

REMEMBERING HER

". . . what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."
Matthew 26:13



Article 27

Retrieving Women's Histories

Parish Deaconesses

In the early 19th century many people disapproved of any career for women outside the home. Fortunately in Germany (at a place called Kaiserswerth) German Protestants developed a new form of ministry for Christian women. They trained and consecrated young single women as nurses, providing safe communal living arrangements for them in and near hospitals. Unlike Roman Catholic nuns, who took lifetime vows, the majority of Protestant "Deaconesses" later married and had families of their own. (see RH #4) The idea of making this option available to young women in the United States took hold among German Evangelicals in St. Louis in 1889. Although the majority of the St. Louis deaconesses were engaged in hospital service, by the early 20th century some deaconesses were deployed as "Parish Deaconesses." A parish deaconess did not work in a hospital, but focused upon urban ministry and the needs of local congregations.

The "Rules for Admission" to the Evangelical Deaconess Association of St. Louis noted that what "characterizes a deaconess in the true sense of the word is her service in the Church of Jesus Christ, in which it is immaterial where she does it, whether in the ministrations of the sick, epileptics, orphans, aged or poor, or the education of children or young girls, or perhaps by facilitating pastoral communication with the members of the church." [see *Living Theological Heritage of the UCC*, volume IV: document 49]

Parish deaconesses expanded the ministries of women. Parish deaconesses took responsibility for Christian education, social work and home visitation, functioning in essence as assistant pastors. In 1910 two St. Louis deaconesses (Sisters Alvina Scheid and Anna Meyer) were assigned to parishes in Louisville, Kentucky. [see Ruth Rasche, *The Deaconess Heritage* (St. Louis, MO: Deaconess Foundation, 1994), p. 280]

In 1916 Sister Adele E. Hosto wrote up the "Principles of Parish Deaconess Work," explaining this new ministry to women and the churches. She wrote:

“Diakonia” denotes various kinds of service, but is here used to designate a service that particularly concerns itself with performing duties of love and mercy, and administering charities of the church; of the churches in a community.

It is evident that in no other branch of the work can deaconesses serve the Lord in such manifold ways as are opened to her within the confines of a large city parish, which affords an abundance and variety of work. The deaconess in going from house to house, comes in contact and keeps in touch with all the people, and by getting acquainted with the situation and circumstance of the individual, has occasion to serve all, the sick and the well, the rich and poor, and the senior as well as the junior members of the church.

Hosto knew that the public normally thinks of deaconess work as “merely that of nursing the sick.” She insisted along with others that parish deaconess work, with its varied opportunities for service was “the crown and glory of deaconess work.”

Think,” She wrote, “of the great city church with its various interests, left to the care of a single man, the pastor.” The pastor is overwhelmed with sermon preparation, the social welfare of the church and a thousand other claims on his time. “The good that can be accomplished by a faithful deaconess, co-operating with the minister in the interest of the church, is beyond human calculation.” [see *Living Theological Heritage of the UCC*, volume IV: document 50]

Many of the ideas shaping contemporary urban ministry and leading local UCC congregations to establish “parish nurse” programs were anticipated by the work of the Evangelical Deaconesses almost 100 years ago.

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Barbara Brown Zikmund is a UCC minister and historian who served as general editor for the seven volume collection of UCC resources called *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ* (Pilgrim Press, 1995-2005). She now lives in Washington, DC where she and her husband are members of First Congregational UCC. Please write her at beebeegee@verizon.net.