

# The ministry of the Deaconess through History

By Nancy Vyhmeister

## Part One the Early Church

What was the role of the deaconesses in the New Testament and in the church through history? To understand this issue fully, we shall first turn to the New Testament for a study of the word deaconess and review the life and work of some of the deaconesses mentioned there. Then we shall briefly explore the role of the deaconesses in the early church from available historical records.

### The word in the New Testament

The word deaconess is the feminine counterpart of the male deacon. Both words come from the Greek verb diakone (to serve, to assist, to minister).

In [Matthew 8:15](#), [Luke 10:40](#), and [Acts 6:2](#), the authors used the verb diakone in connection with serving food and other aspects of ministry. For example, Jesus coming to minister or serve ([Matt. 20:28](#)); Paul's trip "to Jerusalem to minister to the saints" with the offerings he collected in Europe ([Rom. 15:25, NKJV](#)); and the commendation of believers "ministering" to the saints ([Heb. 6:10](#)).

The noun diakonia also describes: the table ministry the apostles entrusted to the seven ([Acts 6:1, 2](#)); Paul's God-given ministry of the gospel ([Acts 20:24](#)); and the spiritual gifts given to the saints to prepare them for ministry ([Eph. 4:12](#)).

The noun *diakonos* is used in several ways. It denotes one who waits on tables, as at the wedding feast at Cana ([John 2:5](#)). Jesus told that " 'whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant [diakonos]' " ([Mark 10:43, NKJV](#)). With Paul, the word takes on a specifically Christian sense. Paul is a diakonos of the new covenant ([2 Cor. 3:6](#)), of God ([2 Cor. 6:4](#)), and of the church ([Col. 1:25](#)). In these texts, the meaning comes much closer to *minister* than to *servant*.

In [Philippians 1:1](#) and [1 Timothy 3:8–13](#), diakonos identifies specific church officers. Theirs was evidently a spiritual occupation, for the requirements were spiritual, personal integrity, and blamelessness.

The Greek, which usually distinguishes carefully between masculine and feminine forms of a noun, does not do so with *diakonos*. 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: *ho diakonos* (masculine) and *h diakonos* (feminine). The feminine diakonissa appeared only in the early fourth century.

## Women deacons in the New Testament

*Phoebe*. Paul, in [Romans 16:1, 2](#), called Phoebe a diakonos of the church of Cenchraea. Besides this brief statement, we know nothing 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 (*prostatis*) suggests a woman of wealth and position. In the first-century Mediterranean world, a patron or benefactor funded the construction of monuments or buildings, financed festivals or celebrations, and supported artists and writers. Of interest to this study, Paul recognized Phoebe as a *diakonos*, or minister, of the church at Cenchraea. Only here is *diakonos* used in relation to a specific church, implying some kind of position in the church. Translation of the term *diakonos* 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 to teach “that there were women ordained in the church’s ministry.”<sup>2</sup> About Phoebe and the other women of [Romans 16](#), John Chrysostom (c. 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 male nor female.”<sup>3</sup> Theodoret (393–460) noted Phoebe as “a woman deacon, prominent and noble. She was so rich in good works performed as to have merited the praise of Paul.”<sup>4</sup>

“The women likewise.” In [1 Timothy 3:2–7](#), Paul lists the characteristics of bishops or overseers. Verses 8–10 describe the spiritual traits required of diakonoi. Verse 11 seems something of a digression: who are these “women”? The Greek word, which can be translated “women” or “wives,” has been variously translated as “women,” “women deacons,” or “their [deacon’s] wives.”

The suggestion that the term refers to wives of deacons presents difficulties, for in the Greek there is no possessive. Whose wives were they? On the other hand, if one takes the context seriously, these women 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 *diakonon gunaik n* (“women deacons”). John Chrysostom and Theodoret, writing in the fourth and fifth centuries respectively, also understood these women to be female deacons.<sup>5</sup>

## Women deacons in the early church

During the early centuries, women deacons and widows were recognized church leaders. We will examine evidence for the existence, tasks, and ordination of women in the diaconate<sup>6</sup> and then point to reasons for the demise of the female diaconate.

The existence of deaconesses. Somewhere between A.D. 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 *diakonos*.<sup>7</sup>

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 [“fellow deacons”] in relation to housewives, through whom the Lord’s teaching penetrated into the women’s quarters without scandal.”<sup>8</sup>

*The Didascalia Apostolorum* [Teaching of the Apostles], undoubtedly from the eastern part of the empire and composed in the third century, 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 required, on the other hand a woman for the ministry of women.”<sup>9</sup>

Tomb inscriptions also provide evidence that female deacons served the church. Among others, 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 (h diakonos), the second Phoebe.”<sup>10</sup> As a “bride of Christ,” Sophia would have been celibate.

A sixth-century inscription from Cappadocia in Asia Minor gives not only the title, but shows what this female diakonos 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.”<sup>11</sup>

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.”<sup>12</sup>

*The ordination of deaconesses.* The *Apostolic Constitutions* (late fourth century) give 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.”<sup>13</sup>

At the Council of Chalcedon (451), the ordination of deaconesses is expressly called 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.”<sup>14</sup>

Emperor Justinian directed a novella (March 16, 535) to the archbishop of Constantinople, indicating that the church there should have 40 women deacons. In subsequent instructions, 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.<sup>15</sup>

The Barberini Greek Euchology, an eighth-century Byzantine ritual for the ordination of male and female deacons, calls for the laying-on of hands in ordination. The first of two prayers was said by a deacon, and noted 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, stated: “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 fulfill 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.”<sup>16</sup>

*Tasks of deaconesses.* From ancient documents, we learn of the functions performed by early deaconesses. The Apostolic Constitutions command 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.”<sup>17</sup> 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 addition, they ministered to the sick, the poor, and those in prison.<sup>18</sup> 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 held up a veil so that the clergy could not see the naked woman being baptized. She may have accompanied the woman into the water.

The *Disdascalia* 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.”<sup>19</sup>

James of Edessa (683–708) noted that deaconesses in the Eastern Church “had no authority regarding the altar.” They could “sweep the sanctuary and light the sanctuary lamp.” In a community of nuns, they could take “the holy sacrament from the tabernacle and distribute this” to her fellow nuns.<sup>20</sup>

## 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. British monk Pelagius (c. 420) wrote that the female diaconate was an institution fallen into disuse in the West, though remaining in the East.<sup>21</sup>

The Synod of Nimes (396) pointed 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.”<sup>22</sup>

A series of church councils made pronouncements 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 deaconesses, they should bow their heads beneath the blessing which is given to all the people.”<sup>23</sup> The Burgundian Council of Epaon (517) ruled: “We abrogate totally within the entire kingdom the consecration of widows who are named deaconesses.”<sup>24</sup> The Second Synod of Orleans (533) followed up on this prohibition. Its Canon 18 states: “To no woman must henceforth the benedictio diaconalis be given, because of the weakness of the sex.”<sup>25</sup>

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.”<sup>26</sup> In a letter to John, Bishop of Jerusalem, he insisted he had never “ordained deaconesses . . . nor done anything to split the church.”<sup>27</sup> 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.”<sup>28</sup> One of the reasons he gave was the “impurity of their menstrual periods” and the fact that law “prohibits women from entering the sanctuary.”<sup>29</sup>

Jacobite author Yahya ibn Jarir, writing from Persia in the third quarter of the eleventh century, wrote: “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.”<sup>30</sup>

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. . . . But we can plainly see that this practice has long since ceased in the Church. . . . There is no longer any need for deaconesses because there are no longer any grown women who are baptized.”<sup>31</sup>

## **Conclusion (of part one)**

The existence and ordination of deaconesses in the early church is evident. Their tasks—assisting at the baptism of women, teaching, and caring for people—are also clear. Yet, they disappeared.

Three factors 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.<sup>32</sup> Further, the rise of monasticism, with the institution of nunneries and the insistence on celibacy, changed the focus of church work for women.

## **This article continues after the references for part one:**

1 A fuller version of this article appeared in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 43 (2005): 133–158.

2 Origen, *Epistola ad Romanos* 10.17.2; commentary on [Romans 16](#).

3 John Chrysostom, Homily 30, on [Romans 15:25–27](#); taken from Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 11:1002.

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

5 Clement *Stromata* 3.6.53; John Chrysostom, In *Epistola 1 ad Timotheus* 3, Homily 11.1.

6 For further information on the history of female deacons, see “The History of Women Deacons,” at [http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/deac\\_ovr.htm](http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/deac_ovr.htm) (May 21, 2007). 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.

7 Pliny, *Letters* 10.96.

8 Clement, *Stromata* 3.6.53; English translation from Clement of Alexandria, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 85 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1991), 289.

9 “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.

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

11 *Ibid.*, 164–167.

12 *Liber Patrum*, ser. 2, fasc. 16, in *S. Congregatio pro Ecclesia Orientali, Codificationes canonica orientales*, *Fonti* (Rome: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1930), 34, quoted in Martimort, 158.

- 13 Apostolic Constitutions 8.3.20, ANF 7:1008.
- 14 Canon 15, Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta, 94.
- 15 Justinian, Novellae 3.1; 6.6; Corpus Iuris Civilis, vol. 3, Novellae (Zurich: Weidmann, 1968), 20, 21, 43–45.
- 16 Barberini Greek Euchology 336; for the original Greek, English translation, and the history of the manuscript see [http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/deac\\_gr1.asp](http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/deac_gr1.asp) (May 15, 2007).
- 17 Apostolic Constitutions 3.2.16 (ANF 7:884).
- 18 Mary P. Truesdell, “The Office of Deaconess,” in *The Diaconate Today*, ed. Richard T. Nolan (Washington, DC: Corpus, 1968), 150. Truesdell, an Episcopalian deaconess, 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).
- 19 Didascalia 16, Vööbus, 2:157.
- 20 Syrian Synodicon, in “James of Edessa.”
- 21 Pelagius, Commentary on [Romans 16:1](#), Theodore de Bruyn, *Pelagius’s Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 150, 151.
- 22 Charles Joseph Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church from the Original Documents* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1871), 2:404.
- 23 Canon 26, Council of Orange, in Charles Joseph Hefele, *Histoire des conciles d’après les documents originaux* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1908), 2:1:446, 447. In a long note, Hefele outlines the history of the female diaconate and maintains that the council had to take strict measures with deaconesses because they were attempting to “extend their attributions” (447).
- 24 Council of Epaon, Canon 21, in Edward H. Landon, *A Manual of the Councils of the Holy Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1909), 1:253.
- 25 Hefele, *A History of the Councils*, 4:187.
- 26 *Against Heresies* 79.1, 3, 4.
- 27 Epiphanius, Letter to John Bishop of Jerusalem, ‘2 [http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/epiphan .asp](http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/epiphan.asp) ( May 15, 2007).
- 28 Catholic Encyclopedia, s.v. “Deaconesses.”
- 29 Replies to the Questions of Mark, reply 35, [http://www.womenpriests .org/traditio/balsamon.asp](http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/balsamon.asp) (May 15, 2007).

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

31 Syriac Pontifi cal, Vatican Syriac MS 51, quoted in Martimort, 167.

32 Daniel Augsburg, “Clerical Authority and Ordination in the Early Christian Church,” in Women in Ministry (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1998), 77–100.

## Part Two: History of Deaconesses in Adventism

By Nancy Vyhmeister

After their disappearance during the Middle Ages, deaconesses were “rediscovered” by Protestants in Holland in the sixteenth century. By the nineteenth century, they were trained for nursing, teaching, and parish work, on both sides of the Atlantic. Leslie McFall quotes an eighteenth-century source saying deaconesses 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.”<sup>1</sup>

The Seventh-day Adventist Church grew up at the time when the office of the deaconess was gathering strength. It cannot be considered strange that 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 choosing of the seven deacons of [Acts 6](#) and Phoebe the deaconess ([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 approvingly quoted from Clarke’s commentary: “ ‘There were deaconesses in the primitive church, whose business it was to attend to 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.’ ”

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”? He then summarized these duties:

1. To see to the poor and destitute, the widows and orphans, the sick and afflicted
2. To raise funds and care for church finances



3. To make preparation for the ordinances, including keeping on hand good [unfermented] wine from grapes or raisins<sup>2</sup>

In 1870, J. H. Waggoner published his ideas about “The Office of Deacon.” His presentation, based on [Acts 6:3](#) and [1 Timothy 3:8–12](#), emphasized the spiritual characteristics of the deacons. Where Frisbie had earlier included deaconesses, Waggoner makes no mention of them.<sup>3</sup>

## Ellen White and deaconesses

A large number of books, sermons, and pamphlets regarding deaconesses and their work were published in the United States in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Ellen White had none of these in her library.<sup>4</sup>

A search for White’s position on the appointment, ordination, or work of deaconesses proved disappointing. Only one reference was found: a letter written in September 1902. In it White scolded A. T. Jones for listening to the private woes of women: “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.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet 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.”<sup>6</sup>

Records show that on the strength of this declaration, at least three ordination ceremonies for deaconesses took place. The first was August 10, 1895, at the Ashley Church in Sydney, Australia, where “Pastors Corliss and McCullagh of the Australian conference set apart the elder, deacons, deaconesses by prayer and the laying on of hands.”<sup>7</sup> The second known ordination took place at the same church on January 6, 1900, with W. C. White officiating, as he noted in his diary.<sup>8</sup> 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 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* article.<sup>9</sup>

## Adventist deaconesses in the twentieth century

Not having to prove their existence, we will consider only two of the three aspects considered in the first article. The two are ordination and tasks.

*Ordination of deaconesses.* 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,” with nothing said about the deaconess’s ordination.<sup>10</sup> In spite of this, in 1921, F. A. Detamore described a visit to a church in Sarawak (Malaysia), and noted the ordination of “Sister Lee [as] deaconess.”<sup>11</sup>

With the publishing of the first Adventist Church Manual in 1932, the New Testament origin of the deaconess was noted. The manual stated that “there is no record, however, that these women were ordained, hence the practice of ordaining deaconesses is not followed by our denomination.” This sentence appeared in the Church Manual through the edition of 1986.<sup>12</sup>

The Annual Council<sup>13</sup> of 1984 recommended that the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* delete the sentence about not ordaining deaconesses and 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 1985 General Conference Session took up an amended statement for consideration: “The church may arrange for the ordination of deaconesses by an ordained minister who holds current credentials from the conference.”<sup>14</sup> After a delegate objected to calling Phoebe a deaconess, the General Conference Session of 1985 voted to refer the amendment to the standing Church Manual Committee for further consideration.<sup>15</sup> The 1990 session voted to use the word “induction” rather than “ordination.” Thus the 1990 *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* reads, “The church may arrange for a suitable service of induction for the deaconess by an ordained minister holding current credentials.” The recognition of Phoebe as a deaconess was included.<sup>16</sup> This same sentence appears in the 2000 edition.

This “appropriate ceremony” may include the laying-on of hands, but ordination of deaconesses is still not generally practiced. For example, in the year 2000, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Southeastern California reported that only 38 percent of its congregations ordained women as deaconesses.<sup>17</sup>

The tasks of deaconesses. Possibly the oldest reference to duties performed by deaconesses is W. C. White’s recollection of his father’s calling out the Battle Creek deaconesses in 1863 to repair a torn evangelistic tent.<sup>18</sup>

Further perusal of historical Adventist materials provides no information until 1909, when T. E. Bowen wrote in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* that “the work of the deaconess, properly carried on, is of great importance, and will bring much blessing into the church.” Besides attending to the Communion service, they should visit “the sick and those in need of loving help.”<sup>19</sup> In the same year, in a plea for the use of proper baptismal robes, Mrs. S. N. Haskell pointed 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 pertaining to the Lord’s house.”<sup>20</sup>

In June 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.”<sup>21</sup> The article emphasized “systematic visiting” and rendering “such assistance as may be required.” Deaconesses were to care for the sick, provide food and clothing for those in need, help people find work, and teach the sisters how to cook and care for home and children. In this work deaconesses were to involve other church members,

“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.”<sup>22</sup>

The second article spoke of the care of different aspects of the church building: arranging the platform, placing flowers on the desk, and dusting the sanctuary. Deaconesses were entrusted with the preparations for communion and the women’s ordinance of humility, which consists of washing the feet of another person. They were also to care for baptismal robes and help the women who were baptized. Summarizing their duties, the unknown author stated, “To faithfully perform the duties that belong to the office of a deaconess means much hard work and self-denial.”<sup>23</sup>

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.”<sup>24</sup> The *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.<sup>25</sup>

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.”<sup>26</sup>

In *The Church Officers’ Gazette* of October 1948, deaconesses were instructed regarding the highly choreographed 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.”<sup>27</sup>

Child care during church services is added in a 1940 issue of *Ministry*. The deaconess should be in charge of the mothers’ room, supplying “picture books, crayons, blocks, and other busywork . . . for the little tots.”<sup>28</sup>

In a 1956 article in *Ministry*, Bess Ninaj delineated six major duties of deaconesses: (1) Communion service, including preparation of bread and wine; (2) ordinance of humility; (3) baptisms, especially of women; (4) caring for the sick and poor; (5) greeting people at the door; and (6) visitation of members, at least quarterly but better each month. Ninaj noted that the last of these tasks was “neglected or unrecognized.”<sup>29</sup>

The emphasis on the deaconess and the Communion service, including preparation and footwashing, appears in a two-part *Ministry* article in 1972. The later article even contains a recipe for Communion bread.<sup>30</sup>

A half century ahead of his time, Leif Tobiassen suggested in 1952 that the church be divided into small groups under the leadership of deacons and deaconesses. “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.”<sup>31</sup>

A ministry description, dated 2002 and prepared by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America for deacons and deaconesses, lists the duties of deacons and deaconesses. 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 follow the earlier pattern. 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, “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 to visit.”<sup>32</sup>

In 1999, Vincent White published a book, *Problem Solvers and Soul Winners*, based on a workshop given for deacons and deaconesses. The more traditional duties include helping to maintain reverence in the service and seeing that the preacher has a glass of water by the pulpit. Deaconesses make arrangements for funeral dinners and “serve as flower bearers.” In addition, deaconesses are to “privately call the pastor’s attention to candidates who may be wearing colorful cosmetics and jewelry.” If dressed appropriately in white, deaconesses may participate in the Communion 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.<sup>33</sup>

But Vincent White goes further—as the title of his book suggests. Deaconesses should participate in visitation of church members so that all families receive one 10 to 15 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 are backed up by interdisciplinary teams in the local church. In addition, the head deaconess, together with her male counterpart, organizes the telephone committee and helps train those who participate. Deaconesses are to be soul winners and help disciple new members.<sup>34</sup>

With Vincent White’s book and the 2002 ministry description, one might say that Seventh-day Adventists have returned full circle to the early vision of the deaconess: consecrated women carrying out a ministry of caring for things and people. Whereas for much of the century, the emphasis was on details, now the deaconess has a place in the pastoral team.

## Conclusion

Adventism was born as a grassroots movement. Everyone—including females—was needed to spread the message.<sup>35</sup> As early as 1856, Frisbie called for women deacons. Later Ellen White pleaded for women who gave part-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 ordained to specific tasks.

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; instead, to a great extent, they were lovely ladies who poured wine and water and kept Communion linens and baptismal robes. Selective 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. 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 their Lord with love and creativity, becoming a force for strength and growth within the church.

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