



The Order of Deaconess

BIBLICAL

There has always been clearly delineated ministerial roles in the Bible for men in the church: bishops, priests, deacons, and elders; however, on the surface while it may appear that there were no clearly delineated ministerial roles for women in the church, that is a misperception because when we delve a bit deeper into the Bible, we see that women have always had ministerial roles in the church and the community:

- caring for the physical needs of Jesus Christ and their fellow man
- nurturing the souls of fellow Christians
- teaching about Christ (in their home churches)
- being disciples of Jesus Christ

Thus, it stands to reason that moving forward, women's role in church ministry would eventually become more clearly defined. Furthermore, the women chosen would need to meet specific requirements and demonstrate certain reverent characteristics (1 Timothy 3:11).



While we have the three-fold Holy Order of bishop, priest, and deacon and there is no clerical role for the deaconess, all the duties noted above which were performed by women clearly point to those women being examples of the primitive deaconess, a role while not clerical was as important to the church as the clerical roles of bishop, priest, and deacon.

GREEK origin of deacon = diakonos = servant, minister (to attend to), or messenger.

Thanks to St. Paul (A.D. 56-57), there is more definitive evidence that the deaconess had an early ministerial role and place in the church. In St. Paul's letter to the Romans while in Corinth (**Romans 16:1-3**): *"I commend to you Phoebe our sister who is a servant (diakonos) of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the Saints and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also."* St. Paul goes on to greet Priscilla and Aquila (**Romans 16:3-5**) and calls them, *"my fellow workers in Christ Jesus"* and also asks that they greet the church that is in their home. They were also instrumental in teaching Apollos of Alexandria *"the way of God more accurately."* (**Acts 18:24-26**).

The official ministry of women was an established fact in the Church of Ephesus, which reinforces the fact that the OFFICE OF THE DEACONESS IS AN APOSTOLIC OFFICE.

QUALIFICATIONS OF A DEACON (which are also applicable for a deaconess)

1 Timothy 3:8-13 gives clear instructions about the character of a deacon. He must be reverent, not double tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of faith with a pure conscience. However, he must be tested and found blameless, for those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.

HISTORICAL

The evidence for deaconesses grew stronger in the second century.

- Pliny the Younger, the Roman governor of Bithynia and Pontus, wrote a letter to the Roman Emperor Trajan around A.D. 111-113 seeking advice on how to deal with the Christians if they refused to renounce Christianity.

*“I thought it therefore the more necessary to try and find the truth of the matter by torture as well, from two female slaves who were called **deaconesses**.”* (Cecilia Robinson, *The Ministry of the Deaconess*, p.81)

HISTORICAL

- Third century evidence is found in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, which has specific instructions about the roles of women and men in the church.

*“This is why O bishop, you must take to yourselves workers for justice, helpers who will cooperate with you in guiding others towards life. Those among the people who must please you in this respect should be chosen and instituted as deacons on the one hand, a man for the administration of the many necessary tasks, on the other hand, a woman for the ministry among the women. For there are houses where you may not send deacons, on account of the pagans, but to which you may send **deaconesses**. And also because the service of a **deaconess** is required in many other domains.”* (Aime Georges Martimort, *Deaconesses*, p.61-62)

HISTORICAL

- Fourth century evidence can be found in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, which states, “choose also a *deaconess* who is faithful and holy for the service of women.” Bear in mind that the need for women deaconesses was clear due to the customs of that era, but also as we see today, there is always the ever present need that exists socially in all human societies. In section III of Book 8, which dealt with the Ordination and Duties of the Clergy – the Constitution of Bartholomew XIX describes the process for *deaconesses*.

John Chrysostum, Bishop of Constantinople in A.D. 398, was a great champion of the Order of Deaconess.

St. Chrysostum's letters have educated us about the presence of deaconesses who were attached to the principal church in Constantinople in the year A.D. 400.

The Order of Deaconess was more well established in the East than in the West, due to the presence of the Order of Widows, which had a stronger foothold in the West. Nevertheless, deaconesses began to gain some traction in the West around the fifth century.

With the changing of the times, around the beginning of the eleventh century, deaconesses had disappeared.

WHY?

- with the advent of infant baptisms, nude adult immersion baptisms were no longer practiced
- there were no longer separation of men and women within the church
- no need to carry messages
- no longer needed as doorkeepers (for the women)
- no longer needed as guardians of holy books (during the persecutions)
- no need to visit persecuted Christians in prison

REVIVAL OF THE ORDER OF DEACONESS

1833: Lutheran Pastor, Theodor Fliedner created the Kaiserwerth Deaconess Institution (KDI) in Germany. He was influenced by a social reformer, Elizabeth Fry, and what he had observed in the churches in England and Holland. Elizabeth Fry had a passion to improve the treatment of prisoners, particularly women prisoners. Fliedner's vision was that the Institution would train unmarried women to meet the physical and spiritual needs of women and the less fortunate.

His Institution impacted Rev. William Pennefather and the first deaconess that was sanctioned in the Church of England, Elizabeth Ferard. Ferard spent some time at the KDI in 1856.

1860: Rev. William Pennefather founded a small Missionary Training College, which eventually became the Mildmay Deaconess Home. Initially this home had no official connection with the church; however, it was instrumental in exposing the public to the capability of women workers in service to the people. Eventually in 1917, it was recognized as an official training house for the Church of England workers. Nevertheless, its deaconesses remained distinct from the Order of Deaconess because they lacked episcopal sanction in the Anglican church. (Henrietta Blackmore – The Beginning of Women's Ministry – The Revival of the Deaconess in the 19th Century Church of England, p.79)

1860: Dean Howson played a huge role in the restoration of the female diaconate. Howson's 1860 article in the Quarterly Review brought the subject of the deaconess prominently into notice. He felt strongly that the church would benefit immensely from the service of women in the official ministry, especially pertaining to those services only women could render. His efforts broke down prejudice and garnered the support of church leaders.

REVIVAL OF THE ORDER OF DEACONESS

1861: Elizabeth Ferard was the first head deaconess of the North London Deaconess Institution (NLDI), which she created with the assistance of some lifelong friends.

- NLDI model was community based
- she was not in favor of lifelong vows
- Deaconess had some exposure to the parochial life

1886-87: Isabella Gilmore participated in the creation of the Rochester Diocese Deaconess Institution (RDDI) with Bishop Anthony Wilson Thorold.

The RDDI was a vision of Bishop Thorold:

- He wanted to see women's work thoroughly organized in the diocese
- RDDI was therefore established strictly on parochial lines (answering the question of women's place in the church)
- Gilmore, unlike Ferard, was in favor of lifelong vows
- Gilmore also believed that deaconesses are a part of the church's infrastructure (*a very necessary part for the church to function as the whole body of Christ*)

1897: The Order of Deaconess is recognized by the Lambeth Conference

1920: The Lambeth Conference clearly stated that no vow of celibacy is demanded to be admitted to the Order of Deaconess

1923: The Convocation of Canterbury officially restores the Order of Deaconess

1925: The York Convocation cemented the restoration of the Order of Deaconess

1993: the first deaconess is set apart in the Anglican Church of America (ACA – Annette Johnson)

REC TIMELINE

1995: the first deaconess is accepted into the REC by Bishop Grote

2002: Canon 22, Of Deaconesses, was adopted by the General Council (it recognized the Order of Deaconess and established requirements for candidacy)

“The Order of Deaconess is an ancient and Apostolic lay ministry for women in Christ’s Church. A woman of devout character and proved fitness may be Set Apart as Deaconess by any Bishop of this Church, subject to the provisions contained in this Canon.”

2005: the first REC and APA (Anglican Province of America) Handbook was published

2012: Deaconess Studies Department established at Cranmer Theological House Seminary (and first class held – M.A.R in Deaconess Studies)

2017: Deaconess Certificate Program adopted as an alternate to a Master of Arts in Religion degree

2017: Canon 22, Of Deaconesses, was revised

2020: Handbook for REC Deaconesses was revised

2021: First Canon for Deaconesses (AJ) was appointed

2022: Deaconess Studies Program offered at Cummins Memorial Seminary

2023: Deaconess Scholarship Fund established

2024: Deaconess Ember Conclave (an online video conference for Deaconess and candidates began)

2024: 12 active Deaconesses, 3 retired, 8 candidates, and 3 postulantes (those in discernment, not yet approved by the standing committee), and 1 active deaconess in Cuba



ACADEMIC REQUIREMENTS

- Master of Arts in Religion (Deaconess Studies) – 73 credit hours
- Deaconess Licentiate in Theological Ministry (L. Th.)
- Deaconess Certificate – 39 credit hours

MY JOURNEY AS A DEACONESS

My journey as a deaconess began in 2020 when I was approached rather innocently by Rev. Harrington and asked, “*have you ever considered being a deaconess.*” I looked at him like the proverbial deer caught in headlights because like many I had never heard about a deaconess, I had no idea how I could be a deaconess, and furthermore, what would I do as a deaconess.

I have been a Christian since I was a baby, but my life had taken the path of science. I dealt in the physical and struggled mightily to understand the realm of spirituality. I liked the concrete realm of flesh and blood, but I have always been fascinated with learning and personal development. The highest level of personal development for me is spiritual. Therefore, I responded, “*I will pray about this.*”

2021: I began my studies as a Deaconess at Cranmer Theological House after I had submitted my application along with letters of recommendations and proof that I was not a criminal in hiding.

I opted for the Deaconess Certificate:

- 39 credit hours (13 courses)
- 9-month internship

2024: May 16th – I successfully defended my final deaconess exam and was unanimously approved to be set apart as a Deaconess

2024: June 30th – I was set apart by Bishop Gillin at St. Albans Church (The First Reformed Episcopal Church) for service in the Church

A DEACONESS (IS NOT A FEMALE VERSION OF A DEACON)

1. A deaconess cannot offer the ABC's:

- Absolution
- Bless
- Consecrate

2. A deaconess's ministry is NOT at the altar, instead her ministry is to the congregation and surrounding community

3. A deaconess cannot function as a lay reader; however, she can be a lector

4. A deaconess cannot serve as a Chalice bearer

MY WORK AS A DEACONESS (to date)

- Teaching Bible study
- Instruction in the Christian Faith (led a 4-week Spirituality Workshop)
- Visiting the sick and shut-in
- We have had no candidates for Baptism yet (but I will help to prepare those as well as those for Confirmation)
- I will be a witness in the counseling of women and children
- I am currently involved in community work through our Tea & Conversation outreach

The role of a deaconess arose out of a need for women to minister to other women in the congregation and those in the community who are sick, shut in, indigent, or in spiritual need. As it was important to Jesus Christ that women and children be cared for, so too it must be important to us as modern-day Christians.