



# The Diakonia of The United Church of Canada

## Part #1                      Diaconal History

Diaconal ministry has its origins in the early church through expressions of hospitality, education of members of the church, care for the poor, sick, and widows and orphans. Throughout history, diaconal ministries have been done by both women and men, but most often by women, frequently without recognition. Diaconal ministry is the responsibility of all who seek to follow Jesus' teachings. All Christians are encouraged to participate in some aspect of diaconal ministry. Diaconal Ministers are called, educated and trained to offer leadership in diaconal ministries and to develop the diaconal leadership of others.

Below are some examples of diaconal ministry in different eras to illustrate its resilience and its creativity in responding to the needs of the church and the world.

Caryn Douglas, Diaconal Minister and former Principal of the Centre for Christian Studies, developed a website [Deaconess History of The United Church of Canada](#). It provides interesting information and references to other texts on the history of diaconal ministry. The names of sections below correspond to the sections on this website and borrow from it.

### **Biblical Record**

In the early church **Phoebe**, **Stephen** and **Phillip** are named in a ministry of "Diakonos" (servant/minister), a term **Jesus** used to describe his ministry. The first record of such a group was in Book of Acts, Chapter 6. In Romans 16, Phoebe is named to this group.

### **Early Church**

The term "deaconess" was first used in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. As the place of women in the leadership of the church became marginalized, so too was diaconal ministry. By the 5<sup>th</sup> century women's ministry began to die out in stages—first for married women, then for widows, and finally for virgin widows. One of the most notable deaconesses of this era was **Olympias** who, as a wealthy widow and with her deaconess community, helped to create a hospital and orphanage in Constantinople. In Europe, women's ministry took refuge in cloistered monasteries and the term "sister" became associated with deaconesses and nursing.

### **Middle Ages**

In the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, in the lowland areas of Europe, a movement called the **Beguines** was developed for married women to provide healing and care for the poor to the community. A similar group, called the **Beghards**, made up of outcast men related to craft guilds, was developed to provide service to other marginalized people.

### **European Revival**

The Reformation (circa 1500) was a time of tremendous social upheaval. For the first few centuries after the Reformation, women's leadership was still seen to be in the home, although Luther spoke of women having a ministry like work in the home. There was some development of diaconal ministries during the first few centuries of this period. However, it was not until the Industrial Age (circa 1800) started to show its shortcomings as displaced farmers and peasants moving to the larger cities, that deaconess communities became stable organizations.

In 1836, a deaconess society in **Kaiserswerth**, Germany was formed and is often referred to as the centre of revival of the modern diaconate. This may not be technically true, but its influence has been substantial in the Lutheran and Reformed churches around the world. **Florence Nightingale**, known for her leadership and courage in nursing, was heavily influenced by the ministry of women in Kaiserswerth, and saw her nursing as a calling from God.

## **The Modern Era**

As Europeans moved to North America, deaconess communities were developed here. Both the Methodist and Presbyterians had deaconess communities and training schools. In 1925 with the creation of The United Church of Canada, the deaconess communities merged in a similar pattern.

From 1925 until the late 1960's, when it was terminated, there was a **United Church Deaconess Association**. Working closely with **Woman's Missionary Society** women worked overseas and in First Nations communities, inner city missions, United Church hospitals, and immigrant centres. As the "baby boomers" filled the Sunday Schools, deaconesses and certified churchmen, were trained in Christian education.

As church membership began to decline in the 1970's and 1980's, the need intensified for ministry leadership in rural communities. The church was also beginning to deepen its involvement in outreach programs, chaplaincies, community ministries, and ecumenical initiatives. Diaconal education responded by incorporating greater focus on worship leadership, biblical study, social analysis, community development, leadership development, and models of teaming. Bringing a perspective on ministry rooted in our history of service, community building, and social transformation, graduates continued to serve in a wide variety of ministries and increasingly (currently 80 percent) serving in congregations as the only called or appointed minister. Students in today's diaconal education programs are developing skills that enable them to offer effective leadership in congregations, communities, and institutions, participating in the work of healing and justice in our world.

In 1980 all former deaconesses and certified churchmen were accepted as members of the one order of United Church ministry, being commissioned to diaconal ministry, and are now called **Diaconal Ministers**.

## **Education**

Since the 1970's, most Diaconal Ministers have been educated at the Centre for Christian Studies. The Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre offers an integrated program, designed to prepare people for ministry in indigenous communities, which includes the possibility of educational certification for diaconal ministry. Thirty women and men graduated from The Western Field-Based Program for Diaconal Ministry (1989-1996). Some Diaconal Ministers are graduates of the MRE program offered at Emmanuel College between 1972 and 1989. Prior to the availability of diaconal education which did not require students to relocate, a few people completed their educational requirements through arrangements made with the Atlantic School of Theology, the Vancouver School of Theology, and the former Division of Ministry Personnel and Education.

Diaconal education uses the action-reflection (praxis) model of education and is based in learning communities in which learners, in consultation with other students and with staff, determine their own learning goals using approved learning guidelines. Students are responsible for their own learning and for contributing to the learning of all others in the community. Diaconal education includes gathering in learning circles, readings, assignments, supervised ministry placements, external courses, projects, and integrative work.

## **Other Information on Diaconal Ministry**

### **Name**

Diaconal Ministers were consulted by General Council Executive in the early 1980's on what they wanted to be called. There was a short period when the term "commissioned minister" was used based on the name of the rite through which the United Church accepts us into ordered ministry (such as Ordained Ministers are named). We chose to be known as Diaconal Ministers in reference to the work of our ministry and maintaining our Biblical, ecumenical, global and historical connections. General Council affirmed this choice in 1982.

### **Gender**

From the inception of the UCC Deaconess Order in 1926, only single women were permitted to serve as deaconesses. In 1960 the General Council removed marital status as a barrier. Men were admitted in 1962 as "certified employed churchmen" and later became Diaconal Ministers. For most of the last 40 years about 90% of Diaconal Ministers have been women. In The United Church of Canada, Diaconal Ministers are not referred to as "sisters", but that is a familiar nomenclature in many European diaconal communities.

## **Diaconal Community**

A unique characteristic of deaconesses and now Diaconal Ministers is that we are part of an intentional community. In 1984 [Diakonia of The United Church of Canada \(DUCC\)](#) was formed as an independent association of Diaconal Ministers and others who identify as participating in diaconal ministry. The membership of DUCC includes lay people and ordained ministers. DUCC meets biannually at conferences, which are both organizational and educational in nature.

The diaconal community is global. DUCC is a member of [Diakonia World Federation](#) and the regional organization [Diakonia of the Americas and Caribbean \(DOTAC\)](#). These are both active bodies supporting diaconal projects in various countries and hold quadrennial conferences to which DUCC always sends delegates and participants.

## **Sacraments**

Diaconal Ministers can be authorized to preside at the sacraments if their work needs this aspect of ministry. Diaconal Ministers serving in congregations usually can conduct these rites, but some Diaconal Ministers serving in other ministries, such as community ministries, may not have the permission to do so. There are a few Conferences in the United Church that gives permission to preside over sacraments upon commissioning. This permission is in effect as long as the Diaconal Minister remains in that Conference.

### **Diakonia of The United Church of Canada Statement of Vision**

*God calls us to diaconal ministry.  
The gospel of Jesus invites all to this ministry:  
to offer compassion and accompaniment,  
to work for liberation and justice,  
to act as advocates of creative transformation.  
Diaconal ministry, as a recognized order, is rooted  
within our faith tradition and history,  
and it is continued and embodied  
in an ecumenical, world-wide community.  
This vocation is a journey  
involving Spirit-filled enrichment and learning,  
requiring humble offering of self,  
demanding prayerful discernment and courageous risking,  
exercising visionary and communal leadership,  
promising joy and meaning,  
and daring to imagine God's abundance  
in a world of love and respect.  
Through education, service, social justice, and pastoral care,  
diaconal ministry in The United Church of Canada,  
encourages a growing faith,  
speaks truth to power,  
seeks mutual empowerment,  
proclaims prophetic hope,  
nurtures life-giving community,  
fosters peaceful, right relationship,  
within the church and the whole of creation  
wherever the Spirit may lead.*

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