

RATIONALE FOR LEGISLATION REGARDING THE OFFICE OF DEACONESS AND HOME MISSIONER

Historical Context

Faced with both the new social problems that occurred around the turn of the twentieth century and the recognition that women were needed as missionaries to reach women in other countries, Methodism adopted a practice of Protestants in Europe and, claiming Scriptural authority in the person and work of Phoebe, created the position of deaconess. The first three deaconesses were consecrated in the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) in 1889; the first five in the Methodist Episcopal Church South (MECS) were consecrated in 1903. Other UMC predecessors made space for deaconesses in their polity, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ in 1897, the Evangelical Association in 1903, and the Methodist Protestant Church in 1908.¹

Deaconesses – Who They Are and What They Do

Deaconesses are LAYWOMEN who have received extensive training and who have dedicated themselves to lives of full-time Christian service. According to Alice Knotts, “Deaconesses... gave their lives to serving people in need. As did the early Christians described in the Bible in the Book of Acts, they held office in the church as people who serve. They were not ordained as ministers are, but were consecrated by the denomination....”² Noted Methodist women’s historian Jean Miller Schmidt wrote that deaconesses “responded to Christ’s call with the resolve to become useful, to further God’s purpose for the world. Methodist deaconesses formed a new breed of church women. Trained for and consecrated to the order, they became experts in the field of Christian social service.”³

A Long Tradition of Consecrating Methodist Deaconesses

From the beginning, it was the practice to consecrate the women who had completed the requirements for becoming a deaconess. Consecrating deaconesses retained Disciplinary status after the 1939 merger. When the three main branches rejoined to form The Methodist Church, “The Order for the Consecration of Deaconesses” was included in the text of the *Discipline*.⁴ The merger of 1968 resulted in a new version of *The Book of Worship*, and it, too, contained a ritual in which deaconesses were consecrated.⁵ Changes in how the UMC organized ministry were reflected in the 1992 *United Methodist Book of Worship*.⁶

Orders

The word “orders” refers to “the office and dignity of a person in the Christian ministry.”⁷ In 1992, with the revision of the ordering of ministry, *the Book of Discipline* called for creation of an order of elders and an order of deacons. Exactly how these orders were to be organized and what their functions were to be was not spelled out.



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The terminology of “order” has often been applied to deaconesses, as well, as when historian Charles Ferguson wrote that in 1888, “General Conference accepted the plan and announced that women wishing to engage in this work were to abandon other pursuits and ‘to devote themselves in a general way to such forms of Christian labor as may be suited to their abilities.’ No vows were to be exacted of those who joined but the order was to be set apart with a uniform and it was free to draw up rules and regulations and lay out a program of ministering to those in sore bodily need.”⁸ **Deaconesses in various Methodist churches around the world are members of orders;** the Deaconess Order of the Methodist Church in Ghana, in South Africa, in Britain, and in the Caribbean and the Americas, the last based in Kingston and in Nassau, are examples.⁹

Why Consecration?

Opening the path to ordination for women in The Methodist Church in 1956 changed the context of the deaconesses’ work.¹⁰ More recently, the need for a professional category for laypeople who are employed full-time in the work of the church has begun to grow, and more individuals are seeking relationship with this community of faithful servants.

Currently, many forms of outreach use the word and action of “commissioning” to recognize the church’s sending people to specific work. Consecrating is a historic moment in the life of a deaconess (and now home missionaries as well) when her/his commitment to life-time service is recognized and affirmed by the church. The language of “consecration” is more appropriate for this set-apart status for those laypeople who make a life commitment to professional Christian service; reinstating the term “consecration” could address this need.

Further, since these individuals have their primary community not within the bounds of one annual conference but with other deaconesses serving around the world, the use of the term “order” is an appropriate way to make this kind of work better understood and more attractive.

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1. Mary Agnes Dougherty, *My Calling to Fulfill: Deaconesses in the United Methodist Tradition* (New York: Women’s Division, General Board of Global Ministries, UMC, 1997), x, 36.
 2. Alice Knotts, *Lifting Up Hope, Living Out Justice: Methodist Women and the Social Gospel* (San Diego: Frontrowliving Press, 2005), 8-9.
 3. Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: A History of Women in American Methodism, 1760-1939* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 207-8.
 4. “The Order for the Consecration of Deaconesses,” paragraph 1589, *Doctrines and Discipline of The Methodist Church, 1939* (New York City: Methodist Publishing House, 1939), 579-86.
 5. “An Office for the Consecration of Deaconesses,” *The Book of Worship for Church and Home: With orders of worship, services for the administration of Sacraments, and aids to worship according to the usages of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1964), 327-9.
 6. “The Order for the Consecration of Diaconal Ministers,” *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 654-60.
 7. *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Church and Religions in the Modern World*, 2nd ed., Vol. 2: *The World by Segments, Religions, Peoples, Languages, Cities, Topics*, David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, Todd M. Johnson, eds. (Oxford University Press, 2001), 669.
 8. Charles W. Ferguson, *Organizing to Beat the Devil: Methodists and the Making of America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 347-8.
 9. *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Church and Religions in the Modern World*, 2nd ed., Vol. 2: *The World by Segments, Religions, Peoples, Languages, Cities, Topics*, David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, Todd M. Johnson, eds. (Oxford University Press, 2001), 793-4.
 10. Ellen Blue, *St. Mark’s and the Social Gospel: Methodist Women and Civil Rights in New Orleans, 1895-1965* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), 133-4, 188-91.