

reflections

WHEN I THINK about *diakonia*, I think about my Grandma Meyer. Could she have been a deaconess (diakonias)? I'm not sure, but I know she taught me to serve and to listen to Jesus.

Grandma was one of five daughters born to Iowa farmers. She served as she grew up. Grandma was 46 when Grandpa died, and she served in keeping the farm and raising three teenage children. Grandma moved to town when her sons married. Then Grandma served her congregation and community.

Grandma Meyer taught me the work and joy of service. Grandma served—like Martha, I suppose.

Grandma also taught me to listen to Jesus. Grandma Meyer taught Sunday school for 21 years. With an eighth grade education, she was the best Sunday school teacher I knew. Even when we were too old to be in Grandma's class, we went to Sunday school with her during summer visits. She told Bible stories using flannel-graph figures. She could recite all six Chief Parts of Luther's Small Catechism. She knew lots of Bible verses and hymns. She cleaned and washed and baked early in the day to have time for teachers' meetings, lesson preparation, and Ladies' Aid. During many afternoons we found her in her rocking chair reading a well-worn Bible.

Grandma Meyer taught me the hope and salvation that come from Jesus. Grandma loved to listen to Jesus—like Mary, I suppose.

If Grandma had been born in another generation, with different opportunities, might she have been a deaconess? I wonder.

This edition of *Issues* highlights opportunities for Lutheran deaconesses to engage in the ministries of service and to listen to Jesus within and outside congregations. The ministry of a deaconess is that of Martha and that of Mary. A deaconess is called to serve like Martha in caring for the sick, the poor, the grieving, the hurting, and the dying. A deaconess is called to listen to Jesus like Mary in order to tell the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ.

The ministry of a deaconess is a vital extension of the pastoral office that encourages women to use the full array of gifts, talents, and abilities God has given them "as they live and breathe the Gospel as servants of Christ in the midst of his people" (Bielby and Just). Thus, it is our hope that this edition of *Issues* will help you see that "the opportunities for *diakonia* are limitless" as God's people come to know that "their Shepherd indeed loves and cares for them" (Wassilak). As we better understand how *diakonia* is lived out through and by a deaconess in the life of a congregation and the community she serves, it is our prayer that more women will be encouraged to respond to God's call to serve in this "essential ministry of Christ to his Church" (List) and be Marthas and Marys, engaged in *diakonia* now and for generations to come.

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Brian L. Friedrich, President

“What Do Deaconesses Do Anyway?”

“WHAT DO DEACONESSES DO ANYWAY?” This is a question that I hear a lot these days as a student in the deaconess program. Finding an adequate yet succinct answer, however, has been harder than I expected. After all, what do deaconesses do?

During my journey through this program, I have had the opportunity to meet and learn from more deaconesses than I even knew existed a year ago. Some care for hospice patients, helping them die with dignity and love. Others serve congregations as directors of caring ministries, ministers of music, directors of Christian education, or other congregational positions. Deaconesses serve as chaplains in hospitals or nursing homes. Some work for non-profit organizations such as Habitat for Humanity. And the list goes on. Hearing of their ministries and the myriad of ways they serve God’s people, one sees a common thread that runs through each of their lives. The Lutheran Deaconess Association expresses it in its motto: “Faith and Service in Christ.”

This makes sense. The very word “deaconess” comes from the Greek word, *diakonia*, which is most often translated “service.” As implied by the motto, however, the single word “service” does not fully capture the entire concept of *diakonia*. After all, slaves serve, employees serve, military personnel serve. For some of these, their service is *diakonia*. For some it is not. What makes the difference is the motivation behind the service.

Diakonia is not performed for fear of punishment, hope of reward, or honor and country. *Diakonia* is service gladly given in thanksgiving for all that has been received from God. *Diakonia* is imitating Christ who said, “... the Son of Man did not come to be served (*diakonathanai*), but to serve (*diakonasai*), and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26-28).

Just before he gave his life as a ransom for us, he demonstrated how we are to serve one another when he took the position of the lowest slave in the household and washed his disciples’ feet. This act, the washing of feet, has become for the deaconess community the symbol of *diakonia*. It exemplifies the duty of all Christians—service to others in Christ’s name.

But if, as a Christian, I am already supposed to serve in such a manner, what is the point of becoming a deaconess? Why not just remain as I am and continue to serve as I do? This same line of reasoning could be used regarding pastors. If the whole body of Christ is called to proclaim the Gospel, what is the point of having pastors? Yet we know that the church throughout the ages has set apart certain people, called by the Holy Spirit, to publicly proclaim the Gospel on behalf of the church. Deaconesses, likewise,

are individuals called by the Holy Spirit and set apart by the church to do the work of *diakonia* publicly on its behalf. They are signs to the world that one of the valuable functions of the church is service in Christ’s name.

Some have asked, “Might the presence of deaconesses in the church offer fellow Christians an excuse to shirk their own call to *diakonia*? Might the impression be given that deaconesses are the only ones who can and should do *diakonia*?” One of my instructors, E. Louis Williams, executive director of the Lutheran Deaconess Association, responded to my musing on these questions by stating, “I believe that the reason the diaconate exists is ultimately to help the whole church be more diaconal.” So, deaconesses don’t just do *diakonia*, they help others do it, too. But how?

That brings us back to our original question, “What do deaconesses do anyway?” The short answer is, they serve. But in reality there is more to it than that. Deaconesses serve in Christ’s name and on behalf of his church. They dedicate their whole lives to “Faith and Service in Christ” and help others to do the same. And each one does this in her own unique and gifted way.

In the end, maybe the best way to find out what a deaconess does is ask one. She can share with you how she answers the call to *diakonia* through her life and work. She can help you consider how your own service is or can be *diakonia*. Then, together you can marvel at the amazing ways God uses each one of us to serve both the church and the world. “Faith and Service in Christ.” *Diakonia*. That’s what the church does. That’s what deaconesses do.

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Why the Church Needs Deaconesses

IF I REMEMBER CORRECTLY, my first contact with a deaconess in the Synod was in Sidney, Montana, in the summer of 1952. Since then I have had numerous contacts with deaconesses in the Synod. I have witnessed the love and devotion to our Lord Jesus which these dedicated women have demonstrated. They have followed in the footsteps of those dedicated women who are mentioned in the New Testament and in early church history: Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchrea (Romans 16:1, 2); Priscilla (v. 3); Mary (v. 6); Tryphena and Tryphosa (v. 12) who served the saints. In a letter to the Emperor Trajan (112 A.D.), Pliny, Governor of Bithynia, mentioned that

he had to put to torture two Christian maidens who were called deaconesses. Canon 19 of the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) made reference to Paulinian deaconesses, and Canon 15 of the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) prohibited placing a woman into the order of deaconesses before the age of forty.

I am pleased to see the revival of the deaconal order after years of decline in our Synod. Today we have a great need to increase the number of deaconesses serving our congregations and the Synod. One of the greatest needs is located in ministry to families. Families, not only in our nation, but in the church, are in trouble. The national divorce rate is about 50 percent. The rate in the church is almost the same. Eighty percent of the divorces are initiated by females (*Lutheran Education*, Spring 2004, Vol. 139/No. 3, pp. 191, 192). We need women trained in marriage counseling who also have received training in biblical and systematic theology to offer a ministry to strengthen marriage. Deaconesses need to be prepared for this ministry in the church.

As I visit congregations I also see another great need for the ministry of deaconesses. We have very few single moms and their children in our churches. Today 1.3 million children are born annually out of wedlock. The statistical figures for young women in the church are not significantly different from those outside the church. Additionally, today almost 40 percent of children live in a household without their biological father. Seventeen million children have no father living with them at all. These women express their concern by saying that no one who has tried to raise children alone has any idea of what they are going through. Sending two male elders or even a pastor to the home for a visit will achieve little. Congregations need to become serious about their ministry to this group in our population. The ministry to these women and their children can best be done by a woman, a deaconess.

Little is being done to assist parents in the training of their children in the faith at home. What is not done in the home cannot be done by the church in its educational programs. Parents need to be assisted in this important responsibility by regular home visits. Again, much of this ministry can be done by trained deaconesses.

We are confronted with an aging population. The percentage of our church members who are at retirement age or older is increasing. People live longer, and the result is that we have more members who are unable to attend worship at the church, who need to be ministered to in their homes through regular devotions and visits by someone who cares. Deaconesses may well be able to assist congregations in developing this very much-needed ministry.

According to Holy Scripture, God created male and female in His own image. The female is created to reflect the image of God

in giving life and nurturing that life. The male reflects the image of God in protecting and supporting the life which is given. Nurturing is needed, not only at the beginning of life, but also at the end of life. It is my observation that a woman does this far better than a man. There is a unique ministry for women in the church that needs to be more fully developed. Deaconesses also need to be trained in theology in order to contribute to the needed ministry of the churches. With both of our seminaries offering post-graduate programs in theology for our deaconesses, I am convinced that the renewal and revitalizing of this ministry in our Synod will bring blessings from our Lord for His people.

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The Distaff Side of Pastoral Care: The Deaconess as Chaplain

FOR A LONG TIME, a portion of the constituency within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has been concerned that women studying to be Lutheran deaconesses merely consider their training to be a stepping stone into the pastoral ministry. Some worry that acceptance of women as pastors may eventually spread into the LCMS. The fact that some rostered LCMS deaconesses are serving the Church as chaplains only heightens those fears.

But there are good reasons we have deaconesses as chaplains. First, we need them! While parish settings frame a structure for ministry that works in most circumstances, specialized pastoral care (chaplaincy) provides the “out of the box” opportunities for ministry in the institutional settings, such as nursing homes, hospitals, and rehabilitation centers, where traditional ministry models fall short. Deaconesses in complementary ministry with pastors can serve side-by-side in the struggle to help people in the most dire of life-changing circumstances.

Seelsorge (the care of souls) is the essence of Lutheran pastoral care. It focuses its attention on faithful Jesus at the center of all the changes in a person’s life in the ways that He promises in Isaiah 43:2.

Since so much of pastoral care is administered via Word and Sacrament ministry, people most often identify a chaplain with the person of a specially trained male pastor. Just think of the male images embodied in Jesus: Savior, Brother, Lord, King, Good Shepherd. As “the under shepherd,” the male pastor is identified with all of them.

But there is a distaff side of Jesus that hasn’t been considered since the 12th century. It is

from these images that the deaconess/chaplain complements her male counterparts. In her book, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Caroline Walker Bynum reminds us of the image of the tender, compassionate, nurturing Jesus. Remember this passage? “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing” (Matthew 23:37). Bynum says, “Medieval images of the maternal also stressed mother-love as instinctive and fundamental; the mother is tender and loving, sometimes dying to give the child life; she tempts or disciplines only with the welfare of the child in mind” (p. 133). Might and tenderness; male and female images. There is both room and need for each.

The titles of “Pastor” and “Deaconess” are ecclesiastical designations that help to define distinct roles in congregational settings. But the title “chaplain,” earned through academic and clinical training, culminating in professional endorsement, means something different in the organizational structure of institutions, such as hospitals and nursing homes. Though they are part of the patient’s care team, *Pastoral Care* is the only department not directly connected to the medical community, either by their credentialing or job description.

Institutional chaplaincy is the great equalizer. In their presence and contributions, chaplains are a visible reminder to the number crunchers and managerial offices that care of people is their *raison d’être*—a demonstrated reflection of the love Christ offers to us.

The deaconess/chaplain serves in a complementary role with her male counterparts in some distinctive ways. The bond of a deaconess/chaplain with her female patients/residents is crucial when addressing the sensitive issues involving life-changing or disfiguring female surgeries (such as mastectomies and hysterectomies), and the impact the death of children has on them as a result of miscarriage, childhood disease, or motor vehicle accidents.

A woman’s emotions and tears are accepted by most of society. Affirmation of male fear by the deaconess/chaplain encourages male patients to release their deepest emotions. A male veteran, fraught with survivor guilt, will disclose to the deaconess/chaplain the remorse he has for living when so many of his war buddies died and release burdens that may have been carried in private for over 60 years. A surgical patient, without his family around, will reveal, in the presence of a deaconess/chaplain, his tears during pre-surgery visits. The visit is cathartic. Through pre-surgery prayer, anxiety is lessened, the patient sleeps relaxed, and a body, now better prepared both mentally and emotionally, offers the prospects for a positive outcome post-op.

For women with special gifts, the deaconess as chaplain offers opportunities to bring Jesus’ distaff side to pastoral care. And in the effort to meet a diversity of needs in 21st century health-care, sometimes the deaconess as chaplain may be just *exactly* what The Doctor ordered.

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