

DEACONESSES IN HISTORY AND IN THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

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In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, deaconesses traditionally prepare the communion bread, pour the grape juice, and make sure each participant in the women's room has a partner for the foot washing. They are not usually ordained. Where do these traditions come from?¹

In order to answer this question, this article will examine evidence relating to the role and function of deaconesses in the Christian church during various stages of its history. We will begin by evaluating the NT evidence. Then we will trace the story of deaconesses from the early church onward, finally coming to Seventh-day Adventist practice and understanding of the female diaconate.

The Word: "Deaconess"

The word "deaconess" is the feminine counterpart of the male "deacon." Both words come from the Greek verb διακονέω ("to serve, to assist, to minister"). Related nouns are διάκονος ("one who serves, or deacon") and διακονία ("service or ministry").

In Matt 8:15, Luke 10:40, and Acts 6:2, the verb means to serve at a table, which is consistent with the earliest Greek usage of the word. For instance, at the end of the forty days in the wilderness, angels "waited on" Jesus (Matt 4:11). The meaning broadens to include other aspects of ministry: Jesus came to minister or serve (Matt 20:28), Paul considered his trip to Jerusalem to deliver the offering gathered in Europe as a ministry (Rom 15:25), and the author of Hebrews commends the practice of serving the saints (Heb 6:10). Thus serving others is what deacons do (1 Tim 3:10, 13).

The noun διακονία is used to describe the table ministry the apostles entrusted to the seven (Acts 6:1, 2). In Acts 20:24, it is Paul's God-given ministry of the gospel, which he also calls the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18). Timothy is encouraged to carry out his διακονία (2 Tim 4:5). Spiritual gifts are to prepare the saints for διακονία (Eph 4:12).

The noun διάκονος (διάκονοι, pl.) is used in several ways. For example, it denotes one who waits on tables, as in the wedding feast at Cana (John

¹This article is a tribute to my deaconess mother, now in her 96th year. I well remember how reverently she baked communion bread, and how she wore her special black suit and white gloves to uncover and cover the table on communion Sabbath.

2:5). Jesus told his disciples to be *διάκονοι* if they wished to be great (Mark 10:43). Tychicus is Paul's *διάκονος*, who ministers to him and helps him (Col 4:7). With Paul, the word takes on a specifically Christian sense. Paul is a *διάκονος* of the new covenant (2 Cor 3:6), of God (2 Cor 6:4), and of the church (Col 1:25). He calls Timothy a *διάκονος* of Jesus Christ (1 Tim 4:6). In these texts, the meaning is much closer to "minister" than to "servant."

In Phil 1:1 and 1 Tim 3:8-13, *διάκονος* is used to identify specific church officers, the "deacons." Theirs was evidently a spiritual occupation, for the characteristics required of them were personal integrity and blamelessness. While they seem to have held a position lower than that of the elders (or presbyters), they were recognized church leaders—not merely people who opened and closed the church or carried gifts to the poor.

The Greek, which usually distinguishes carefully between masculine and feminine forms of a noun, does not do so with *διάκονος*. The same word is used for male and female religious servers, both in pagan religions and in Christianity. When the article is used, the gender is visible: *ὁ διάκονος* (masculine) and *ἡ διάκονος* (feminine). The canons of the first general council of Nicaea (325) contain a neologism: *διακόνισσα*, a feminine form of *διάκονος*.

Another Greek word speaks of service: *δοῦλος* (verb, *δουλεύω*), which means "slave," is consistently mistranslated "servant" in the KJV. Unlike a *διάκονος*, the *δοῦλος* has no say over his own person. A *δοῦλος* is totally committed—willingly or otherwise—to a master. The "servants" in Jesus' parables are actually slaves rather than servants. In Rom 6, Paul portrays human beings as "slaves," either to sin or to God. Paul calls himself a *δοῦλος* of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:1), thereby showing his total commitment to God.

Women Deacons in the New Testament

In the NT, women served the church in many ways. This article will examine only those women who served in official capacities. Those women who served in unofficial capacities, among whom would be the women who provided for the needs of Jesus and his disciples (Luke 8:3)—for example, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis, who "worked hard in the Lord" (Rom 16: 12), and the older women, whose task it was to teach the younger (Titus 2:4-5)—will not be discussed in this article.

Phoebe

Paul, in Rom 16:1-2, called Phoebe a *διάκονος* of the church of Cenchraea. Besides this brief statement, nothing is known about Phoebe, except that

she was a “benefactor” of Paul and others, and that Paul commended her to the church in Rome.

That she was a benefactor or patroness (προστάτις) suggests a woman of wealth and position. In the first-century Mediterranean world, patronage provided sustenance to the clients and honor to the patron. A patron or benefactor funded the construction of monuments, financed festivals or celebrations, supported artists and writers, or even provided a synagogue for a Jewish congregation in exile. In return for the patron’s support, the client—individual or group—provided gratitude, honor, and, sometimes, the fruit of their artistic labor.² In ancient Athens, the male equivalent, προστάτης, was the title of a citizen whose responsibility it was to see to the welfare of resident aliens, who had no civic rights.³

That she was commended to the church in Rome is usually accepted as evidence that Phoebe carried the letter to the church for Paul. Given that Cenchraea was the eastern port city of Corinth, Phoebe would have been known to Paul, who seems to have written from Corinth, as is suggested by references to Gaius and Erastus, who were clearly from Corinth (Rom 16:23; cf. 1 Cor 1:14, 2 Tim 4:20).

Of interest to this study is Phoebe’s title, διάκονος. The Greek word appears here in the masculine but, as noted above, the word was used for both males and females. Paul recognized Phoebe as a διάκονος, or minister, of the church at Cenchraea. Only here is διάκονος used in relation to a specific church, implying that the word refers to some kind of position in the church. Translation of the term διάκονος in this passage has more to do with the translator than the meaning of the Greek word. The KJV has “servant”; the NIV has “servant,” with “deaconess” in the note; the NRSV says “deacon,” with “minister” in the note.

Early church writers give their own interpretation of this passage. Origen (185-254) interprets Paul’s statement as follows: “This passage teaches that there were women ordained in the church’s ministry . . . because they helped in many ways.”⁴ Writing about Phoebe and the other women of Rom 16, John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407) wrote: “You see that these were noble women, hindered in no way by their sex in the course of virtue; and this is as might be expected for in Christ Jesus there is neither

²For more on patronage, see Nancy Vyhmeister, “The Rich Man in James 2: Does Ancient Patronage Illumine the Text?” *AUSS* 33 (1995): 266-272.

³W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Fleming Revell, 1981), s.v. “prostatis.”

⁴Origen, *Epistola ad Romanos* 10.17.2, cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary of Scripture*, vol. 6, *Romans*, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998).

male nor female.”⁵ Theodoret (393-460) noted that the “church assembly at Cencreae was already so considerable as to have a woman deacon, prominent and noble. She was so rich in good works performed as to have merited the praise of Paul.”⁶

“The Women Likewise”

In 1 Tim 3:2-7, Paul lists the characteristics of bishops or overseers, which is the literal translation of the Greek ἐπίσκοπος. Verses 8-10 describe the spiritual traits required of διάκονοι.⁷ Verse 11, however, seems something of a digression: “Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.”

Who are these “women”? The Greek word, which can be translated “women” or “wives,” has been variously translated as “women,” with “women deacons” or “their [deacon’s] wives” in the note (NRSV); “women,” with “either deacons’ wives or deaconesses” in the note (NASB); “their wives,” with “or deaconesses” in the note (NIV); or “*their* wives,” with *their* in italics, admitting its absence in the original text (KJV).

However, the implication that the term refers to a wife of the deacon presents difficulties, for in the Greek there is no possessive, so it would not be possible to know whose wives the text was referring to. On the other hand, if one takes the context seriously, these are women who serve the church as do their male counterparts. Quite probably, these women were female deacons, as was Phoebe. In the late second century, Clement of Alexandria (155-220) indicated that this text presented evidence for the existence of διάκονον γυναικῶν (“women deacons”). John Chrysostom and Theodoret, writing in the fourth and fifth centuries respectively, also understood these women to be female deacons.⁸

As in the case of Rom 16:1-2, the translation of 1 Tim 3:8-10 varies according to the translator’s presuppositions. The present is interjected into the past, with the result that because there are no women deacons in my church now, there must not have been any before, or because we have deaconesses in the church today, they could have had them in the first century. Finally, if no other interpretation works, it is always appropriate for the spouses of church officers to be serious Christians.

⁵John Chrysostom, *Homily 30*, on Romans 15:25-27, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (NPNF) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

⁶Theodoret *Interpret. Epist ad Rom.* 16:1, PG 82, cols 217D, 220A.

⁷Interestingly, the Miles Coverdale Bible (1563) translated διάκονος as “minister.”

⁸Clement *Stromata* 3.6.53, *Clement of Alexandria*, trans. John Ferguson, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1991), 289; John Chrysostom, *In Epistola 1 ad Timotheus 3, Homily 11.1*, NPNF.

Women Deacons in the Early Church

During the early centuries, there is mention of women deacons (διάκονος), deaconesses (διακόνισσα), and widows (χήρα) as recognized church leaders. We will examine evidence regarding the existence, tasks, and ordination of women in the diaconate.⁹ Then I will point to reasons for the demise of the female diaconate in the church.

The Existence of Women Deacons

Somewhere between 111 and 113, Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia, wrote to the Emperor Trajan, asking how he should deal with Christians. In the letter, he tells of questioning two women, who were called *ministrae*, the Latin equivalent of διάκονος.¹⁰

Of the ministry of women, Clement of Alexandria wrote:

But the apostles in conformity with their ministry concentrated on undistracted preaching, and took their wives around as Christian sisters rather than spouses, to be their fellow-ministers [συνδιακόνους, “fellow deacons”] in relation to housewives, through whom the Lord’s teaching penetrated into the women’s quarters without scandal.¹¹

The *Didascalia Apostolorum*, which has a complex and debated history, presents information on the work of women in the church. The document, which is undoubtedly from the East, seems to have been composed in the third century and has survived in Greek, Syriac, and Latin fragments. Chapter 16 gives specific instructions about the role of men and women church workers:

Therefore, O bishop, appoint yourself workers of righteousness, helpers who cooperate with you unto life. Those that please you out of all the people you shall choose and appoint as deacons: on the one hand, a man for the administration of the many things that are

⁹For further information on the history of female deacons, see “The History of Women Deacons,” at <www.womenpriests.org/traditio/deac_ovr.htm>. See also, John Wijngaards, *No Women in Holy Orders? The Ancient Women Deacons* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury, 2002). While Wijngaards interprets the evidence as including women deacons in the clergy, Aimé Georges Martimort, whose careful analysis *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), is considered a classic on the topic, admits the existence of women deacons but denies that they were ever considered clergy. See Shirley A. Groh, “The Role of Deaconesses through the Ages,” www.wls.wels.net/library/Essays/Authors/G/GrohRole/GrohRole.htm (August 17, 2004); and Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity. A.D. 311-600*, section 52, “The Lower Clergy,” <www.ccel.org/s/schaff/hcc3/htm/iii.viii.v.htm#_fnf5> (July 28, 2004).

¹⁰Pliny *Letters* 10.96.

¹¹Clement *Stromata* 3.6.53

required, on the other hand, a woman for the ministry of women.¹²

The *Apostolic Constitutions*, from the fourth century, incorporates most of the *Didascalia* and thus includes much the same material on deaconesses.¹³

In answering questions posed by the bishop of Iconium, Basil of Caesarea points out that ἡ διάκονος who has committed fornication can repent, but will not be returned to her office for a period of seven years.¹⁴ Basil's canon 44, which comes from the late fourth century, takes for granted the existence of deaconesses and shows that purity and even celibacy were expected of them. Canon 15 of the Council of Chalcedon (451) anathematizes an ordained deaconess who marries.¹⁵

Grave inscriptions also provide evidence of the existence of female deacons in the church. An inscription found in the vicinity of the Mount of Olives tells of "Sophia the Deacon." Dated to the second half of the fourth century, the tombstone reads: "Here lies the slave and bride of Christ, Sophia, the deacon (ἡ διάκονος), the second Phoebe."¹⁶ As a "bride of Christ," Sophia would have been celibate. As an imitator of Phoebe, she was a deacon.

A fifth-century inscription from Delphi, Greece, reads as follows: "The most pious deaconess [διακόνισσα] Athanasia, who led a blameless life in decorum, was installed as deaconess by the most holy bishop Pantiamianos. She has placed this monument. Here lie her mortal remains."¹⁷ A sixth-century inscription from Cappadocia in Asia Minor gives not only the title, but shows what this female διάκονος did:

Here lies the deacon Maria of pious and blessed memory, who according to the words of the apostle raised children, sheltered guests, washed the feet of the saints, and shared her bread with the needy. Remember her, Lord, when she comes into your kingdom.¹⁸

¹²"Concerning deacons and deaconesses," *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac*, ed. Arthur Vööbus, *Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium*, 407 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1979), 2:156. The Latin calls them *diaconissae*, Erik Tidner, ed., *Didascaliae apostolorum, Canonum ecclesiasticorum: Traditionis apostolicae, versiones latinae* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1963), 42, 59, 111.

¹³*The Apostolic Constitutions*, ANF 7:799-1043.

¹⁴*Canons of St. Basil*, 44, < www.ccel.org/fathers/NPNF2-14/7appndx/basil.htm > (July 22, 2004).

¹⁵Chalcedon, Canon 15, *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta* (Bologna: Istituto per le Scienze Religiose, 1972), 94; also < www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/chalcedon.html > (July 21, 2004).

¹⁶Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 159.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 176-177.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 164-167.

In the East, deaconesses appear as late as the twelfth or thirteenth century. The *Liber Patrum* states:

As for deaconesses, they must be wise. Those who have provided a clear witness of purity and fear of God are the ones who should be chosen. They should be chaste and modest and sixty years or older in age. They carry out the sacrament of baptism for women because it is not fitting that the priest should view the nudity of women.¹⁹

Thus duly constituted women deacons or deaconesses are clearly evident throughout the first centuries of the Christian church. Some have suggested that the existence of women deacons or deaconesses were an evidence of apostasy, while others are firmly convinced that the women who served the church were simply heirs of Phoebe.²⁰

The Ordination of Women Deacons

The *Apostolic Constitutions* gives instruction to the bishop on the ordination of church leaders, male and female. The bishop is to lay hands upon the woman and pray:

O Eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and woman, who didst replenish with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna, and Hulda, who didst not disdain that Thy only begotten Son should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony and in the temple didst appoint women to be keepers of Thy holy gates,—Do Thou now also look down on this Thy servant who is to be ordained to the office of a deaconess, and grant her Thy Holy Spirit, and cleanse her from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, that she may worthily discharge the work committed to her to Thy glory and the praise of Thy Christ, with whom glory and adoration be to Thee and the Holy Spirit for ever. Amen.²¹

At the Council of Chalcedon (451), the ordination of deaconesses is expressly called both *χειποτουείσθαι* and *χειροθεσία* (ordination by the imposition of hands). Members of the Council agreed that “a woman shall not receive the laying on of hands as a deaconess under forty years of age, and then only after searching examination.”²²

¹⁹*Liber Patrum*, ser. 2, fasc. 16, in S. Congregatio pro Ecclesia Orientali, *Codificazione canonica orientale, Fonti* (Rome: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1930), 34, cited in Martimort, 158.

²⁰At opposite poles are the authors at <www.womenpriests.org>, who use the historical material to support the ordination of women deacons and priests, and Martimort, 241-250, who finds the evidence for women deacons as part of the clergy ambiguous.

²¹*Apostolic Constitutions* 8.3.20, ANF 7:492.

²²Canon 15, *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, 94.

Emperor Justinian directed a *novella* (March 16, 535) to the archbishop of Constantinople, settling the number of clerics that should be paid by the churches. Among the clergy of the Great Church of the capital city, the emperor directed that there should be forty women deacons. In a subsequent *novella*, he stated that the same rules should apply to women deacons as to priests and deacons. As virgins or widows of one husband, they merited sacred ordination.²³

The Barberini Greek Euchology, an eighth-century Byzantine ritual for the ordination (χειροτονία) of male and female deacons calls for the laying-on of hands in ordination. Two prayers were to be said. The first prayer, said by a deacon, notes that God sanctified the female sex through the birth of Jesus and has given the Holy Spirit to both men and women. The second prayer, said by the archbishop, states:

Lord, Master, you do not reject women who dedicate themselves to you and who are willing, in a becoming way, to serve your Holy House, but admit them to the order of your ministers. Grant the gift of your Holy Spirit also to this your maid servant who wants to dedicate herself to you, and fulfil in her the grace of the ministry of the diaconate, as you have granted to Phoebe the grace of your diaconate, whom you had called to the work of the ministry [*leitourgia*].²⁴

The *Gregorian Sacramentary*, a Roman liturgical book of the eighth century which contains the sole surviving Western formulary for the ordination of a deaconess, reuses the formula for the ordination of a deacon, but with the feminine gender.²⁵

Tasks of Women Deacons

From ancient documents, we learn of the functions performed by the deaconesses of the early church. The *Apostolic Constitutions* commands the bishop to “ordain also a deaconess who is faithful and holy, for the ministrations towards women. . . . For we stand in need of a woman, a deaconess, for many necessities.”²⁶ Female deacons had a special ministry for women, especially in pagan homes, where male deacons were not welcome. They took the Eucharist to women who could not attend church. In

²³Justinian *Novellae* 3.1; 6.6; *Corpus Iuris Civilis, Novellae* (Zurich: Weidmann, 1968), 3:20-21, 43-45.

²⁴Barberini Greek Euchology 336; for the original Greek, English translation, and the history of the manuscript see <www.womenpriests.org/traditio/deac_gr1.htm> (July 27, 2004).

²⁵Matthew Smyth, “Deaconesses in Late Antique Gaul,” <www.womenpriests.org/deacons/deac_smy.htm> (July 15, 2004).

²⁶*Apostolic Constitutions* 3.2.15, ANF 7:431.

addition, they ministered to the sick, the poor, and those in prison.²⁷

The most important ministry of the female deacons was to assist at the baptism by immersion of women. The deaconess anointed the baptismal candidate with oil, apparently over the whole body. In some cases, she was to hold up a veil so that the clergy could not see the naked woman being baptized. It would appear that she also accompanied the woman into the water. The *Apostolic Constitutions* states that “in the baptism of women, the deacon shall anoint only their forehead with the holy oil, and after him the deaconess shall anoint them: for there is no necessity that the women should be seen by the men.”²⁸

The *Didascalía* points to the role of women deacons in the teaching ministry: “And when she who is being baptized has come up from the water, let the deaconess receive her, and teach and educate her in order that the unbreakable seal of baptism shall be (kept) in chastity and holiness. On this account, we say that the ministry of a woman deacon is especially required and urgent.”²⁹ In her role of teaching, the deaconess would, evidently, deal only with women, for in the section regarding widows, the *Apostolic Constitutions* is clear that women should not teach or baptize.³⁰

Women deaconesses were active in the church service. Public duties included presiding over the women’s entrance into the church, examining the commendatory letters of strangers, and assigning them the appropriate places in the church.³¹

Evidence indicates that deaconesses were to be in charge of convents—the “mother superior,” so to speak. Between 532 and 534, Jacobite bishops in exile in Antioch gave the opinion that in the East “the superiors of female monasteries should be deaconesses and should share the mysteries with those who are under their power,” when no priest or

²⁷Mary P. Truesdell, “The Office of Deaconess,” in *The Diaconate Today*, ed. Richard T. Nolan (Washington, DC: Corpus, 1968), 150. Truesdell, an Episcopalian deaconess, unfortunately based much of her writing on secondary sources, such as *The Ministry of Women: A Report by a Committee Appointed by His Grace the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury* (London: SPCK, 1919). The chapter is available online, but without footnotes, at <www.philosophy-religion.org/diaconate/chapter_7.htm> (July 18, 2004).

²⁸*Apostolic Constitutions* 3.2.15, ANF 7:431. For details and documents, see “The Woman Deacon’s Role at Baptism,” <www.womenpriests.org/traditio/deac_bap.htm> (July 27, 2004).

²⁹*Didascalía* 16, Vööbus, 2:157.

³⁰*Apostolic Constitutions* 3.1.6, 9; ANF 7:427-428, 429.

³¹See “A Woman’s Supervisory Role in the Assembly,” <www.womenpriests.org/traditio/deac_dis.htm> (July 27, 2004).

deacon was available to do so.³² About 538, the bishop of Tella, not far from Edessa, granted the deaconess the authority to assist the priest in the communion service and to read the “Gospels and the holy books in an assembly of women.”³³

James of Edessa (683-708) summarized the activities of the deaconess in the Eastern church during his time:

The deaconess has absolutely no authority regarding the altar. . . . However this is the authority she has: she can sweep the sanctuary and light the sanctuary lamp, and this even when the priest or deacon is not there. Also, if she lives in a community of nuns, when there is no priest or deacon, she can take the holy sacrament from the tabernacle and distribute this to the women who are her companions, or to children who happen to be there. But she is not allowed to consume the blessed sacrament on the table of the altar itself, or to put the blessed sacrament on the altar, or to touch the altar in any way.³⁴

Demise of the Female Diaconate

While deaconesses appear in the Eastern church until the twelfth or thirteenth century, in the West their end came much earlier. This is corroborated by the British monk Pelagius († ca. 420), who wrote that the female diaconate was an institution fallen into disuse in the West, though remaining in the East.¹⁰¹

A late fourth-century Synod of Nimes (396) points out that the problem with deaconesses was that women had “assumed for themselves the ministry of the Levites,” which was “against apostolic discipline and has been unheard of until this time.” Further, “any such ordination that has taken place is against all reason and is to be destroyed.”¹⁰²

A series of church councils pronounced against the ordination of deaconesses. The First Council of Orange (441) ordered: “In no way whatsoever should deaconesses ever be ordained. If there already are

³²Canon 9, in I. Rahmani, *Studia Syriaca* 3 (Sharfé, 1908), 33, cited in Martimort, 139-140; see A. Vööbus, *Syrische Kanonensammlungen*, Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalem, 307:167-175.

³³John bar Qursos, “Questions Asked by the Priest Sargis,” in A. Vööbus, ed., *The Synodicon in the West Syrian Tradition*, Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalem, 368:197-205, cited in Martimort, 140-142.

³⁴*Syrian Synodicon*, in “James of Edessa,” <www.womenpriests.org/traditio/james_ed.htm> (July 27, 2004).

¹⁰¹Pelagius, *Commentary on Romans 16:1*, Theodore de Bruyn, *Pelagius's Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 150-151.

¹⁰²Charles Joseph Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church from the Original Documents* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1871), 2:404.

deaconesses, they should bow their heads beneath the blessing which is given to all the people.”¹⁰³ The Burgundian Council of Epaon (517) ruled: “We abrogate totally within the entire kingdom the consecration of widows who are named deaconesses. If they desire it, they may receive only the benediction which is given to penitents.”¹⁰⁴ The Second Synod of Orleans (533) follows up on this prohibition. Canon 17 states: “Women who . . . have received the benediction as deaconesses, if they marry again, must be excommunicated.” Canon 18 continues: “To no woman must henceforth the *benedictio diaconalis* be given, because of the weakness of the sex.”¹⁰⁵

The ordination of deaconesses, rather than their work, seems to have become an issue, perhaps because of their monthly “impurity.” Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis (315-405), who held that women “are a feeble race, untrustworthy and of mediocre intelligence,” pointed out that deaconesses were not clergy, but served the “bishops and priests on grounds of propriety.”¹⁰⁶ In a letter to John, Bishop of Jerusalem, he insisted he had never “ordained deaconesses . . . nor done anything to split the church.”¹⁰⁷ By 1070, Theodore Balsamon, Patriarch of Antioch, could affirm that “deaconesses in any proper sense had ceased to exist in the Church though the title was borne by certain nuns.”¹⁰⁸ One of the reasons he gave was the “impurity of their menstrual periods” and the fact that law “prohibits women from entering the sanctuary.”¹⁰⁹

Jacobite author Yahya ibn Jarir, writing from Persia in the third quarter of the eleventh century, wrote:

¹⁰³Canon 26, Council of Orange, in Charles Joseph Hefele, *Histoire des concile d'après les documents originaux* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1908), 2:1:446-447. The note that follows this canon runs from pp. 446-452 and outlines the history of the female diaconate and points to examples of noncompliance, such as canon 73 of the Council of Worms (A.D. 868), which reaffirms Chalcedon's Canon 15, as well as certain eleventh-century pontifical decrees that allowed for the ordination of deaconesses (451-452). The author maintains that the Council of Orange had to take strict measures with deaconesses because they were attempting to “extend their attributions” (447).

¹⁰⁴Council of Epaon, Canon 21, in Edward H. Landon, *A Manual of Councils of the Holy Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1909).

¹⁰⁵Hefele, *A History of the Councils*, 4:187; note that “ordination” is no longer mentioned, but merely “benediction.”

¹⁰⁶Epiphanius of Salamis, *Against Heresies* 79.1, 3, 4. <www.womenpriests.org/traditio/epiphian.htm> (July 28, 2004).

¹⁰⁷Epiphanius, *Letter to John Bishop of Jerusalem*, §2 <www.womenpriests.org/traditio/epiphian.htm> (July 28, 2004).

¹⁰⁸*Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Deaconesses.”

¹⁰⁹*Replies to the Questions of Mark*, reply 35, <www.womenpriests.org/traditio/balsamon.htm> (July 15, 2004).

In antiquity deaconesses were ordained; their function was to be concerned with adult women and prevent their being uncovered in the presence of the bishop. However, as the practice of religion became more extensive and the decision was made to begin administering baptism to infants, this function of deaconesses was abolished.¹¹⁰

Michael the Great, Patriarch from 1166 to 1199, seemed to agree:

In ancient times there was a need for deaconesses, principally to assist with the baptism of women. When converts from Judaism or paganism became disciples of Christianity and thereby became candidates for holy baptism, it was by the hands of the deaconesses that the priests and bishops anointed the women candidates at the time of their baptism. This was why they performed an ordination or *cheirotonia* on the one chosen to be a deaconess.

But we can plainly see that this practice has long since ceased in the Church. The reason for this is that it is now at birth or during infancy that those who are destined for baptism receive this baptism. There is no longer any need for deaconesses because there are no longer any grown women who are baptized.¹¹¹

Thus two main considerations seem to have contributed to the demise of the female diaconate. First, infant baptism replaced adult baptism, making the assistance of a female at the baptism of adult women unnecessary. Second, the sacrifice of the mass, which gave to the priest the power of converting bread and wine into the very body and blood of Jesus, shaped the understanding of clergy and laity and removed lay people—male and female—from ministry. Further, the rise of monasticism, with the institution of nunneries and the insistence on celibacy, changed the focus of church work for women.

The Rediscovery of the Female Diaconate

Following the Reformation in Europe, the office of deaconess is first attested among the Independents in Holland. In 1575, the “conclusions drawn up by Thomas Cartwright and Walter Travers . . . contained a clause ‘touching deacons of both sorts, namely men and women.’ Both were to be chosen by the congregation and ‘to be received into their office with the general prayers of the whole Church.’”¹¹² The Puritan governor William Bradford’s *Dialogue* describes an “ancient deaconess” in Holland, who served the congregation for many years after she was chosen at age sixty.

¹¹⁰Jahya ibn Jarir, *Book of Guidance of Jahya ibn Jarir*, G. Khori-Sarkis, *Le livre du guide de Yahya ibn Jarir, Orient Syrien* 12 (1967): 461, cited in Martimort, 166.

¹¹¹*Syriac Pontifical*, Vatican Syriac MS 51, cited in Martimort, 167.

¹¹²D. S. Schaff, “Deaconess,” *The New Schaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopedia*, 3:375.

She honoured her place and was an ornament to the congregation. She usually sat in a convenient place in the congregation, with a little birchen rod in her hand, and kept little children in great awe from disturbing the congregation. She did frequently visit the sick and weak, especially women, and, as there was need, called out maids and young women to watch and do them other help as their necessity did require; and if they were poor, she would gather relief for them of those that were able, or acquaint the deacons; and she was obeyed as a mother in Israel and an officer of Christ.¹¹³

Kaspar Ziegler, a German Protestant jurist, theologian, and hymnodist, showed a renewed interest in the topic of the deaconess in his book, *De diacone et diaconissis veteris ecclesiae liber commentarius*, published in Wittenberg in 1678.

In 1734, the nonjuring bishops of Scotland were led by their study of Christian antiquities to desire the revival of the office of deaconess. They designed a service for the making of deaconesses, complete, beautiful, and in full accord with ancient tradition, and which provided for the laying-on of hands. There is no evidence, however, that this service was ever used.¹¹⁴

The office was gradually introduced elsewhere. One early eighteenth-century work on the subject indicated that a deaconess was not to be ordained before the age of forty; her duties were “to assist at the baptism of women, to instruct children and women before baptism, to supervise the women in Church and rebuke and correct those who misbehave,” and “to introduce any woman who wanteth to make application to a Deacon, Presbyter, or Bishop.”¹¹⁵

While Mennonites in Holland employed deaconesses, the modern revival of the office may be said to have begun at Kaiserwerth in 1836, when Lutheran pastor Theodore Fliedner formed the “Society of Deaconesses for the Rhenish Provinces of Westphalia” to care for the unfortunate. The members received “consecration,” but were not considered ordained. They formed voluntary societies for common life and work, which the volunteers could leave at the call of more urgent duties. At the Kaiserswerth Institute, women were trained for nursing, teaching, and parish work.¹¹⁶

¹¹³Leslie McFall, *Good Order in the Church*, <www.btinternet.com/%7Elmf12/HTML-GOITC/women_as_elders.htm> (July 13, 2004); see also Lucy Rider Meyer, *Deaconesses: Biblical, Early Church, European, American* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1889), 29-30; Schaff, 3:376.

¹¹⁴Truesdell, 158.

¹¹⁵McFall.

¹¹⁶An interesting detail is that Florence Nightingale studied there and later wrote about Fliedner and Kaiserwerth (*The Institution of Kaiserwerth on the Rhine* [London: London

In time, there was an attempt to introduce the idea of ordination into the induction of deaconesses. This came about unofficially in 1861, when Dr. Tait, Bishop of London, invested Elizabeth Ferard with the office of deaconess. By 1871, the deaconess was “a woman set apart by the bishop under that title for service in the Church.”¹¹⁷

According to Mary P. Truesdell, “one of the first persons in America to have a clear concept of the office [of deaconess] was Bishop Cobbs, the first Episcopal Bishop of Alabama.” His plan called for a cathedral in Montgomery, “with a house for deacons who were to do missionary work and assist in pastoral ministrations and a house for deaconesses who were to teach and take care of the sick and poor.” The plan, however, did not work, probably because of the Civil War.¹¹⁸ Bishop Cobbs was succeeded by his friend, Richard Hooker Wilmer, who, late in December 1864, “instituted” as deaconesses—but did not lay hands on—“three godly women who offered themselves for whatever work the bishop might assign them.” The group organized to care for war orphans. In 1885, the first deaconesses were ordained. The General Convention of the Episcopal Church adopted a canon authorizing the “setting apart” of deaconesses. Thus the ancient institution was reinstated in the Episcopal Church.¹¹⁹

In 1917, the Archbishop of Canterbury appointed a committee of scholars to study the historical material regarding deaconesses. After much discussion, the Lambeth Conference of 1930 affirmed that “the Order of Deaconess is for women the one and only ministry which we can recommend our branch of the Catholic Church to recognize and use.”¹²⁰ Subsequently, the Convocations of Canterbury and York stated: “At her ordination as a Deaconess, a woman receives by episcopal ordination a distinctive and permanent status in the Church and is dedicated to a life-long service and ministry.”¹²¹

The first American Lutheran deaconesses came to the United States in 1849. Theirs was a nursing ministry in the Passavant Hospital in Pittsburgh, which was modeled after the Kaiserwerth Institution.¹²² In

Ragged Colonial Training School, 1851]). American editions followed.

¹¹⁷Schaff, 3:378.

¹¹⁸Truesdell, 159-160.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 160.

¹²⁰Ibid., 165.

¹²¹Ibid., 166.

¹²²“Commission for Women,” <www.elca.org/cw/ordination/panel5/5.1.html> (July 28, 2004).

1884, seven additional deaconesses came to the German Hospital.¹²³ Much later, it was decided that nursing was not the only service women could render, and deaconesses began to serve in other capacities.¹²⁴

The work of Lucy Rider Meyer laid the basis for the Methodist deaconess movement in the United States. After receiving an M.D. in 1887, Meyer organized a number of her women students into a program of visitation and social service among the urban poor. In 1889, she published *Deaconesses: Biblical, Early Church, European, American: A History of the Movement*.¹²⁵ At the Methodist General Conference of 1902, deaconesses were accepted, but not without debate and the warning, by some of the “brethren,” that the work of “trained women would displace that of ministers themselves.” That same year, the magazine *Our Homes* carried a full description of deaconesses. Not a preacher, “she is not ordained; therefore she is not a female deacon.” Yet, she is “authorized and appointed by the Church, which gives her the right to do some of the things she could not otherwise do.” “As a pastor’s assistant she becomes a leader for the women of that congregation in Church work.”¹²⁶ By 1909, forty-five deaconesses “had been trained, consecrated, and appointed by the Church to various types of service.”¹²⁷ In 1915, it was decided that deaconesses were to have completed high school and two years of college work in nursing, teaching, or business.¹²⁸

Most nineteenth-century deaconesses belonged to “sisterhoods” and lived together in “houses.” They wore uniforms and were either single or widowed. Theirs was a life fully consecrated to service to the church. Deaconesses were not merely part-time church workers.

Deaconesses and Adventism

The Seventh-day Adventist Church grew up in the nineteenth century, when the office of deaconess was springing up in various churches in Europe and the United States. Thus it is not strange that Seventh-day

¹²³Mark Concepcion and Edward Chen, “Deaconesses of German Hospital,” <www.aahn.org/gravesites/deaconess.html> (July 28, 2004).

¹²⁴E.g., the history of Lutheran deaconesses, <www.curf.edu/departments/deaconess/IMustDoSomething.htm> (July 28, 2004).

¹²⁵*Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “Meyer, Lucy Jane Rider.”

¹²⁶Elizabeth M. Lee, *As among the Methodists: Deaconesses Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (New York: Woman’s Division of Christian Service, Methodist Church, 1963), 52-53.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*, 54.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 55.

Adventists also considered the possibility of having women serve as deaconesses.

Early Adventism

As early as 1856, Joseph Frisbie wrote about deaconesses as church workers. He referred to the seven (Acts 6) and Phoebe (Rom 16:1), noting that they “were considered servants, helpers or laborers with the apostles in the gospel, not that they preached the word, but ministered or served their temporal wants.” He then quoted from “Dr. A. Clarke’s Commentary”:

There were deaconesses in the primitive church, whose business it was to attend the female converts at baptism; to instruct the catechumens, or persons who were candidates for baptism: to visit the sick, and those who were in prison; and, in short, perform those religious offices, for the female part of the church, which could not with propriety be performed by men. They were chosen in general out of the most experienced of the church; and were ordinarily widows, who had borne children. Some ancient constitutions required them to be forty, others fifty, and others sixty years of age. It is evident that they were ordained to their office, by the imposition of the hands of the bishop; and the form of prayer used on the occasion is extant in the apostolic constitutions.¹²⁹

Frisbie then asked: “Would it not be well then, brethren, to appoint in all the churches deacons and deaconesses who may answer the qualifications that are laid down clearly in the Bible, with an understanding of what their duties are?” These duties are then summarized:

1. To see to the poor and destitute that may belong to the church; such as widows, orphans, the sick and afflicted that may be among us.
2. That it is the duty of such to first inquire into the wants of the cause, to introduce them to the church where they belong, at any proper time, to raise means for the support of the truth. That such be considered the treasures [*sic*] and agents of the church where they belong in all matters of finance.
3. That it may be the duty to keep on hand good wine [John ii,10] from grapes or raisins, for the ready ministration of the ordinances at any time on the visits of the messengers, which ordinances are too much neglected for the want of preparation; also to see to all other necessary preparations for the ordinances.¹³⁰

¹²⁹Joseph Birchard Frisbie, “Deacons,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 31, 1856, 0102 (Words of the Pioneers, CD ROM); the quotation is from Adam Clarke’s *Commentary on Rom 16:1, 2*, <www.thebibletool.com/wordsearchresults.jsp?searchTerm=deaconesses> .

¹³⁰*Ibid.*

In 1870, J. H. Waggoner published his ideas about "The Office of Deacon." His presentation, based on Acts 6:3 and 1 Tim 3:8-12, emphasized the spiritual characteristics of the deacons. These men were needed because "it is adopted by us as a custom, in the absence of an elder to have the deacon take charge of meetings, and exercise a general care for the church."¹³¹ Where Frisbie had earlier included deaconesses, Waggoner makes no mention of them.

Ellen White and Deaconesses

Throughout North America, a large number of books, sermons, and pamphlets regarding deaconesses and their work were published in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In addition, there are reports on deaconess homes and the ministry of deaconesses in major American cities, such as Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia. In this environment, one might expect that Ellen White would have had some of these books in her library. She did not.¹³²

A search for White's position on the appointment, ordination, or work of deaconesses proves disappointing. Only one direct reference is found in a letter written in September 1902, in which White scolds A. T. Jones for listening to the private woes of women: "You are not to set such an example that women will feel at liberty to tell you the grievances of their home life, and to draw upon your sympathies. When a woman comes to you with her troubles, tell her plainly to go to her sisters, to tell her troubles to the deaconesses of the church."¹³³

Ellen White's 1895 message on the setting-apart of women is key to the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the work of the deaconess.

Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands. In some cases they will need to counsel with the church officers or the minister; but if they are devoted women, maintaining a vital connection with God, they will be a power for good in the church. This is another means of strengthening and building up the church.¹³⁴

¹³¹J. H. Waggoner, "The Office of Deacon," *The Review and Herald*, September 27, 1870, 116.

¹³²*A Bibliography of Ellen G. White's Private and Office Libraries*, 3d ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1993). She did, however, have Clarke's *Bible Commentary*, cited by Frisbie in 1856.

¹³³Ellen G. White, Letter to A. T. Jones, *Manuscript Releases* 21, MR 1519.

¹³⁴Ellen G. White, "The Duty of the Minister and the People," *Review and Herald*, July

On the strength of this declaration, deaconesses were ordained. The first ordination is recorded in the church minutes for August 10, 1895, at the Ashley Church in Sydney, Australia. After the election of new officers, "Pastors Corliss and McCullagh of the Australian conference set apart the elder, deacons, deaconesses by prayer and the laying on of hands."¹³⁵ The second ordination took place at the same church on January 6, 1900, with W. C. White officiating.¹³⁶ The third occasion was an ordination service in February or March 1916, when E. E. Andross, then president of the Pacific Union Conference, officiated, citing as his authority Ellen White's 1895 *Review and Herald* article.¹³⁷

Adventist Deaconesses in the Twentieth Century

The process of becoming a deaconess and the role which the deaconess plays in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is still emerging.

Ordination of Deaconesses in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

The early ordination of deaconesses in the Seventh-day Adventist Church was soon forgotten. In the *Church Officers' Gazette* of December 1914, deacons and elders are to be ordained, for "until this is done they are not properly qualified to attend to all the duties of their office." The work of the deaconess, "closely associated with the deacon in looking after the many interests of the church," is "of the greatest well-being of the church," but nothing is said about the deaconess's ordination.¹³⁸ In spite of this, F. A. Detamore described a visit to a church in Sarawak, Borneo, and noted the ordination of "Sister Lee [as] deaconess."¹³⁹

When the first *Church Manual* was published in 1932, the NT origin of the deaconess was noted. However, the *Manual* goes on to state that

9, 1895, par. 8.

¹³⁵ Arthur N. Patrick, "The Ordination of Deaconesses," *Adventist Review*, January 16, 1996, 18-19; see also Jerry Moon, "A Power That Exceeds That of Men": Ellen G. White on Women in Ministry," in *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Nancy Vyhmeister (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1998), 201-203.

¹³⁶ As recorded in the church minutes and the diary of W. C. White; see Patrick, 18-19.

¹³⁷ Correspondence on this is transcribed in Appendix C of Ellen G. White, *Daughters of God* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald, 1998), 253-255.

¹³⁸ O. A. Olsen, "The Duties of Deacons and Deaconesses," *The Church Officers' Gazette*, December 1914, 1.

¹³⁹ F. A. Detamore, "First Fruits in Sarawak, Borneo," *Adventist Review*, December 8, 1921, 11.

“there is no record, however, that these women were ordained, hence the practice of ordaining deaconesses is not followed by our denomination.”¹⁴⁰ This sentence appears in the *Church Manual* through the sixteenth edition in 1986.¹⁴¹

The Annual Council of 1984 recommended revising the *Church Manual* to delete the sentence about not ordaining deaconesses, and to include Ellen White’s 1895 statement about laying hands on women who would “consecrate some of their time to be of service to the Lord.” The last sentence of the amended version was to read: “The church may arrange for the ordination of deaconesses by an ordained minister who holds current credentials from the conference.”¹⁴² The General Conference Session of 1985 voted to refer the amendment to the standing Church Manual Committee for consideration in 1990, after a delegate objected to calling Phoebe a deaconess.¹⁴³ At the 1990 session, it was voted to use the word “induction” rather than “ordination” to refer to the commissioning of deaconesses. Thus the 1990 *Church Manual* reads: “The church may arrange for a suitable service of induction for the deaconess by an ordained minister holding current credentials.” Furthermore, the recognition of Phoebe as a deaconess is included.¹⁴⁴ This same sentence appears in the latest edition issued in 2000.¹⁴⁵

It is understood that this “appropriate ceremony” may include the laying-on of hands, but ordination of deaconesses is not practiced in all churches. For example, in the year 2000, the Southeastern California Conference, well known for being progressive on women’s issues, reported that only 38 percent of its congregations ordained women as deacons or deaconesses. The rest maintained the nonordination tradition.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁰General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Church Manual* (n.p., 1932), 34.

¹⁴¹General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (n.p., 1986), 64.

¹⁴²Annual Council Minutes, 253-84G, October 15, 1984, <www.adventistarchives.org/docs/GCC/GCC1984-10/index.djvu?djvuopts&page=78 (11 August 2004)>.

¹⁴³“Ninth Business Meeting, Fifty-fourth General Conference Session, Tuesday, July 2, 1985,” *Adventist Review*, July 4, 1985, 9.

¹⁴⁴General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist, 1990), 64.

¹⁴⁵*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, rev. ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 56.

¹⁴⁶“Southeastern California Conference Values Gender Inclusiveness,” *Adventist Review*, March 23, 2000, <www.adventistreview.org/2000-12/news.htm> (August 10, 2004).

*The Tasks of Deaconesses in the
Seventh-day Adventist Church*

In the answer to a question regarding deaconesses in a 1909 *Review and Herald*, T. E. Bowen affirmed that the "work of the deaconess, properly carried on, is of great importance and will bring much blessing into the church. Her duty is not done when the quarterly meeting services are over." Deaconesses should visit "the sick and those in need of loving help. . . . They should take the lead in this noble work throughout the year and enlist the interest and help of other sisters in the church."¹⁴⁷ In the same year, in a plea for the use of proper baptismal robes, Mrs. S. N. Haskell points out that "those who accept, at the hand of the church, the office of deaconess, obligate themselves to spend time to attend to the things of the Lord's house." These things include baptismal robes.¹⁴⁸

In June of 1914, the Seventh-day Adventist Church began to publish instructions for local church officers in *The Church Officers' Gazette*. Its first two issues carried articles delineating the duties of deaconesses: "caring for the appointments of the church building, and looking after the welfare of the members of the church."¹⁴⁹ The first article emphasizes the second of these tasks: "It is her duty to become acquainted with the members by systematic visiting, and to render them such assistance as may be required." The attention required included caring for the sick, providing food and clothing for those in need, helping people to find work, and teaching the sisters how to cook and care for home and children. The deaconess should not do this alone, but should "solicit the assistance of the other members of the church, . . . thus leading them to become interested in one another's welfare and uniting the church as one family." Finally, the deaconess was to keep record of the "poor fund, administered by the deacon and deaconess." "It will be seen that the duties of the deaconess open before her a very wide field of usefulness in ministering to the needs of the members."¹⁵⁰

Almost at the end of the article, the care of different aspects of the church building are considered: arranging the platform, placing flowers on the desk, and dusting the sanctuary. Deaconesses were entrusted with the preparation for communion and the women's ordinance of humility. They were also to care for baptismal robes and help the women who were baptized. Deaconesses should report their labors in a quarterly meeting. Summarizing the duties, the unknown author stated: "To faithfully

¹⁴⁷T. E. Bowen, "Questions Answered," *Review and Herald*, January 7, 1909, 19.

¹⁴⁸Mrs. S. N. Haskell, "Baptismal Robes," *Review and Herald*, March 11, 1909, 10.

¹⁴⁹*The Church Officers' Gazette*, June 1914, 2.

¹⁵⁰"The Duties of the Deaconess," *The Church Officers' Gazette*, July 1914, 2.

perform the duties that belong to the office of a deaconess means much hard work and self denial."¹⁵¹

The December 1914 issue of *The Church Officers' Gazette* repeats much of the advice given in the June issue. It ends by stating that "deaconesses should be real mothers in Israel. In connection with their other church duties, they will do well to take a special interest in the welfare and salvation of our children and youth."¹⁵²

The article "Deacons and Deaconesses" in the October 1919 *Church Officers' Gazette* gives only one short paragraph to the care of the sick and the poor. Much more importance is given to the deaconess's part in preparing for the "quarterly [communion] service." The same *Gazette* recapitulates the duties of deaconesses in its issue of July 1923. While the practical help deaconesses may render "in the home or sick-room" did not disappear, the emphasis shifted from caring for and visiting the members to a concern with "dishes, decanter, goblets, and linen cloths" for communion.¹⁵³

Among the 1929 Annual Council recommendations were several that had to do with "shepherding the flock." One was that members should be visited at least once a year "by the minister, or by the church elder, deacon, deaconess, or other spiritually minded person."¹⁵⁴

The first Adventist *Church Manual*, published in 1932, dedicates five short paragraphs to the work of deaconesses. Their major tasks were preparing the communion table, overseeing the footwashing ceremony, assisting in baptisms, and doing "their part in caring for the sick, the needy, and the unfortunate, co-operating with the deacons in this work."¹⁵⁵

In the *Church Officers' Gazette* of October 1948, deaconesses were instructed regarding the highly coreographed communion service. After folding the napkins covering the bread, "the deaconesses, always moving 'in sweet accord' and unison, return to the table to remove and fold the large cloth that covers the wine service. Somehow, women's fingers can do this so much more skillfully than men's."¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹Ibid.

¹⁵²O. A. Olsen, "The Duties of Deacons and Deaconesses," *The Church Officers' Gazette*, December 1914, 1.

¹⁵³M. A. Hollister, "Deacon and Deaconess," *The Church Officers' Gazette*, July 1923, 2; the article by O. A. Olsen, first published in 1914, was republished in a shortened form in February 1924, omitting the injunction for deaconesses to be "mothers in Israel" and the stress on the importance of the "home mission."

¹⁵⁴"Report of the Autumn Council," *Adventist Review*, November 14, 1929, 15.

¹⁵⁵*Church Manual*, 1932, 34.

¹⁵⁶Dorothy Foreman Beltz, "Communion Service and True Worship," *The Church Officers' Gazette*, October 1948, 4.

In a 1952 essay on local church administration, Leif Tobiassen suggested that the church be divided into small groups under the leadership of deacons and deaconesses. He recommended that deaconesses be instructed "as to the details" of their office and work closely with the church elders. The greatest opportunity for service would be in a "campaign or a project," organized and promoted by the church. The pastor would not spend time promoting church activities from the pulpit, but deacons and deaconesses would lead their groups into activity and then report to the pastor. In this way, each member could be "an active worker. This ideal," wrote Tobiassen, "can most surely be reached by the pastor if he takes pains to educate the deacons and deaconesses to enlarge their vision of the significance of the part they should take in the spiritual and missionary management of the remnant church."¹⁵⁷ An echo of Tobiassen's idea, suggested by Harold Howard, was the "undershepherd" plan. Deacons and deaconesses would work with the elders to shepherd the flock.¹⁵⁸

A task that is halfway between the care of church property and church people is the attendance of children during the church service. In a 1940 edition of *Ministry*, the deaconess is in charge of the mothers' room, supplying "picture books, crayons, blocks, and other busywork for tiny tots."¹⁵⁹ A 1954 *Review* article suggests that deaconesses could be in charge of a nursery where the little ones could play during the church service.¹⁶⁰ In 1963, deaconesses are told to encourage mothers to remove their noisy children from the sanctuary to the mothers' room.¹⁶¹

In a 1956 article in *Ministry*, Bess Ninaj delineates six major duties of deaconesses. The first has to do with the communion service; it involves preparing the bread and juice, and includes maintaining the table linens and covering, and uncovering the table. Another duty is attending to all that is necessary for the ordinance of humility, aided in the heavy work by the deacons. Deaconesses are in charge of all items necessary for baptism and assist women candidates. They also greet visitors at church services. In addition, deaconesses should care for the sick and the poor, which "may involve financial assistance, personal help with children in the home, assistance with household duties, or making arrangements for any

¹⁵⁷Leif Tobiassen, "Adventist Concepts of Church Management," *Ministry*, November 1952, 18-20.

¹⁵⁸Harold Howard, "The Undershepherd Plan," *Ministry*, September 1992, 26; see n. 95.

¹⁵⁹W. E. Howell, "The Meaning of 'Holy Place,'" *Ministry*, October 1940, 18.

¹⁶⁰Eric B. Hare, "Conditioning the Child for the Church Service—Part 1," *Adventist Review* August 5, 1954, 9.

¹⁶¹Orval Scully, "Children in Church," *Adventist Review*, March 21, 1963, 11.

or all of these.” Finally, “the deaconesses and deacons assist the pastor in his work of calling on the members of the church. It is suggested in the *Manual* that these visits be made at least once every three months, but preferably each month.”¹⁶²

After listing these duties, Ninaj notes that some of these duties “are recognized and carried out quite uniformly by the churches. Some of them are consistently neglected or unrecognized.”¹⁶³ The second part of the article suggests that the care of people is neglected. To remedy this situation, Ninaj lists six tasks that deaconesses should carry out: home visitation in their own neighborhood, visitation in the homes around the church, conducting a “Sunday school at the church” for neighborhood children, conducting Vacation Bible Schools, developing a hospital visitation program, and visiting families that have had a bereavement. To achieve this kind of ministry, Ninaj insists, there “needs to be an awareness of the needs and possibilities” and also preparation. She concludes by quoting from Ellen White regarding the task of pastors in organizing and preparing the church for service.¹⁶⁴

A two-part *Ministry* article in 1972 refers to the privileges and responsibilities of deaconesses in relation to communion and footwashing, and contains a recipe for communion bread.¹⁶⁵

A ministry description, dated 2004 and prepared by the North American Division for deacons and deaconesses, lists the common duties of deacons and deaconesses as understood throughout the last century: deacons and deaconesses are in charge of greeting and ushering, keeping up the church property, seeing to security, and visiting members. Deaconesses are to help with the baptismal service, which includes preparing robes, laundering and storing equipment, and assisting women candidates. The functions regarding footwashing and communion are the same as those listed earlier. One item, however, is new: “It is appropriate for either deacons or deaconesses, who have been ordained, to assist in distributing the emblems and uncovering and recovering the table during the service.” In addition—and here the list seems more similar to the ones of the early twentieth century—“they will join with the pastor and elders in visiting church members. Some churches assign a geographic area or certain number of members for deacons and deaconesses in teams of two or three

¹⁶²Bess Ninaj, “The Deaconess and Her Work,” *Ministry*, December 1956, 36.

¹⁶³Ibid.

¹⁶⁴Ibid, 36-37.

¹⁶⁵Dalores Broome Winget, “The Deaconess and the Communion Service,” 2 parts, *Ministry*, October 1972, 28-30; November 1972, 41-42.

to visit.¹⁶⁶ The final item bears quoting in full:

In many churches an unwritten tradition gives the women who serve as deaconesses or deacons the responsibility of organizing hot meals for any church family that experiences a death or other tragedy. This may mean simply taking food to the home or, in some cases, the serving of an entire meal to family and guests after a funeral. Often the planning of wedding and baby showers is also done by this group. This is an important aspect of a caring ministry in the congregation.¹⁶⁷

What Seventh-day Adventist deaconesses do varies according to the nature of the local church they attend. In Black churches in North America, deaconesses have more visibility than in White churches. A 1999 book, based on a workshop given for deacons and deaconesses by the author Vincent White, shows some of these differences. In Black congregations, deaconesses are instructed to “be dressed uniformly in white outfits.” In the church service, they are to help maintain reverence and see that the preacher has a glass of water by the pulpit.¹⁶⁸ Deaconesses make arrangements for the funeral dinner and “serve as flower bearers.”¹⁶⁹ In addition to the expected services a deaconess might render at a baptism, she is to “privately call the pastor’s attention to candidates who may be wearing colorful cosmetics and jewelry.”¹⁷⁰ Deaconesses prepare for the communion service and footwashing. If dressed appropriately in white, they may participate in the processional and veil and unveil the table (for which activity specific details are given). Deaconesses also prepare the communion kits for those who were unable to attend, form part of the team that takes communion to shut-ins, and dispose of the emblems of communion by burning the bread and pouring out the wine on the ground.¹⁷¹

Deaconesses participate in visitation of church members so that all families receive one ten- to fifteen-minute visit per quarter. When they find problem situations, they are to use a nine-step problem-solving method to meet the physical, social, and spiritual needs of those they work with. They

¹⁶⁶Church Resources Consortium, North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, *Responsibilities in the Local Church*, rev. ed., 2002, <plusline.org/article.php?id=236> (August 10, 2004).

¹⁶⁷Ibid.

¹⁶⁸Vincent E. White Sr., *Problem Solvers and Soul Winners* (Knoxville, TN: AVA, 1999), 11-12.

¹⁶⁹Ibid., 14-15.

¹⁷⁰Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁷¹Ibid., 20-39.

are backed up by interdisciplinary teams in the local church.¹⁷² In addition, the head deaconess, together with her male counterpart, organizes the telephone committee and helps train those who participate.¹⁷³ Deaconesses are to be soul winners and help disciple new members.¹⁷⁴

With this book, one might say that Seventh-day Adventists have returned full circle to the early vision of the deaconess. Unordained women carry out a ministry of caring—for things and people. At different times the emphasis has varied, yet one cannot doubt that these women have been an integral part of the leadership of their respective churches.

Conclusion

That women served the church as deacons in the NT is clear. What they did and whether they were ordained is not. But then, the same could be said about the deacons in the Pastoral Epistles.

The service of women as deacons in the early centuries is well attested. The most important of their duties had to do with the baptism of adult females, but they were also involved in visitation and care of women in the church. In the early church, their existence seems to be taken for granted and their ordination accepted. Later, as the understanding of ordination changed and people were ordained to a position rather than to a task, the role of deaconesses changed and nearly disappeared. Given the “indelible character” of ordination and the power it provided to the clergy, women were excluded—earlier and more completely in the Western than in the Eastern church. At the same time, adult baptism practically disappeared and monasticism became the preferred way for women to serve God and the church. Thus women deacons disappeared.

The Radical Reformation saw the beginning of a renewed interest in the service of deaconesses, but it was not until the nineteenth century that deaconesses came into their own. And then it was as sisterhoods for nursing, teaching, and ministry—single women devoting their full time to church service.

Adventism was born as a grass-roots movement. Everyone—including females—was needed to spread the message.¹⁷⁵ As early as 1856, Frisbie called for women deacons. Ellen White pleaded for women who gave part-

¹⁷²Ibid., 47-58.

¹⁷³Ibid., 59-65.

¹⁷⁴Ibid., 67-79, 87-93.

¹⁷⁵See Michael Bernoi, “Nineteenth-Century Women in Adventist Ministry against the Backdrop of Their Times,” in *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1998), 211-234.

time service to be ordained by the church. The women that Frisbie and White envisioned as serving the church were not to be ascetics or members of sisterhoods, living separate from the world. They were to be people involved in everyday life, giving of themselves; they were not clergy, but lay people who were ordained to specific tasks. My research would suggest that this concept of deaconesses was an attempt to recreate a NT or very early-church custom.

Twentieth-century Seventh-day Adventists, for the most part, lost the impetus and potential of the early deaconess movement. Deaconesses in pastoral ministry became a rarity, becoming, to a great extent, lovely ladies who poured wine and water and kept communion linens and baptismal robes. Marginal tasks, such as greeting people at the church door and distributing welfare to the poor, were sometimes added, but deaconesses were not a force to be reckoned with. Suggestions for instructing and organizing deaconesses appear as isolated calls to use the female talents in the church, but seem not to have been heeded.

Perhaps twenty-first century Seventh-day Adventists can learn from history. Seventh-day Adventist deaconesses may yet be recognized as lay ministers. Perhaps the church will find ways to instruct and enable them so that they may serve the church and its Lord with love and creativity, becoming a force for strength and growth within the church.