministry in the round

In doing God's work of love and justice, prophetic ministry becomes central. Maintaining a strong critique of the oppressive social structures means that we stand in opposition to the dominant mode of society—in opposition to competition, to capitalism, to hierarchy, to patriarchy. Unfortunately the church too often has been a reflection of society, and needs to be critiqued and transformed along with society.

An alternative vision necessarily implies change and transformation. When, as in this case, the foundations of society are questioned, there is definite risk. Diaconal people often experience ourselves to be at risk by the attempts we make to bring this alternative vision to birth. We risk dismissal of all kinds, including our jobs.

A persisting question is: what replaces the dominant social structure? What does an alternative vision hold out to people?

Inherent in the diaconal vision is a view of people as God-bearers. People are gifts of God to one another and are of infinite worth. The approach of diaconal ministry is to enable people to discover their gifts, their worth, their power, and to learn how to share these attributes in the

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building of a just world. Each person has both the potential and responsibility to grow, as well as both the potential and responsibility to participate.

The theological implication is that we share with God the responsibility for creation—responsibility for what happens here and for the shape of the future. The former understanding of an hierarchical God no longer fits. While we do not claim God as our exact equal as human beings, God is seen to be mutual, operating through community as a transforming spirit. In this way God enters into partnership with us, and we with God.

Consistent with this theology of relationship and in concert with feminism, diaconal ministry believes that a mutual, non-hierarchical model of leadership and community are essential to the liberation of all persons. Within community all persons are a resource towards the realization of this vision. All have a voice to be heard and all have gifts to be honoured.

An alternative vision radically changes the face of the church. Ancient images of flock and shepherd crumble under critique from a diaconal perspective. If the ministry of the faith community is regarded as the vital ministry of the church, the ministry personnel become servant-leaders existing only to enliven lay ministry in the world. A more appropriate image for this approach is "ministry in the round". Within this image, power in the faith community is shared power. Leadership is not focused on one expert but is intentionally developed in all persons and becomes a shared interaction. The round of the circle is an encompassing community, inclusive of all, standing with those who have limited power.

The image of ministry in the round has been used by the diaconal community since at least 1988. It closely relates to the feminist interpretation of the church by Letty Russell called *Church in the Round*. Letty Russell speaks of a round table where there is no permanent seating and whatever chairs of authority that exist are shared. The table holds a feast to welcome everyone as partners in God's world house.¹⁶ While the two images are both grounded in a feminist interpretation of church and a feminist understanding of leadership, there is a difference, we believe. Diaconal ministry turns towards the world. The round form of the faith community is not so much to invite others to the table, as it is to extend

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means that there are few people with whom we work who truly understand the diaconal perspective and even fewer who are willing to advocate for diaconal ministry. The result is that diaconal ministers can feel isolated especially when we do not have the critical mass to always be sure that we can be heard. To isolate, a tactic of capitalism and patriarchy, serves to reduce women's power through a scheme designed to silence. Understood within the broader context, isolation serves to divide and conquer.

As of June 1993, United Church of Canada statistics record 160 diaconal ministers in active service or retained on the rolls of presbytery as compared with 2,584 ordained personnel who are in active service or retained. Clearly diaconal ministry is not the norm in the United Church of Canada. Since we are so few in number, the diaconal perspective is less well known, frequently overlooked and misunderstood. The temptation for diaconal ministers is to become more and more like the majority and to forgo the visible diaconal role with its transformative feminist perspective.

Visibility is an issue for diaconal ministers. Our competency in visible leadership roles needs to be witnessed in order to gain respect and appreciation for diaconal ministry. Traditionally, like women everywhere, we have been kept out of these visible roles. Consequently there have been few diaconal ministers who provide a visible model of a feminist and diaconal style of ministry. The church and the world have been poorer for this. This lack of visibility has also meant that fewer persons have had the opportunity to discern whether they are called to this ministry.

A further frustration is the need to prove ourselves, much as women have had to do in many fields. Often this need to prove ourselves leads to overwork at the expense of our own well-being, not to mention the well-being of others around us. Overwork is a temptation inherent in a capitalist society, linked to the notion that our worth is defined by our productivity. It is a denial of a basic diaconal and feminist principle that all have inherent worth and value. The situation is further complicated by the very nature of diaconal ministry; when discerning and responding to others' needs, there are no limits to the work!

Diaconal ministry, as we have stated earlier, places its focus on empowerment. Our work is with those on the periphery of both church

and society. Our commitment is to stand together on the periphery. As a result, diaconal ministry has the frustration of being relegated to an inferior status with little authority, similar to those we hope to serve. Therein lies the "catch 22" for diaconal ministers.

Diaconal ministers are not looking for status in the form of power over others, but it is terribly difficult to function without the authority to do ministry which comes from peoples' perception of the role. Too often we find ourselves side-tracked in a fight for equality, which in actuality is a struggle for recognition as having authority. It may seem like a laudable struggle, yet the very idea of having "authority" suggests prestige and power-over, given that we are functioning in a hierarchical society and church. What is set up in this "catch 22" is an opposition between equality/authority and justice seeking. Can justice be created from a position of authority within the hierarchy? It is a pernicious issue, especially if the position which is ascribed authority means the loss of identification with those on the periphery.

Diaconal ministers suffer from the same form of antagonism that women generally experience. Once having been defined as "other", as "lower", as "different", as "mysterious" and "uncontrollable", we are then seen to be threatening. To the extent to which we resist this dehumanization both for ourselves and for others, we are indeed threatening, but it is an antagonism not created by our doing. It is tempting however, to want to become part of the norm—to be accepted, respected, and not to be seen as threatening. For women, who have a history of being relegated to a lesser role simply by virtue of our gender, it is no easy task to consistently choose a role that will be disdained by the status quo.

Conclusion

Diaconal ministry embodies a feminist model of ministry through a collegial style and transformative perspective. As a ministry which has historically been chosen by women since its reappearance in western society in the mid-1800's, diaconal ministry has been shaped by and infused with the life experiences of women. Gradually it has evolved through the influence of the early women's movements and the more recent feminist and liberation theologies to the articulation and embodiment of a feminist method and vision. This is not an approach and vision that diaconal ministers try to hoard for themselves. Whenever and

wherever a liberationist ministry celebrates! For the world. Diaconal ministry is a transformation of the church.

Kay Heuer is a member of the United Church of Canada in Toronto, a theological educator, and is unabashedly a feminist. She has served in congregational ministries and is currently a theological educator. She has served in congregational diaconal ministry as an elder.

Teresa Jones is a diaconal minister in Saskatchewan, Teresa first served in the church women's movement what is still known as the Saskatchewan church women's movement. She is currently a diaconal minister in rural and urban areas and education.

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wherever a liberationist feminist model of ministry emerges, diaconal ministry celebrates! Feminism is critical to the transformation of the world. Diaconal ministry which embodies feminism is critical to the transformation of the church and its role in the world.

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Teresa Jones is a diaconal minister in the United Church of Canada. A native of Saskatchewan, Teresa first put words to her feminist beliefs with the encouragement of the church women of the prairies. In 1980, she and other women formed what is still known as the Saskatchewan Christian Feminist Network. Teresa has served in rural and urban congregational ministry, in administration and as a chaplain. She is currently engaged in contract employment in administration and education.