What is my want? I want to serve. Whom do I want to serve? The Lord in his wretched ones and his poor. And what is my reward? I serve neither for reward nor thanks, but out of gratitude and love. My reward is that I am permitted to serve.” These beginning lines of the Deaconess Motto by Rev. Wilhelm Lohe, founder of the Confessional Lutheran Deaconess Movement in the 1800s, encapsulate the heart of deaconess ministry, or *diakonia*. Whether or not your church has a called deaconess, chances are *diakonia* is at the heart of your church’s life.

**What is Diakonia?**

Your parish practices *diakonia* when the faithful are instructed, the sick visited, the poor assisted, the suffering comforted, the grieving consoled, the hungry nourished, the fearful encouraged, the lonely befriended, the recovering nursed back to health, the abandoned supported, the ignorant educated, the jaded reassured, the questioners answered, the outsider evangelized. Or rather, chances are that this is the *diakonia* which, ideally, you would like to see occur, or occur more thoroughly and consistently, in your congregation.

Most churches have only two sources for *diakonia*: the work of the pastor and the work of the volunteer. But there are two problems with these approaches. The first problem is that if a congregation relies largely on the pastor to provide *diakonia*, the pastor will be overtaxed, and worse, will be distracted from the primary responsibilities of his call, providing Word and Sacrament ministry. The Apostles themselves realized that the pastor should not be distracted from his call to Word and Sacrament ministry to provide *diakonia* (to “wait on tables”), and that the Church should not even consider failing to provide *diakonia* because of its proper focus on Word and Sacrament ministry. The second problem is that if a congregation relies largely on volunteers to provide *diakonia*, *diakonia* will likely not attain its necessary position at the heart of the life of the church. Partially this is because the structure of our society leaves the church in chronic need of sufficient volunteers. Partially this is because a congregation needs an *office*—and an officer—of *diakonia*. When a congregation has a pastor, it sends the message that Word and Sacrament ministry is not an *ad hoc* and optional part of the Church’s life, but rather a central and essential part of the Church’s ministry in the world. When a congregation has a diakonal officer—that ministry for which we deaconesses are trained and called—it says that *diakonia* is an essential ministry of Christ to his Church. God designed the Word and Sacraments to be efficacious unto our justification and our sanctification. The pastor brings the Word and Sacraments to the parishioners; the deaconess brings the fruits of the Word and Sacraments to them. Ideally, the deaconess does not replace volunteers; instead, she both ensures that *diakonia* will take place full-time in the name of the parish, and she coordinates and educates diakonal volunteers so that they might perform their *diakonia* more effectively.

**What is a Deaconess?**

Deaconess ministry is commonly described as having three pillars, meaning that there are three main areas of service provided by
deaconesses: spiritual care, mercy care, and teaching of the Christian faith. The goal of all three of these pillars of deaconess ministry is the same, that people be set free by the glorious love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. All three are designed to bring our flesh-and-blood Christ to people who are themselves struggling with the realities of being flesh-and-blood humans. Spiritual care brings Christ to people by perceiving people’s spiritual needs and addressing them with a proper application of Law and Gospel to each person’s individual circumstances. Deaconesses address both the day-to-day spiritual needs of the individual and the crisis-induced spiritual needs of believer or unbeliever alike. Mercy care brings Christ to people by removing impediments to perceiving Christ’s merciful presence. As frail humans, many temporal forms of suffering, born of illness or poverty, heartache or catastrophe, obscure the love of Christ from our view. Deaconesses attend to the temporal needs of people, showing them Christ’s love penultimately in the merciful administrations which they bestow on the needy, but always with the ultimate goal of teaching people that it is the eternal mercies of Christ demonstrated at Calvary, not the temporal mercies demonstrated today, which are the bedrock of their peace. Teaching the Faith brings Christ to people by bringing them face-to-face with the Living Word who equips them to witness Christ to others and prepares them to face the challenges which their own lives do or will hold. These three pillars of spiritual care, mercy care, and teaching the Faith are the unifying thread of continuity throughout forms of diaconal service which might otherwise appear to be quite diverse.

**Who Becomes a Deaconess and Why?**

The decision to become a deaconess is a complex one. Part of what goes into that decision is a deliberate and calculated conclusion that one’s own personal talents are congruous with the skill-set needed to be a competent deaconess. The other part of that decision is much more personal, and occurs when a woman who is considering deaconess ministry from the “outside” has that stirring...
sensation inside which makes her feel that she is looking in a mirror, or that, in considering the deaconess ministry, she is coming home to herself and embracing who she has always been.

Frequently, women who end up becoming deaconesses tell the story that, at an earlier point in their lives, they “never knew that deaconesses existed.” Upon discovering this hidden gem of deaconess ministry, women frequently feel like they are looking in a mirror, seeing themselves in deaconess ministry, discovering that they can become professionally who they have always been avocationally.

**Deaconesses and the Missouri Synod**

**Deaconesses are professional church workers.** The position of deaconess in the LCMS is a called and rostered one, meaning that the deaconess is called by a congregation or institution of the Synod, either to serve therein or to serve in a secular institution, such as a prison or hospital, in the name of the LCMS. Similar to teachers and other non-ordained church workers, deaconesses are considered “ministers of religion—commissioned,” generally participating in the worker benefits program of the calling institution, and generally considered to be self-employed.

Deaconesses are not new to our Synod. The LCMS has had deaconesses serving in America for fully as long as the church body now known as the LCMS has existed. As both the faces of the American concepts of professional education and the process for the training of church workers has changed over the years, so has the nature and location of deaconess education. Since 1979, by virtue of synodical resolution, deaconess training has been conducted by LCMS institutions of higher education. In 1980, Concordia College (now University), River Forest became the sole institution offering the deaconess program to LCMS women. Since LCMS deaconesses major in theology and since the heart of diaconal ministry is spiritual care, already since the inception of the River Forest Deaconess Program, discussions between LCMS deaconesses and other LCMS theologians were exploring the possibility of educating deaconesses at our synodical seminaries. By resolution of the
2001 synodical convention, our two seminaries were authorized to begin deaconess programs. As a result, we currently have three synodical institutions which offer deaconess programs: Concordia University, River Forest, which maintains the B.A. program and the colloquy program; Concordia Theological Seminary, which offers an M.A. program; and Concordia Seminary, which offers both an M.A. program and deaconess certification via the Hispanic Institute of Theology.

In earlier days, deaconess education was not the unique venue of the Synod. In early American Lutheran history, deaconesses were either educated in Germany and then sent to work in the United States, or they were trained locally by the myriad of regional Lutheran church bodies. In 1911, the Synodical Conference, which was the union of conservative Lutheran synods of the United States, decided to begin educating deaconesses to serve within the various synods of the conference. A pamphlet written in that year by Rev. Hertzburger, son of a former deaconess, argued that a woman could and should serve in any ecclesial capacity save that of the Office of Public Ministry (the pastoral office). In clarification of just what constituted the pastoral office, Hertzburger clarified that the Christian woman has no role within the worship service (Gottesdienst) of the community. Outside of the worship service Hertzburger contended that not only could women serve the Lord freely, according to their skills and interests, but that the Church was obligated by God to make use of the gift God had given to the Church in the personages of women. God had given both deaconesses and pastors, with both their common and their unique spiritual gifts, to the Church, and it was shameful when the Church did not embrace both deaconesses and pastors. Interestingly, this argument was proposed in response to the proliferation of deaconesses in the less Confessional and less Scripturally faithful Lutheran conference known as the General Synod. Pastor Hertzburger wanted to see Scriptural and Confessional Lutherans embrace deaconess ministry, and the Synodical Conference concurred. The conference began offering Scripturally and Confessionally focused diaconal education in the name of the conference and for the benefit of congregations and institutions formally or informally affiliated with the conference. By the 1940s, this conference-oriented deaconess education had become university-based education in theology and diakonia, and the location of this education was Valparaiso University. To this day, Valparaiso offers a pan-Lutheran deaconess program.

Earlier in our history, graduates of the Valparaiso University Deaconess Program were eligible to be rostered deaconesses of the LCMS. This is no longer the case. One reason is that there is no longer a conference of conservative American Lutheran church bodies which are in altar-and-pulpit fellowship with each other. Another reason is that the Zeitgeist of the Valparaiso University Deaconess Program has changed and now deviates from the conservative Lutheran position, most notably in favoring the ordination of women. The Valparaiso University graduate herself may be quite conservative and confessional, and may hold unswervingly to her LCMS convictions (if she is LCMS); but since the program encourages women’s ordination and other positions not consistent with the convictions of the LCMS, Valparaiso University Deaconess Program graduates must colloquize to obtain LCMS rostering. Currently, all rostered LCMS deaconesses are either graduated or colloquized by LCMS institutions of higher earning, or they graduated from Valparaiso University at a time when the LCMS was still rostering graduates of the Valparaiso University Deaconess Program.

Deaconesses: Professional Conferences

Parishes and institutions which are familiar with LCMS deaconesses will have already discerned that two main different deaconess conferences exist. These two conferences are professional associations of deaconesses. A deaconess could graduate from any given deaconess program (Synodical or that of Valparaiso) and choose not to join a professional conference. However, most deaconesses do choose to join a professional conference, partially for purposes of professional enrichment, but especially due to a sense of
sisterly community. Historically, deaconesses have been identified both by the recognition of the Church (which currently is attained by approved theological and vocational education) and the sisterly community between deaconesses themselves. This community results from the "sisterhood" of identity and purpose between deaconesses, often despite superficial differences in diakonal job descriptions. In fact, until quite recently, American Lutheran deaconesses were known not by that title, but rather by the title of "sister." In a few pockets of American Lutheranism and in most areas of international Lutheranism, deaconesses are still known as "sisters."

The two main deaconess conferences to which LCMS deaconesses generally belong are the Lutheran Deaconess Conference (LDC) and the Concordia Deaconess Conference (CDC). The LDC tends to be comprised of graduates of the Valparaiso Deaconess Program, and therefore has members of several different Lutheran church bodies. The CDC is comprised of rostered LCMS deaconesses (generally deaconesses actively serving in or retired from called positions). The uniforms, properly called garb, of the two conferences differ. (Deaconesses of either conference have the option of wearing or not wearing their garb.) The LDC formal garb consists of a navy blue dress or suit worn with the pin which is the symbol of the LDC, namely a Jerusalem cross with a bowl of water, symbolizing the service Christ rendered by washing the disciples’ feet. Navy is worn because it is traditionally a common uniform color for practitioners of service professions. Informally, LDC deaconesses can wear the pin with any outfit. The CDC has only formal garb, which consists of the navy blue suit or dress, and two crosses: a three-inch gold cross stitched on the left sleeve and a one-inch version of the same cross pinned over the heart. This golden cross is comprised of stylized fish laid nose to nose (symbolizing the Christian call to be "fishers of men"), whose tails flair out like Easter lilies. This symbol represents the gift of eternal life (hence the gold) won for us by Christ on the cross, which is the heart of the message (hence the positioning of the two crosses near our hearts) which we herald to others (hence the Easter lily shape).

Diakonal Education

The nature of the curricula of the Synod’s various deaconess programs is similar, independent of which educational institution the deaconess student chooses to attend. We maintain a continuity of educational standards between the various schools which offer deaconess programs. This continuity consists of educating deaconesses to be competent theologians and competent practitioners of diakonia in its three major forms of teaching the Faith, furnishing spiritual care, and providing mercy care. This education takes place both in the classroom and in the field. Deaconess students at all three institutions major in theology and take core classes in diakonal history and practice. In addition, all deaconess students do field work, or on-the-job training, in congregations and institutions. Since some deaconesses are called to serve in congregations, and others are called to serve in institutions such as nursing homes, hospitals, and prisons, ideally deaconess students will experience field work in both congregational and institutional settings. Finally, all deaconess students serve a one-year long, full-time internship in a congregation or institution, for which they are compensated with salary and benefits.

Although core characteristics of deaconess education are consistent among different synodical schools, each program has its individual specialties and foci as well. The unique specialty of Concordia University, River Forest is the B.A. Deaconess Program. This program leads the graduate to a B.A. in theology, producing graduates certified in deaconess ministry. This program is five years long—four years of liberal arts education majoring in theology and specializing in diakonia, and one year of internship. Concordia Theological Seminary maintains an M.A. program leading the graduate to an M.A. and certification in deaconess ministry. The unique specialty of the Fort Wayne program is that it has two distinct foci: general theological education with an emphasis in specific diakonal courses, and in human care. Concordia Seminary maintains both the Hispanic Institute of Theology’s deaconess
program, which is a distance-education program for native Spanish speakers seeking to become deaconesses, and the M.A. program in Deaconess Studies. The unique specialty of the St. Louis program is that it offers the largest number of specialized deaconess theology courses. All three schools offer courses in deaconess history and skills for deaconess practice. In addition, Concordia Seminary has two courses dedicated to issues which deaconesses need to be able to address competently, namely, the role of women in the Church and special spiritual needs of women. Both seminary programs are about three years long, two years of academic and one year of internship.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Women in the LCMS who find that they have a desire to serve their Lord in the areas of spiritual care, mercy care, and teaching of the Christian Faith should consider the office of deaconess. Likewise, if you know a woman who demonstrates a servant heart, who cares for hurting people, and who loves to study God’s Word and share it with others, recommend the deaconess program to her and share what you have learned about diaconal ministry. If your congregation or institution is interested in calling a deaconess, it has two options. If interested in calling a deaconess from the field, one contacts the District Office and requests to call a deaconess. If interested in calling a deaconess who is being newly placed into the field, one contacts the three schools with deaconess programs and requests a candidate. In addition, a congregation or institution can aid in the education of a deaconess and can determine if a deaconess would be right for them by employing a deaconess intern for a year. Interns are available from all three schools. Contact may be made with:
Notes

1 Until the mid-1960s, deaconesses were single women, in accordance with the post-industrial revolution western expectation that married men focused on paid employment and married women focused on child-rearing and household management. If and when a deaconess decided to marry (which was encouraged), she resigned the diaconal call in favor of her “call” to be a wife and mother. As social ethos changed, so did this requirement.

2 Congregations and institutions near the program schools may request field workers.

3 All program lengths given for all three schools presume the beginning student; students who have previous higher education in required areas may have shorter programs on a case-by-case basis. Concordia University, River Forest in particular offers a colloquy program for women who are already deaconesses but who are seeking LCMS rostering.