“THE NOBLEST IDEALS OF SERVICE”:
SISTER JEANIE BANKS’S SOJOURN IN
LONDON’S EAST END, 1888-1893

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In the July-August, 1912 issue of Flying Leaves, the publication of the Wesleyan Methodist Church Deaconess Order, a notice appeared announcing the retirement of Sister Jeanie Banks. Beginning her ministry as a “Lady Worker” in London’s East End Methodist Mission in 1888, Banks later served as an itinerant Deaconess Evangelist where her preaching ministry throughout Great Britain between 1896 and 1912 extended from inner-city London to small villages in Scotland. “Her evangelistic missions have been owned of God in multitudes of converts,” the magazine noted. “She has also worthily represented the Deaconess Order on many important occasions, and striven, by speech and example, to inspire the younger Sisters with the noblest ideals of service.”

Scholars who have studied the deaconess movement in British Methodism often refer to Jeanie Banks’s unique role as an itinerant preacher. At a time when British Methodists, like their American counterparts, denied women the right to be ordained, Banks was part of a small group of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women who achieved a level of formal recognition for their preaching. However, in order to understand Jeanie Banks’s call to preach, one needs to understand the way that Banks—as well as hundreds of other Methodist women of that era—embodied in their ministries “the noblest ideals of service.”

From the mid-1880s to the eve of World War I, the deaconess movement rose in prominence within transatlantic Methodism. At a time when Methodist churches were undergoing numerous institutional changes, the deaconess movements in American and British Methodism sent hundreds of women into home, foreign, and city missionary service. Wearing uniforms that resembled nuns’ habits, deaconess sisterhoods cropped up in ma-

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1 I am grateful to Gareth Lloyd, archivist at the John Rylands Library, Manchester, England, for providing me access to many of the materials used in this article, including Jeanie Banks’s diary.
2 Flying Leaves (July-August, 1912), 102.
4 Far more scholarship has been done on the American Methodist deaconess movement than its counterpart in the UK. See, for example, Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, ed., The American Deaconess Movement in the Early Twentieth Century (New York: Garland, 1987), and Jean Miller Schmidt, Grace Sufficient: a History of Women in American Methodism (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999). On British Methodist deaconesses, see Graham, Saved to Serve.
ior urban areas like Chicago, Manchester, New York, and London. Through various city missions, deaconesses founded hospitals, rescue missions, and schools. Deaconesses ran Sunday Schools, offered classes to young mothers in home economics, led class meetings, and provided spiritual and material relief to the poor. Although the deaconess movement declined in both Britain and the U.S. after World War I, the movement’s legacy can be seen in the impact that these women had on Methodism’s social witness, embodied in the words from the United Methodist Church Book of Discipline, “we proclaim no personal gospel that fails to express itself in relevant social concerns; we proclaim no social gospel that does not include the personal transformation of sinners.”

The formation of deaconess “sisterhoods” swept through many Protestant churches in the latter third of the nineteenth century. In part, the emergence of the deaconess movement reflected a long tradition within Methodism, and other Protestant churches, to recover models of ministry from the early church. In his sermon, “On Visiting the Sick,” John Wesley noted examples of deaconesses from the Book of Acts that provided evidence of women’s fitness for servant ministry to the poor. Wesley asserted that women, like men, had an obligation to use their talents for the benefit of those who suffered: “Whenever you have opportunity, do all the good you can, particularly to your poor, sick neighbour. And every one of you likewise ‘shall receive your own reward, according to your own labour.’”

At the same time, deaconesses were part of a wider late nineteenth-century transatlantic movement where women were creating organizations to promote a range of religious and societal reforms. At the center of this development was Frances Willard’s Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. A lifelong Methodist, Willard, with many Protestant women in the WCTU, campaigned not only for the prohibition of alcohol, but promoted a range of social reforms. By the early 1890s, the WCTU was the largest women’s organization in the world, and had linked its reform battles with churches and women’s temperance organizations worldwide, including in Great Britain.

Paradoxically, this emerging women’s leadership was grounded in a

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5 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 55. The question of how women embodied the Wesleyan tension between personal faith and social responsibility has been pursued by several scholars of American Methodism. See, for example, Jean Miller Schmidt, “Reexamining the Public/Private Split: Reforming the Continent and Spreading Scriptural Holiness,” in Perspectives on American Methodism, eds. Russell Richey, Kenneth Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 228-247; Rosemary Skinner Keller, ed., Spirituality and Social Responsibility: Vocational Vision of Women in the United Methodist Tradition (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993); Schmidt, Grace Sufficient.


conservative nineteenth-century gender ideology that saw women as the preservers of domestic tranquility. This nineteenth-century worldview asserted that women possessed inherent abilities to be caretakers of Christian homes—especially geared toward caring for children. While this view traditionally confined women to the realm of the home, in the latter third of the nineteenth century, women increasingly spoke of how they could use their unique gifts of “motherly nurture” for the redemption of the world.\(^8\)

Methodist deaconesses in Great Britain and the United States appropriated this “separate spheres” domestic language, arguing that women could use their nurturing gifts to transform society.\(^9\) Although women like Frances Willard vigorously campaigned for a range of progressive political reforms, including women’s suffrage, their language returned to the theme that an ideal society needed to resemble an ideal home. “Home is the citadel of everything that is good and pure on earth,” Willard argued. “Wherever you put a woman who has the atmosphere of home about her, she brings in the good time of pleasant and friendly relationship and points with the finger of hope and the eye of faith always to something better.”\(^10\)

The emergence of the deaconess movement in the 1880s also coincided with a shift in churches that increasingly encouraged single women to take up Christian service. For much of the nineteenth century, the chief avenue open to women who wanted to engage in some form of public ministry was through the role of minister’s wife, serving their husbands as helpmates and assistants.\(^11\) The rise of women’s groups like the WCTU in the 1870s—along with the emergence in the 1880s of the intercollegiate student movement represented by organizations like the Young Women’s Christian Association and the Student Volunteer Movement—fostered new venues for women’s leadership that didn’t involve marriage.\(^12\)

At the same time, women’s embrace of “separate spheres” gender ideology did not necessarily equate with women’s passivity. One British Methodist deaconess observed in 1905 that being a deaconess required a unique balance of womanly nurture and worldly intelligence: “We cannot afford to have women who blunder. Difficult situations will arise, and the Sister upon the spot must know how to act with firmness, and yet with kindness; and above all, in dealing with the deep needs of the human soul, a very

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\(^12\) See Ian Tyrrell, Woman’s World, Woman’s Empire, and Tyrrell, Reforming the World: The Creation of America’s Moral Empire (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010).
gentle and a very sympathetic hand is required.”

Jeanie Banks’s ministry illustrates this assertion. Between 1888 and 1893, Banks kept a diary of her work serving as a Lady Worker in the Wesleyan Methodist East End Mission. Situated in one of the most notorious slums in the western world, Banks’s diary provides insight into her daily routines. It also enables us to understand how women like Banks felt empowered to use their gifts for ministry, even as they overtly or tacitly affirmed predominant late nineteenth-century gender roles. Banks’s story is vital not only for giving us a clearer example of the work of deaconesses in British Methodism. It helps us understand how an often overlooked group of women contributed to a historical and theological Methodist legacy of personal and social holiness.

**Methodist Deaconesses and the Call of Jeanie Banks**

Lucy Rider Meyer is usually credited with establishing the deaconess movement in American Methodism. Rider Meyer and her husband founded the Chicago Training School for City, Home, and Foreign Missions in 1885 and the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church officially recognized the deaconess order in 1888. The route toward a formal deaconess order in the Wesleyan Methodist Church, the largest branch of Methodism in Great Britain, was more cautious and often rested upon the leadership of prominent male clergy leaders.

The individual who championed the deaconess cause in the Wesleyan Methodist Church was a London minister, Thomas Bowman Stephenson. A longtime head of a Methodist Children’s Home, in the 1870s, Stephenson became interested in replicating the deaconess sisterhood established in the mid-nineteenth century by a German Lutheran minister, Theodor Fliedner. Focusing primarily on nursing, Fliedner’s “Kaiserwerth Sisterhood” quickly became a model for many Anglo-American evangelicals. Repeatedly emphasizing women’s innate gifts of nurture, Stevenson argued that there was no reason why women should not be allowed to use their talents for the church’s benefit. “A woman, whose hand is softer than man’s for the work of charity, and whose heart is warmer in sympathy with sorrow, is in many circles more powerful for good than he.” Eventually, Stephenson used the grounds of his children’s home to launch a Deaconess Training College in 1890, even though the Wesleyan Methodist Church would not formally incorporate the deaconess model into its Conference structure until 1901.

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13 *Flying Leaves* (August, 1905), 296.
16 In addition to the Wesleyan Methodist Church, the Primitive Methodist Church and the United Methodist Church soon established deaconess orders in Great Britain. While American deaconesses in the Methodist Episcopal Church numbered approximately 1,300 at their peak prior to World War I, deaconesses in the Wesleyan Methodist Church were much smaller, peaking around 250 women serving in city, home, and foreign missionary appointments. See Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient*; Graham, *Saved to Serve*, and *Flying Leaves* (July-August, 1914), 111.
Stephenson and other British Methodist clergy sympathetic to the deaconess cause moved cautiously, reassuring conservative colleagues that women’s gifts for service did not include ordained ministry. At the same time, other British Methodists formed “sisterhoods” to staff Methodist missions in cities like London. In 1887, Katherine Hughes, wife of the prominent Methodist leader, Hugh Price Hughes, established in her husband’s West London Mission a group called the Sisters of the People. These women took on activities ranging from evangelistic outreach to nursing. The Sisters served as the backbone of the West End Mission and by the early twentieth century they offered a number of services aiding West End poor, including running a hospital for pregnant women with venereal diseases.17 Less than a year after the West End Mission opened, another Methodist minister, Peter Thompson, established a mission in London’s East End. One of the first women recruited as a Lady Worker was Jeanie Banks.

Banks’s biography conforms to commonly-used late nineteenth-century arguments to recruit single women for Christian service: the perception that they had more free time than married women. Katherine Hughes noted that the best women to serve urban missions were educated women “who were not obliged to earn their own living and who remained at home after leaving school with practically nothing to do and simply longing to have some outlet for their energies and a purpose in life.”18 Banks fit this description. Born into a Methodist family, her father, Matthew, was a missionary in the West Indies and her brother, John, became a prominent Methodist minister and a future Conference President of the Wesleyan Methodist Church.19 Recalling her childhood, Banks observed that “to my girlish mind” her chief purpose was to engage in some sort of ministry, even as she struggled with the state of her soul. “Influenced sometime by fear and sometimes by strong desire, yet never seeing clearly the plan of salvation, my earliest life was an unsatisfied hunger, and being exceedingly reserved and sensitive, I shrank from expressing my feelings, even to my mother.” These struggles continued into her young adulthood until finally, “I was stripped of all,” and accepted Christ as her Savior “and the beauty of holiness ravished my gaze.”20

The joy of her conversion fueled Banks’s zeal for Christian service. While desiring to follow her parents into missionary service, she was constrained by the need to care for her ailing parents through most of her twenties, supporting herself by tutoring students and offering singing lessons. After her parents’ deaths, she left home in the spring of 1888 to begin her eight-year residency at the East End Mission.

Banks’s entry into the East End Mission was well timed. Although the founding of Stephenson’s London Training School was still two years away, the model of Katherine Hughes’s Sisters of the People, and the cause of

18 Hughes, 67.
19 Graham, Saved to Serve, 57.
20 Jeanie Banks, Flying Leaves (February, 1903), 20.
The Forward Movement campaigned to organize Methodists in wide-ranging efforts of evangelism and social reform, designed to alleviate the suffering of Britain’s urban poor. In a period when the Salvation Army was gaining notoriety for its urban missions and Toynbee Hall in London was established as the first settlement house, reform-minded ministers appealed for “refined ladies” to aid Methodism’s efforts in helping build the kingdom of God in Britain. “We have to deal, not with disembodied spirits, but with living men and women, whose bodies and minds cannot be separated from their souls. It is impossible to deal effectually with the spiritual destitution of London, unless you also deal with its physical and mental destitution.”

The East End Wesleyan Methodist Mission was typical of a number of late nineteenth-century urban mission churches established in cities like London. While weekly worship was rooted in chapel services, the mission owned a number of properties (including a former saloon converted into a recreational center) that were used for a variety of Mission programs. These programs were run and staffed by women like Banks. “Here I spent eight years, finding it an excellent school of training for all kinds of social, religious, and philanthropic work. My work hitherto had been with the individual; but here it was the mass—feeding, clothing, rescuing, comforting poor friendless humanity.”

Banks began her journal in late 1888 after she had resided at the Mission for about six months. Her diary reflects the struggles and hopes of a woman trying to apply her faith—and discern her call to serve. But it also provides a unique look into how one woman’s faith was lived out in one of the most notorious slums within a city that at the time considered itself at the center of the Christian world.

Jeanie Banks in the East End

Marking her first anniversary at the East End Mission, Banks expressed joy in her fulfilling work:

No words can tell the soul-satisfaction and rest I have experienced in this field of labour. Every power of my soul finds sweet employ; I only long to be able to crowd more into my life. A year never appeared to pass so quickly as this has done, and, although I have had a very happy house and many friends elsewhere, I never spent a happier year in my life . . . . The Lord mark out my path and teach me to do His will.

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22 Methodist Times (March 19, 1885), 177.

23 Banks, Flying Leaves (March, 1903), 41.

24 Jeanie Banks, MS Diary, (The Methodist Archives and Research Centre, John Rylands Library, Manchester, England), May 31, 1889.
Like other Lady Workers as well as women who later came out of the Wesleyan Methodist Church’s deaconess order, Banks lived a regimented life. A typical day often consisted of holding morning classes for boys or girls, followed by an afternoon of visitations. Possessing a great love of music and singing, Banks was often enlisted to put together children’s concerts. On other days, Banks met with men’s and women’s groups, and led revival services. She participated in the Mission’s temperance organization, and regularly visited and spoke to men’s and women’s gatherings in the East End and at other London area Methodist missions. On weekends, Banks taught Sunday School and frequently made follow-up visits with families. Constantly, she and other Lady Workers hosted a variety of teas and social gatherings. In all, Banks worked with hundreds of men, women, and children during her years in the East End. Her diary records that one of her mother’s groups enrolled over 400 women, and that approximately a thousand women were under the care of the Mission’s outreach.25

The role that appeared to give Banks most difficulty was teaching children. Banks supervised a range of classes, including “Girl’s Parlours” and boys’ classes that often revolved around Bible study and home economics. She also conducted sewing classes for girls and young women and regularly led “Band of Hope” children’s meetings.26 At times, Banks grew frustrated, especially with her boys’ classes. “To set one down in the midst of scores of boys, who are only developed animally, whose souls are dark and untouched, is just to make me powerless.”27 Given the poverty of these children, Banks frequently wondered if it was possible for them to have future opportunities to escape the harshness of East End life. “What character is stamped on some of their features! What traces of neglect and sufferings! Some of them look utterly wild. Black faces and hands, bare, muddy feet and legs and tattered garments surround me.”28 At points, Banks was forced to physically remove rowdy children from her classes and in the midst of her frustration she asked God for strength. “The Lord give me more of the Christ-love which is out going, and utterly unselfish; loving even when no return is given but hatred and scorn.”29

As time passed, Banks grew more comfortable in her work with children, giving many accounts of her love for the youngsters in her care. “What hath God wrought! Once I used to be afraid to go into the room; it seemed the hardest work given me in the Mission, but now I have the joy of seeing them seeking to know God for themselves.”30 Banks was always cognizant of the

25 Banks, Diary, January 1, 1890.
27 Banks, Diary, April 8, 1889.
28 Banks, Diary, April 10, 1889.
29 Banks, Diary, April 13, 1889.
30 Banks, Diary, March 26, 1890.
fact that her primary mission was to bring these children into a relationship with Jesus Christ. However, she recognized the sufferings of these children, and it affected her deeply. “I was sick and in prison and ye visited me!” What ills befall these boys! Another of my lads had a small wound in his ankle plugged with cotton wool; his father in a drunken frenzy had dealt him a blow with the poker, as he lay in bed, and had to go to the Hospital to have his foot dressed.”

Banks didn’t mince words when it came to describing the hopeless living conditions faced by people in the East End. At a time when London was experiencing the fallout from the Jack the Ripper murders, Banks drew attention to the presence of the criminal elements that resided in neighborhood tenements, public houses, and brothels. Yet she recognized that for many East End families life was a daily struggle for survival. She commented on the many fathers who’d walk the streets of London by day in hope of finding work “coming back at night to find those you best love crying for bread.”

Frequently, Banks spoke of how God gave her “grace sufficient” to undertake her ministry. This concept reflects a persistent theme in the broader history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Methodist women. As Jean Miller Schmidt observes, “Methodist women fundamentally affirmed the sufficiency of grace for all things, for living as well as dying . . . . Almost constantly reminded of the precariousness of life, they accepted it as a gift and attempted to live it a day at a time.” Banks’s harshness in castigating the East End’s “criminal element” was accompanied by her strong belief that she could not do her work without faith. “God must put on righteousness if you want to do work amongst these people . . . . All God’s servants who suffer in their labours for Him are touched into a finer sense of sympathy.”

Banks was well aware that many of the persons under her care would not only face acute poverty, but many would die of disease and starvation. As she reflected on the suffering she witnessed:

Sickness, sorrow, misery seem almost to reign supreme here. Could one from the peopled stars overhead drop down to our planet and alight in the East End, surely he would think he had discovered ‘the vale of tears.’ It is well to be acquainted with other parts of our earth where misery is not unmixed, and it is well also to learn here the depths of degradation and woe to which so many thousands of our redeemed brothers and sisters are reduced.

Banks relished opportunities when she was free from London’s slums to go on summer holidays, enjoying time for personal solitude and the joy of seeing family and friends. Yet she quickly yearned to get back to her work. Upon returning from one holiday and reflecting on being reunited with the youth in one of her classes, she noted that “I came home feeling, Jonah-like,

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31 Banks, Diary, March 23, 1890.
32 Banks, Diary, June 11, 1889.
34 Banks, Diary, June 11, 1889.
35 Banks, Diary, January 30, 1890.
as though I could run away from the work.” Even as she worried about her effectiveness, “still God is omnipotent; the seed sown may spring up many years hence.”

Banks often lamented that many of the people that she helped were not necessarily interested in embracing Christianity. She was determined, especially with the children in her care, to cultivate in them patterns of moral-ethical Christian living. She frequently took children on excursions to London museums and visits to the surrounding countryside. However, she often grew frustrated with how many of her pupils did not seem interested in attending church. “Poor creatures: they do not know how to pray, and care not to enter God’s house, many of them, excepting at weddings, births, deaths, or churchings. This is the sum total of their religion. The ‘do justice, love mercy’ of the Bible they are entire strangers to.”

Yet Banks demonstrated an ethos that permeated many deaconesses—a desire to find ways to do good. While recovering from a bout of influenza in the spring of 1891, she grew restless with inactivity. “Housekeeping does not give me scope for the development and unfolding of strong forces within which long for play. I feel like a caged bird, my wings are clipped. I cannot soar, my soul’s feelings cannot find outlet.” Banks relished opportunities to expand the scope of her work. During an “ambulance lecture” on basic first aid, a physician used cadavers to lecture on anatomy. While Banks was appalled by the sight of human remains, she also saw her training as helping her gain useful knowledge that would enhance her ministry.

To see upon our table the gaunt skeletons and the dish of human brains, which but one short month ago were lodged in the skull of some unfortunate one dying friendless and forlorn in Hospital, or Workhouse—such sights and thoughts must lend to strengthen, or weaken our nervous power, and so to teach us more bravely to face what is appalling, or else lead us sicken and turn away, thus effectively weakening our power for usefulness in time of greatest need and emergency. For myself, I delight in this means of acquiring knowledge and hope greatly to benefit thereby.

Banks and other Wesleyan Methodist deaconesses embraced the domestic language that women were inherently motherly in their ability to offer nurture. Much of the literature that would later come out of Wesleyan Methodist Church deaconess publications like *Flying Leaves* emphasizes the unique attributes of women to care for children. At the same time, the magazine is filled with accounts of women who believed that they were living in an age when women were being offered unique opportunities for service. As one deaconess wrote in 1909, “may not this awakening of women be God’s voice calling to them to arise, shake off their sloth, their lethargy and cowardice, and take their place at man’s side in the battle against sin, ignorance and folly?”

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36 Banks, Diary, October 5, 1890.
37 Banks, Diary, May 15, 1889.
38 Banks, Diary, May 13, 1891.
39 Banks, Diary, May 15, 1889.
40 *Flying Leaves* (May, 1909), 73.
Banks’s diary reflects a theological outlook consistent with this confident attitude. Like many male leaders in the Wesleyan Methodist Church of that era, she demonstrates a postmillennial view of evangelism, reflecting an optimism that Christian conversion would lead to a better world.  Her ministry coincided with the annual Southport Holiness Conventions that were supported by British Methodist leaders like Stephenson and Hugh Price Hughes. Appealing to the Irish Methodist William Arthur’s book, *Tongue of Fire*, a work read by Banks, Southport Methodists emphasized the doctrine of entire sanctification, rejecting the idea that holiness was achieved by “slow and steady progress.” Banks’s ministry revolved around the imperative for one to achieve personal holiness, and her diary makes evident her joy when men, women, and children surrendered their lives to Christ.

However, her diary also reveals that Banks’s presence in the East End was embraced by people, in ways that went beyond religion. Many families reached out to Banks and other women of the Mission for food, clothing, and to seek guidance on topics ranging from infant care, job hunting, and legal counsel. Banks took special delight when she spoke to a woman who had seen a lawyer for legal advice. When the lawyer told her she would need to pay a fee, the woman replied, “why I can go to the chapel and get advice for nothing!”

**Visiting the Sick**

For all of her varied work, the core of Jeanie Banks’s ministry revolved around her visits to the homes of East End families. Her diary not only provides insight into Banks’s home visits, but how these visits impacted her wider ministry. Years later, Banks noted that much of her success as an evangelist was rooted in forming personal relationships. “I always accompany the seekers, as though I myself were a seeker, and we travel together, step by step, until we rejoice together in a newly-found Saviour.” While Banks was clear about her evangelistic mission, she was committed to doing what she could to serve the spiritual and temporal needs of people in her care.

On a given week, Banks would often visit hundreds of homes. Sometimes she stopped at a residence to deliver Mission literature. Other times she would visit families to offer remedial services, such as providing food, clothing or medical care—including on occasion helping to deliver babies. Banks painted vivid descriptions of the tenement poverty that she encountered daily. An entry from one of her home visits in 1891 is typical:

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41 Banks’s diary contains accounts of her readings. While she read many works dealing with holiness theology, her choices were eclectic. In addition to the writings of popular evangelical ministers like Dwight Moody and Charles Spurgeon, she also read contemporary books on topics dealing with social reform such as Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* and William Stead’s *If Christ Came to Chicago!*

42 *Methodist Times* (July 8, 1886), 437

43 Banks, Diary, February 20, 1890.

44 Banks, *Flying Leaves* (June/July 1902), 110.
They live in a little room, in the top story of a wretchedly filthy and low alley, called “Shovel Alley.” The stairs are filthy, the walls are filthy, the windows are filthy, and filthy characters inhabit the house . . . . The bedstead occupies one half of the room; it has a dirty chaff mattress, no bed, or sheets, and is covered with a quilt made of carpet and sacking tacked together, and at the foot something like a very old garment tucked in. The furniture consists of a little table by the wall, an old box turned upside down, and a chair, a few pots, very few, an old . . . teapot stewing over a few cinders in the grate and one or two old milk, or beer cans, used for saucepans.45

Beyond the details of living conditions, Banks often kept meticulous notes on households that she visited, writing out information on family size, the family’s affiliation with the East End Mission, and their economic circumstances.

A recurring theme in her diary was Banks’s efforts to get families to sign “the pledge,” that is, a vow to abstain from buying and consuming alcoholic beverages. Influenced by Frances Willard and British temperance leader Isabella Somerset, Banks and other women at the Mission were devoted to promoting temperance. Banks was acutely aware that alcohol consumption was not simply a matter of personal immorality. It was a social problem exacerbated by the economic and physical sufferings of the poor. “Intemperance was the terrible curse that met us at every turn, and how to deal with the drunkard was the most difficult problem to solve.” However, she was well aware of the social consequences of alcohol, revealing the interconnection between alcohol abuse and poverty, domestic violence, prostitution, as well as an absence of economic opportunities. “Poverty, lack of work, and consequent lack of food, clothing, and fuel, helped to drive both men and women, if they could get a copper or two, to the public-house.”46 In particular, Banks despaired on the impact of these drinking establishments upon children. “Drink is the one monster evil and it seems as though wisdom should utter her voice at the corner of every street where these dens of vice are found . . . . Dear little girls and boys, as fair as anybody’s, but not as cared for, were roaming the streets, when the children of better homes had been for hours slumbering in their comfortable beds.”47

Banks recognized how the public houses and “gin palaces” of the East End were draining the meager economic resources of the poor, fostering cycles of poverty. At times, she even pondered if Christian conversion was enough to break the cycles of economic oppression experienced by London’s poor. Upon reflecting on the economic straits of a young man recently released from prison, she mused about the fate of this person, and others like him:

It seems cruel to turn them out. Penniless, into a cold and pitiless world. Could not government, in some way, provide them with sufficiently remunerative labour to give them a start and chance in life? Could not our so called Christian laws . . . provide

45 Banks, Diary, March 13, 1891.
46 Banks, *Flying Leaves* (March, 1903), 41.
47 Banks, Diary, September 24, 1890.
Banks showed affinities with the emerging late nineteenth-century social gospel movement.\(^49\) She supported an eight-hour workday and the elimination of the “sweating system”—sweatshops of women and children who were often forced to work in crowded, unsanitary tenements for negligible wages.\(^50\) Inevitably, however, Banks’s diary returns to the theme of conversion. “They need one thing, that is Christ; nothing else will elevate them . . . . We may take their pence and supply them with goods; we may talk and reason with them of domestic policy, the training of children and other things, but our only hope is their salvation and the implanting of the new graces of the Spirit.”\(^51\)

However, the diary demonstrates how well Banks knew the East End community and her commitment to the temporal and spiritual needs of people under her care. At different times she took on various pastoral roles, including comforting and praying for the dying, and helping families with bereavement. As someone who had nursed both her parents in their final years, Banks held a particular sympathy for those who mourned the loss of a parent, a child, or spouse. In one account where she is seeking to comfort a young girl whose mother recently died, Banks noted her efforts “to soothe her grief by tender sympathy for I, too, know too well the desolation of house when Mother is gone, and the lonely lot of the daughter left alone in that house with death.”\(^52\)

Her diary reveals that her evangelism was predicated on returning to the houses of those who mourned. As she described a visit to a dying elderly woman and her husband (“addicted to drink and adverse to religion”), Banks marveled at how her compassion for this woman impacted her drunken husband.

His wife and I knelt in prayer but he sat still. We thanked the Giver of all good and prayed Him to bless the husband and save him. When we rose tears ever in his eyes, he pulled off his cap and shook hands quite feelingly. His wife exclaimed—“There now! he’s done to you what he won’t do to many, he’s pulled off his cap, and tears in his eyes too!” . . . . I came away feeling I had indeed had my steps directed by the Lord.\(^53\)

Banks’s care for families was long term. She gave an account of calling on a woman whose husband had died two years earlier. While still heartbroken, the woman delighted that Banks remembered the sad anniversary. “‘You came to see me in Hospital she said, and you kissed me, and I seem to feel your kiss on my brow yet; it said so much.’ She said she had been

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\(^{48}\) Banks, Diary, January 6, 1890.


\(^{50}\) Banks, *Flying Leaves* (March, 1903), 41.

\(^{51}\) Banks, Diary, January 1, 1890.

\(^{52}\) Banks, Diary, February 15, 1889.

\(^{53}\) Banks, Diary, February 20, 1889.
longing to see me, for she felt we understood each other, and her heart was full at the recollection of her sorrow.”

Banks repeatedly affirmed her joy for the ways God blessed her ministry. However, by the start of her fourth year at the Mission, she was expressing some anxiety about her work as a Lady Worker. “I feel within me restless yearnings and longings for a sphere in which I may still more fully exercise powers I feel to exist within me. God may have some other branch of the Mission for me to take up; I know not--; I would improve each day as it passes, and so live in whatever sphere I am, as to receive the Master’s ‘Well Done.’” While Banks continued her diary for two more years, the entries become sparser. In the summer of 1893, she gave a brief account of speaking before an evangelistic gathering of 250 workers, affirming “I am again convinced that this is my most successful sphere of labour. May God, in His own good time, lead me into it.”

After “8 yrs and 1 month’s service,” Banks left the East End Mission in 1896. She formally entered the Wesleyan Methodist Church deaconess order and after a brief residence at Thomas Stephenson’s Training College, Banks was commissioned as a Deaconess Evangelist. Banks realized her dream of being able to preach. However, her core identity as a deaconess was formed amid the years that she labored in London’s East End.

Conclusion

What does Jeanie Banks’s diary suggest about the wider experiences of Methodist deaconesses? On one hand, Banks does present a unique story of a woman whose years in London gave way to a traveling preaching ministry—even as she was never ordained. I would suggest, however, that her example illustrates how many deaconesses were devoted to uphold the institutional ministries of their respective denominations, while also finding space to carve out distinctive ministries of leadership and service. Scholars have noted that deaconesses worked within liminal institutional spaces, whereby, their role was circumscribed by an ideology of domesticity. Yet women like Jeanie Banks were far from passive in their work and pushed back against the idea that their ministries were somehow ancillary to men’s.

Part of what Jeanie Banks’s story reveals is that commonly-used theological labels such as “liberal” and “conservative” can be misleading in describing the work of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century deaconesses. At the same time, Banks’s story reflects upon how the context of late nineteenth-century urban industrialization pushed her—and other deaconesses—to rethink aspects of their inherited evangelism. Her servant ministry accentuates how the deaconesses held in tension a care of souls with a care for society. Even as Banks wrestled with her call to preach, she remained

54 Banks, Diary, March 15, 1891.
55 Banks, Diary, May 31, 1891.
56 Banks, Diary, July 13, 1893.
57 See, for example, Pope-Levison, “Mothering Not Governing.”
committed to a vision of evangelism rooted in a deep pastoral concern for individuals. As she reflected toward the end of her diary on one visit to a distraught family, “I asked her husband to remain; he said he could not talk with me, but, as I took the Parable of the Prodigal Son and applied it to himself the tears stole into his eyes; he seemed thoroughly ashamed of himself and knelt down on the other side [of] the bed, whilst I committed them, individually, to God in prayer.”

As a historian, it is difficult to quantify the broader impact of the encounters that Banks, and other deaconess women, had upon those that they served. However, Banks and other Methodist women of that era embodied a critical ideal emphasized in Wesley’s “On Visiting the Sick” sermon. Mainly, effective ministry is inconceivable unless individuals come face to face with people who suffer. Frances Willard observed in 1885 that a critical aspect of women’s work in church and society was visiting the infirm. “This work can not be done by proxy nor at arms length . . . . Go into homes and saloons, inviting lost men to come to Christ. We must go; we can not send.”

Jeanie Banks was one of hundreds of Methodist deaconesses in Great Britain and the U.S. who did as Willard commanded. Grappling with Banks’s struggles and triumphs not only sheds light on the work of Methodist deaconesses. It serves as a critical benchmark for how women embodied the longstanding tension within Methodist history of balancing personal and social holiness.

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58 Banks, Diary, July 20, 1893.
59 Willard, Glimpses, 419.