

**A “THIRTY YEAR WAR” AND MORE:  
EXPOSING COMPLEXITIES IN THE  
METHODIST DEACONESS MOVEMENT**

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Most were of marriageable age. Some had been schoolteachers; others were fairly illiterate. Few had encountered a metropolis except in their imagination. Yet from rural farms in Iowa, river towns in Ohio, and one-street villages in Illinois, to the great urban centers—Chicago, New York City, San Francisco—they flocked, seeking an opportunity to put their Protestant faith into action. In these cities, they knew that needs abounded with unsanitary and overcrowded tenements housing new arrivals from southern and Eastern Europe as well as from rural America.<sup>1</sup> There they could nurse a torn and tattered humanity, school the unlearned child, mentor the expectant mother, interpret for the immigrant, and tell the stories of Jesus to sinners. These women from America’s heartlands, who became Methodist deaconesses, felt compelled to rescue urban America.

In myriad ways, Methodist deaconesses resembled scores of Protestant women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who, through the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, settlement houses, and Women’s Clubs, reached out beyond their homes to ameliorate society’s ills. During these decades of heightened optimistic reform, when “religious inspiration, self-improvement, and civic engagement were closely intertwined,”<sup>2</sup> such

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<sup>1</sup> The influx of European immigrants and “urban-bound folk from the countryside” drastically and swiftly altered the population complexion of the United States “from a primarily rural country in 1890 (64.6 percent of the population) to a mainly urban nation thirty years later (51.4 percent).” See Steven A. Riess, *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 6. See also John D. Buenker, ed. *The Gilded Age and Progressive Era, 1877-1920*, Sources of the American Tradition (Acton, MA: Copley Publishing, 2002), 300; Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 209-210; James D. Anderson, “The Historical Development of Black Vocational Education,” *Work, Youth, and Schooling: Historical Perspectives on Vocationalism in American Education*, eds. Harvey Kantor and David B. Tyack (Stanford: Stanford University, 1982), 198-200; Glenda E. Gilmore, “Responding to the Challenges of the Progressive Era,” *Who Were the Progressives?* ed. Glenda E. Gilmore (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002), 5-8.

<sup>2</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 391.

organizations proliferated.<sup>3</sup> While historians probe many of these organizations and movements, scholarly interest in the Methodist deaconess movement,<sup>4</sup> since its first blush of studies in the late 1970's and early 1980's, has not captured a similar audience. In the intervening two decades, the very few studies promulgate without critique the earliest conclusions about the movement.

Particularly influential in this regard is Mary Agnes Dougherty's dissertation that established two longstanding, interpretative conclusions about the Methodist deaconess movement.<sup>5</sup> The first conclusion is Lucy Rider Meyer's unmitigated prominence as the one deaconess leader of historical interest. The second conclusion is that deaconesses engaged primarily in social service and are best understood, therefore, as early social workers. Subsequent historians adopt these two conclusions without testing their validity or methodological presuppositions. As we shall see, in the hands of notable historians, from Rosemary Skinner Keller to Jean Miller Schmidt, the Methodist deaconess movement is misleadingly reduced to one leader—Lucy Rider Meyer—and one labor—social service.

In this study, I first intend to unmask the fallacy that perpetuates a myopic focus on Lucy Rider Meyer—a misjudgment that leaves the legacies of other deaconess leaders to languish. In particular, I assess the legacy of Jane Bancroft Robinson, whom historians treat merely as a foil to Lucy Rider Meyer on account of their legendary feud, rather than as a principal player in the Methodist deaconess movement. Robinson's leadership strategy for expanding women's roles in a patriarchal church, viewed in light of Estelle Freedman's concept of "female institution building," a strategy which arose during the Progressive Era, challenges historians' interpretation of Meyer's strategy as more liberative for women and therefore of more historical significance than Robinson's.

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<sup>3</sup> Buenker refers to these decades as an "organizational revolution" because of the exponential increase in the number and varieties of organizations, associations, and clubs. Buenker, *The Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 458. See also Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 383ff; McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 65-68; Barbara Kuhn Campbell, *The "Liberated" Woman of 1914: Prominent Women in the Progressive Era* (UMI Research Press, 1979), 147-176; Sandra Haarsager, *Organized Womanhood: Cultural Politics in the Pacific Northwest, 1840-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1997); Anne Firor Scott, "Women's Voluntary Associations: From Charity to Reform," *Lady Bountiful Revisited: Women, Philanthropy, and Power*, ed. Kathleen D. McCarthy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1990), 35-54; Suzanne Lebsack, "Women and American Politics, 1880-1920," *Women, Politics and Change*, eds. Louise Tilly and Patricia Gurin (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1990), 35-62.

<sup>4</sup> The focus of this study is specifically on the Methodist Episcopal Church, sometimes called the Methodist Episcopal Church, North, to differentiate it from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, which had its own deaconess movement. The Methodist deaconess movement was arguably the most robust. As Susan Hill Lindley iterates, "The deaconess movement was a moderate success in American Lutheran and Episcopal churches, but in Methodism it achieved its greatest visibility and participation" (Susan Hill Lindley, *"You Have Stept Out of Your Place": A History of Women and Religion in America* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996], 131).

<sup>5</sup> Mary Agnes Dougherty, "The Methodist Deaconess, 1885-1919: A Study in Religious Feminism," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Davis, 1979.

Second, I challenge the assumption that deaconesses chiefly provided social service by demonstrating, with primary source evidence, that evangelism was also an essential deaconess labor. Again I proceed by focusing on another prominent deaconess leader, Iva Durham Vennard, who crossed paths with both Meyer and Robinson. Vennard's archival material provides insight into a deaconess leader and training school founder who believed that the primary deaconess labor was evangelism, a conviction that prompted conflict with Robinson, who was her superior at the time. As with Meyer and Robinson's feud, it is in the nexus of these conflicts that we are able to see complexities emerge amongst deaconess leaders and deaconess labors.

In light of these two challenges, my intention with this study is to suggest that the fullness of American women's religious history is compromised when movements that were once dynamic, multi-faceted, with plethora personalities, are now insufficiently represented by one leader or one labor. Perhaps this reductionist tendency has even contributed to a scholarly malaise about the deaconess movement in the last decades, with an assumption that its historical importance has already been documented. It is toward expanding the historical reconstruction of the Methodist deaconess movement by exploring its conflicts and complexities that this study is directed.

### **Deaconess Leaders: Lucy Rider Meyer and Jane Bancroft Robinson**

Among the earliest and most influential leaders of the Methodist deaconess movement was Lucy Rider Meyer (1849-1922). Raised in a Methodist home, she was converted at age thirteen. Her education was extensive, including a Bachelor of Arts from Oberlin College, studies in Chemistry at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and, in later life, a medical degree from Woman's Medical College, Northwestern University. Prior to her deaconess work, she was Professor of Chemistry at McKendree College in Illinois and a field secretary for the Illinois State Sunday School Association. Certainly the most noteworthy years of her life were devoted to the Methodist deaconess movement, particularly through her Chicago Training School for City, Home and Foreign Missions of which she was founder, fundraiser, Bible teacher, and principal for over thirty years. Her husband, Josiah Shelley Meyer, worked alongside her as the business agent for the school. When the couple retired, forty agencies, including hospitals, orphanages, training schools, and homes for the elderly had been established either directly by the Chicago Training School or by one of its graduates.<sup>6</sup> Along with these accomplishments, Meyer was also elected to be the first laywoman seated as a delegate by the General Conference of the MEC, when women were admitted for the first time in 1904; she was elected again four years later.

Lucy Rider Meyer's importance to the Methodist deaconess movement

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<sup>6</sup> Catherine M. Prelinger and Rosemary Skinner Keller, "The Function of Female Bonding: The Restored Diaconessate of the Nineteenth Century," *Women in New Worlds, Volume II*, eds. Rosemary Skinner Keller, Louise L. Queen, and Hilah F. Thomas (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1982), 326.

has rightfully garnered the attention of historians because she played a pivotal role in its inception and development. However, for more than two decades, she has occupied center stage in every study of the Methodist deaconess movement beginning with Dougherty, who rarely moves the spotlight to anyone else. The longest chapter in her study (chapter two) chronicles Meyer's life, and the remaining chapters (chapters three through six) investigate the first thirty years of Methodist deaconess work through the lens of Meyer's school and its graduates. Rosemary Skinner Keller continues the trajectory by crediting Meyer as single-handedly instigating the Methodist deaconess movement. "Five years later, Lucy Rider Meyer founded the Chicago Training School for women missionaries and almost immediately originated the deaconess order, one of the most significant forms of home missionary work in the denomination's history."<sup>7</sup> With this statement, Keller essentially erases from history the contributions of other leaders and organizations, such as Jane Bancroft Robinson and the Women's Home Missionary Society (WHMS). Susan Hill Lindley at least nods her head in the direction of other deaconess leaders when she surmises that others besides Meyer had to be involved. "Credit for the success of the deaconess movement in American Methodism must surely also be given to other leaders and supporters, male and female, as well as to the deaconesses themselves."<sup>8</sup> However, she identifies by name no one other than Lucy Rider Meyer, with the exception of a one sentence reference to Jane Bancroft Robinson as Meyer's feuding combatant.<sup>9</sup>

This myopic perspective on Meyer has deep roots as it was diagnosed almost a century ago in a booklet entitled, *The Early History of Deaconess Work and Training Schools for Women in American Methodism, 1883-1885, With Supplement Answering Certain Objections*, published by the organization which Robinson represented, the WHMS. Leaders in the WHMS disagreed with the common assumption even then circulating in Methodist circles, that the deaconess movement was due *not* "to many individuals, but to one only, [Lucy Rider Meyer] and consequently that one individual is entitled to direct and shape the Deaconess Work of the Church." They exhorted the Methodist constituency to recognize that the "Deaconess Work of American Methodism owes its rise to *various causes and individuals*."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rosemary Skinner Keller, "Creating A Sphere For Women," *Women in New Worlds, Volume I*, eds. Hilah F. Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1981), 251. Keller's focus on Meyer also appears in her other articles on the Methodist deaconess movement: "The Deaconess: 'New Woman' of Late Nineteenth Century Methodism," *Explor* 5 (Spring 1979): 33-40; "Women and the Nature of Ministry in the United Methodist Tradition," *Methodist History* 22 (1984): 99-114; and Prelinger and Keller, "The Function of Female Bonding," 318-337.

<sup>8</sup> Lindley, "You Have Stept Out of Your Place," 132.

<sup>9</sup> Lindley, "You Have Stept Out of Your Place," 133.

<sup>10</sup> *The Early History of Deaconess Work and Training Schools for Women in American Methodism, 1883-1885, With Supplement Answering Certain Objections* (Detroit: Hines Press for the Woman's Home Missionary Society, Methodist Episcopal Church, c. 1912), 5, 6. Emphasis added.

This critique cannot be dismissed lightly, for both the WHMS and Jane Bancroft Robinson exercised a formidable role in the Methodist deaconess movement.

Jane Bancroft Robinson (1847-1932) was the daughter of a Methodist minister. Like Meyer and many women reformers in the Progressive Era, she was well-educated with a Ph.D. from Syracuse University. She was on the faculty of Northwestern University as Dean of the Woman's College and Professor of French for nine years. When Bryn Mawr College opened, she became its first Fellow of History. While on an extended study leave in Europe, she came in contact with Methodist deaconesses in Zurich, Switzerland. Noting the possibilities for such a movement in America, she detailed them in a letter to WHMS leaders. When she received a positive response in return, she embarked on a detailed study of deaconess homes and ministries in Europe and then catalogued her research in a book entitled, *Deaconesses In Europe and Their Lessons for America*.<sup>11</sup> Christian Golder, an early historian of deaconess work in America, had nothing but praise for the book. "Several editions of the book have been published, and it has been the means of enlightening the Church on the important subject of which it treats." He also mentioned that Robinson was called "the Evangelist of the Deaconess Work in the Methodist Church in the United States."<sup>12</sup>

After her return to America in 1888, the WHMS appointed her as General Secretary of their newly formed Deaconess Bureau. In this position, she traveled from city to city giving speeches, opening deaconess homes, and raising funds, devoting twenty years in all to deaconess work. Even after she married at the age of forty-four, she labored tirelessly to spread the deaconess movement throughout Methodism. Golder catalogued her accomplishments on behalf of the Methodist deaconess movement in these words:

The Homes at Philadelphia, Baltimore, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington, Brooklyn, and Denver owe their existence to her efforts, and under her direction the work of the Deaconess Bureau has increased to such an extent that to-day no less than forty-two institutions are connected with the Woman's Home Missionary Society. The aggregate value of the property amounts to over half a million dollars. There are 375 deaconesses, including probationers, in these Homes.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, Robinson and Meyer, two highly accomplished women reformers and deaconess leaders, engaged in a legendary and long-lasting feud. It was likened by one of their contemporaries to the "'Thirty years' War' which, like its historical prototype of the Middle Ages, ended without victory and little glory to either side, and for a time threatened to wreck

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<sup>11</sup> Jane Bancroft Robinson, *Deaconesses in Europe and Their Lessons for America* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1889).

<sup>12</sup> Christian Golder, *History of the Deaconess Movement in the Christian Church* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1908), 327.

<sup>13</sup> Golder, *History of the Deaconess Movement*, 326-327.

the cause for which it was waged.”<sup>14</sup> The disagreement erupted over the question of where, or to which Methodist organization, deaconess work belonged. Meyer interpreted the decision of the 1888 General Conference of the MEC, which sanctioned the office of deaconess, as placing the work under the authority of the general church. Her organizational model was known as “the Church Plan.” Dougherty suggests that Meyer preferred this model because “she believed the deaconess movement ‘immensely larger’ than any society.”<sup>15</sup> Robinson countered that deaconess work belonged to a woman’s organization, specifically the WHMS, which she believed initiated the movement. Perhaps she preferred this decentralized organizational plan, as Dougherty conjectures, because it replicated the “European model of deaconess work” in which the principal of each institution supervised her own deaconesses. A second possibility which Dougherty mentions but does not pursue, is that Robinson advocated the WHMS as the organization to administer deaconess work because it was “an independent woman’s society” which was “financially and administratively autonomous of the church.”<sup>16</sup> It is this second possibility that I want to develop further in light of Estelle Freedman’s concept of “female institution building.” From Freedman’s perspective, Robinson’s strategy of housing deaconess work under the authority of a woman’s organization can be interpreted not as diminishing women’s sphere of activity, but rather as investing it with power and increased opportunities.

Estelle Freedman argues that women reformer’s political and social power during the Progressive Era, particularly among middle-class women such as Meyer and Robinson, began with, was sustained by, and ultimately triumphed in large measure through the separatist strategy of “female institution building.”<sup>17</sup> Women reformers utilized this strategy to develop organizations separate from men in order to exert their power and influence in the public sphere. The benefit to women was that the strategy “helped mobilize women and gained political leverage in the larger society” while at the same time, maintained “the positive attraction of the female world of close, personal relationships and domestic institutional structures.”<sup>18</sup> Kathryn Kish Sklar makes the same case in her article on the Hull House settlement. “Strengthened by the support of women’s separate institutions, women reformers were able to develop their capacity for political leadership . . . .”<sup>19</sup> Other studies of women reformers in the Progressive Era, such as

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<sup>14</sup> Isabelle Horton, *High Adventure: Life of Lucy Rider Meyer* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1928), 190.

<sup>15</sup> Dougherty, “The Methodist Deaconess,” 57.

<sup>16</sup> Dougherty, “The Methodist Deaconess,” 57.

<sup>17</sup> Estelle Freedman, “Separatism As Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930,” *Feminist Studies* 5 (1979): 513. See also Lebsack, “Women and American Politics,” 56-57.

<sup>18</sup> Freedman, “Separatism As Strategy,” 513, 517.

<sup>19</sup> Kathryn Kish Sklar, “Hull House in the 1890s: A Community of Women Reformers,” *Signs* 10 (1985), 659.

Florence Kelley,<sup>20</sup> Julia Lathrop,<sup>21</sup> and Miriam Van Waters,<sup>22</sup> demonstrate that many effectively utilized the strategy of "female institution building." They exploited the power base available to them, from voluntary organizations to their care of children. For instance, Robyn Muncy establishes the connection between "female institution building" and political reform in Julia Lathrop's child welfare policy in the opening years of the twentieth century. "Lathrop used the national network of female voluntary organizations which she knew through her work in the settlements . . . . The chief [Lathrop] self-consciously wooed these voluntary groups . . . . Already a member of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, Lathrop joined many more women's groups after becoming head of the Children's Bureau."<sup>23</sup>

The same was true for women reformers in religious organizations. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham applies Freedman's thesis to her study of the women's movement in the Black Baptist Church, as does Rosemary Skinner Keller in her study of women's organizations in the MEC. Higginbotham contends that, by taking advantage of their separate sphere, black women gained leadership opportunities, a sense of sisterhood, and influence over the denomination: "The success of the overall movement depended, in no small measure, upon what Estelle Freedman calls the 'separatist strategy of female institution building.' Moreover, the existence of a female community and its mobilization into a separate organizational base commanded greater authority and respect for women."<sup>24</sup> Keller draws similar conclusions concerning the strategic importance of women's organizations in the MEC, though she curiously omits any reference in her article to Robinson who, in fact, utilized this separatist strategy. Instead she focuses on Meyer, who rejected this strategy.<sup>25</sup>

As we have seen, Keller's preference for Meyer is not unique. Historians of the deaconess movement are sympathetic to Meyer and interpret her strategy of seeking power and opportunities in the men's sphere as more liberative for women, despite the fact that Robinson's strategy resonated with other

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<sup>20</sup> See Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830-1900* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1995), 315; and her article, "Two Political Cultures in the Progressive Era: The National Consumers' League and the American Association for Labor Legislation," in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, eds. Linda Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 1995), 36-62.

<sup>21</sup> Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> Estelle Freedman, "Separatism Revisited: Women's Institutions, Social Reform, and the Career of Miriam Van Waters" in *U.S. History as Women's History*, 170-188.

<sup>23</sup> Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform*, 58. Maureen Flanagan draws similar conclusions about the strategy utilized in this same time period by the Woman's City Club of Chicago as compared to the men's City Club of Chicago. See Maureen Flanagan, "Gender and Urban Political Reform: The City Club and the Woman's City Club of Chicago in the Progressive Era," *The American Historical Review* 95 (1990): 1032-1050.

<sup>24</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1993), 79-80.

<sup>25</sup> Keller, "Creating A Sphere For Women," 246-260.

women reformers in the Progressive Era. Whereas Keller and others attest to the validity of “female institution building” for some women’s groups, they dismiss its application to the deaconess movement.<sup>26</sup> In doing so, they continue to overlook Robinson’s contributions to the Methodist deaconess movement. Due to this persistent trend, the complexities of a movement, replete with vying personalities and strategies, are erased. In contrast, a more accurate reconstruction of the Methodist deaconess movement will integrate Jane Bancroft Robinson’s legacy alongside Lucy Rider Meyer’s, as two deaconess leaders who endeavored in their respective ways to expand women’s roles in a patriarchal church.

### **Deaconess Labors: Social Service and Evangelism**

The second conclusion that emerges from Dougherty’s study which must be re-evaluated is that deaconesses labored principally in social service. Her emphasis on social service fits her stated agenda, which is to gain recognition for deaconesses as early social workers. She critiques historians of social work who have failed to see the pivotal role of religious groups, like the deaconess movement, in the development of the profession. “In separating the history of Christian social service from the evolution of social work as a profession, scholars have exaggerated the differences and obscured the similarities between religious and secular reformers in the Progressive period.”<sup>27</sup> Dougherty is able to develop this connection only by minimizing the religious sensibilities of deaconesses. “Yet, the more committed the movement became to the necessity for social change and the more involved deaconesses became in bringing about that change the more indistinguishable deaconesses became from secular social workers.”<sup>28</sup>

Despite her concentration on social service, Dougherty’s study includes data which confirm that evangelism was also a common deaconess labor. In her statistics on the career profiles of 509 deaconesses who graduated from Meyer’s training school, the number of deaconess evangelists (88) nearly equaled the number of deaconess nurses (87).<sup>29</sup> The highest number in any

<sup>26</sup> One historian has even blamed Robinson’s supposedly unsatisfactory strategy on her socioeconomic status. “Beside Bancroft Robinson’s more elite vision, Rider Meyer’s was inclusive and inspirational to women of various classes” (Carolyn Henninger Oehler, “Femininity and Religious Anxiety: Gender Trouble in the United Methodist Church,” Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1997, 70). This reiterates Dougherty’s earlier conclusions; see Dougherty, “The Methodist Deaconess,” 58.

<sup>27</sup> Dougherty, “The Methodist Deaconess,” 121.

<sup>28</sup> Dougherty, “The Methodist Deaconess,” 123-124. Following the lead of Dougherty’s study, Sarah Sloan Kreutziger’s dissertation for a degree in social work reiterates these same conclusions. “All women of early professional social work, however, owed a debt to their deaconess sisters . . . for helping to make ‘perfecting society’ a legitimate concern and subsequent career path for women of the late nineteenth century,” (Sarah Sloan Kreutziger, “Going On To Perfection: The Contributions of the Wesleyan Theological Doctrine of Entire Sanctification to the Value Base of American Professional Social Work through the Lives and Activities of Nineteenth-Century Evangelical Women Reformers,” DSW dissertation, Tulane University, 1991, 236).

<sup>29</sup> Dougherty, “The Methodist Deaconess,” 102.

category of deaconess work were deaconess visitors (381).<sup>30</sup> This last statistic is pertinent for measuring the extent of evangelistic work because the deaconess visitor often evangelized, or shared the gospel with those whom she visited. Meyer herself explained that the deaconess visitor was often also an evangelist, who rejoiced "in little children rescued, souls saved, and the 'sweetness and light' of the gospel penetrating homes and hearts till now in the darkness and shadow of death."<sup>31</sup> Given this profile of a deaconess visitor, we should include, even provisionally, the 381 deaconess visitors along with the 88 deaconess evangelists as deaconesses who were engaged in evangelism.

In her interpretation of the data, Dougherty admits that deaconesses often attended to the spiritual as well as the physical needs of a person, so that in fact both evangelism and social service were requisite deaconess labors. It was the attention to spiritual needs, often through evangelism, that separated the deaconess movement from the social settlement movement, two movements that, in her opinion, were otherwise quite similar.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, despite her statistics and at least the tacit acknowledgment of evangelism as a deaconess labor, she still concludes that deaconesses were primarily providers of social service, an interpretation that diminishes evangelism and exaggerates social service. More puzzling, however, is the tenor of a more recent essay on the Methodist deaconess movement in which she lists a wide range of deaconess labors without any mention of evangelism. "The first generation of Methodist deaconesses served as pastor's assistants, nurses, traveler's aids, social workers, and educators, roles deemed gender appropriate by church and state."<sup>33</sup> The complete exclusion of evangelism from this list is a noteworthy example of the inaccurate reduction of the deaconess movement's multi-faceted activities.

Once again, more recent historians follow her lead. In an introductory article to a volume of collected deaconess writings, Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford lists the following as deaconess labors: teachers, nurses, caregivers for the poor and children, and "social service professionals" who canvassed neighborhoods "to identify and detail bad living conditions in an area and to project what was needed to correct them."<sup>34</sup> And once again, evangelism is missing from the list. Further, in her description of the "practical training"

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<sup>30</sup> Dougherty, "The Methodist Deaconess," 102.

<sup>31</sup> Lucy Rider Meyer, *Deaconesses, Biblical, Early Church, European, American, With the Story of The Chicago Training School, For City, Home and Foreign Missions, and The Chicago Deaconess Home*, 2nd. ed. (Chicago: The Message Publishing Company, 1889), 71.

<sup>32</sup> She concludes, "Convinced that the whole person, body, mind, and spirit had to be considered in any philosophy of social work, deaconesses were pre-disposed to lament the purely secular social settlement's insistence on the elimination of religion" (Dougherty, "The Methodist Deaconess," 121).

<sup>33</sup> Mary Agnes Dougherty, *My Calling To Fulfill: Deaconesses in the United Methodist Tradition* (New York: Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1997), x.

<sup>34</sup> Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford, ed., *The American Deaconess Movement in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Garland, 1987), 10.

that Meyer's school offered, Gifford omits the fact that evangelism was an option in the curriculum and mentions only "nursing, religious education and home economics."<sup>35</sup> Jean Miller Schmidt, in her history of women in Methodism, reiterates Dougherty's conclusion that social service was the principal deaconess labor: "Trained for and consecrated to the order, they became experts in the field of Christian social service."<sup>36</sup> She does briefly acknowledge that there were two types of deaconesses—"nurse deaconesses and missionary deaconesses (also referred to as visitors or evangelists)," although she proceeds to discuss only nurse deaconesses, paying no further attention to missionary deaconesses who labored in evangelism.<sup>37</sup>

When evangelism is repeatedly excluded from lists and descriptions of deaconess labors, historians misrepresent not only the deaconess movement, but also Lucy Rider Meyer, herself, who maintained an essential commitment to evangelism both personally and educationally.<sup>38</sup> Her commitment to evangelism was expressed, first of all, in her training school curriculum. According to Meyer, "the two original ideas in America" for deaconess work were "the *religious visitation* of the neglected in great cities and nursing the sick poor in their own homes."<sup>39</sup> In order to facilitate evangelism as a deaconess labor, Meyer's training school curriculum provided evangelistic training from its inception. During weekday mornings, all deaconesses were required to study a range of topics, including the Bible, church discipline, and church history. In the afternoons, students pursued courses that corresponded with their intended field of work. Each field of work had its own department. For instance, the Department of Instruction for Evangelism, offered

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<sup>35</sup> Gifford, *The American Deaconess Movement*, 5. Dana Robert repeats the same omission in her description of the training school's curriculum. "Although Bible study was at the heart of the curriculum, increasingly the Chicago Training School provided social work training. The catalogue for 1902-1903 showed that in addition to well-developed departments of Bible, Missions, Medicine, and Nursing, courses were offered in psychology, ethics, sociology, and educational methods. A pamphlet from the same period described how students served internships under pastors and relief agencies, visiting criminal courts and tenement houses, studying prostitution, alcoholism, and public health issues" (Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* [Macon, Georgia: Mercer University, 1997], 156). Later in the same chapter, she rightly amends the previous statement by mentioning that Meyer's curriculum *did* offer training in evangelism: "One of the problems of designating a missionary *an evangelist*, that of lack of experience, was solved once the Chicago Training School was founded and required field work of its students" (Robert, *American Women in Mission*, 169, *emph. add.*).

<sup>36</sup> See Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: A History of Women in American Methodism, 1760-1939* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999), 207.

<sup>37</sup> Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient*, 202-203.

<sup>38</sup> For a recent dissertation which demonstrates that Meyer was committed to evangelism, see Lacey C. Warner, "Methodist Episcopal and Wesleyan Methodist Deaconesses in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: A Paradigm for Evangelism," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Bristol, 2000. Warner argues that Lucy Rider Meyer, as the representative of American Methodist deaconess work, and Thomas Bowman Stephenson, as the representative of British Methodist deaconess work, had inclinations toward a wholistic approach for deaconess labors that included both evangelism and social action.

<sup>39</sup> Lucy Rider Meyer, "The Mother in the Church," *Methodist Review* 83 (1901): 730, *emph. add.*

several courses: Individual Evangelism, World Wide Evangelism, and The Psychology of Evangelism.<sup>40</sup> Deaconesses who were training to become visitor/evangelists took these courses because Meyer considered education in evangelistic work to be a premium: "It is not a light matter to undertake in any degree to be the spiritual guide and help of an immortal soul; and those who are to make this their constant work should be as well prepared as possible, by qualities both natural and acquired."<sup>41</sup>

Her training school curriculum demonstrated what Meyer held privately about evangelism for she maintained her own personal belief in the importance of evangelism. In an article entitled, "Deaconesses and the Need," she expressed in passionate prose her regard for evangelism.

Would you have everybody interested in the evangelistic work? Jesus would. A work for which God the Father spared not his own Son may well claim *the intensest energies of every one of us*, until it is done. But what my art, my literary pursuits, my society? May I not live for them? No, no, no! In a world full of souls with eternal life or death just before them—souls every one of whom has cost the heart's blood of a God to redeem—no one has a right to live for art, or for literature, or for science, or society, or wealth . . . All these things God intends as means and means alone—not an end—not to live for. We may use them just as long as they . . . can be used directly in furthering God's work . . . To amass money that one may simply have it—O foolish one. "This night shall thy soul be required of thee." It is to lie down, after all, in an empty coffin.<sup>42</sup>

Another deaconess leader also believed that evangelism required "the intensest energies of every one of us, until it is done." Iva Durham Vennard (1871-1945) became a Methodist at the age of twelve when she was converted in a revival meeting. Five years later, she claimed the experience of sanctification. Although she never left the Methodist church, she immersed herself in the holiness movement.<sup>43</sup> Vennard attended Wellesley College for a year and was poised to continue her education at Swarthmore College when, at a camp meeting, her educational plans were altered by a call to evangelistic work. Opportunities immediately came her way to participate in revival meetings, first as a singer, then as a preacher. When she was in her early twenties, she attended a lecture on deaconess work by Lucy

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<sup>40</sup> This list of courses comes from an appendix in a book on the early years of the Chicago Training School. See Isabelle Horton, *The Builders: A Story of Faith and Works* (Chicago: The Deaconess Advocate, 1910), 205.

<sup>41</sup> Meyer, *Deaconesses, Biblical, Early Church, European, American*, 68-69.

<sup>42</sup> Lucy Rider Meyer, "Deaconesses and the Need," *The Message* 5 (1890): 9, *emph. add.*

<sup>43</sup> The holiness movement coalesced in America in the mid-nineteenth century around John Wesley's notion of sanctification, or Christian perfection. Holiness adherents "preached the necessity for a second crisis of evangelical faith in the life of every Christian. This 'second blessing,' subsequent to the crisis of evangelical conversion, as understood in the revivalistic tradition, involved the Christian's utter consecration of himself or herself to God through Jesus Christ in the faith that God would free him or her from the inner disposition to willful sin and fill the believers with divine love" (Melvin Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Studies in Evangelicalism, No. 1 [Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1996], 3-4). The holiness movement was fostered early on by Methodists, although as the movement matured, an increasing number of separate holiness denominations were founded.

Rider Meyer. Evidently Vennard heard something in Meyer's words that resonated with her because she soon enrolled in the Deaconess Home in Buffalo, New York. She was assigned to be a deaconess evangelist under the auspices of the Deaconess Bureau of the WHMS, the organization of which Jane Bancroft Robinson was General Secretary. In this capacity, Vennard held evangelistic meetings in churches throughout the state of New York. After several successful years as a deaconess evangelist, Robinson appointed Vennard to the position of Deaconess-at-large, which required her to travel around the country representing the work of the Deaconess Bureau. This institutional promotion work sidelined her evangelistic ministry, but when she protested, Robinson's reply, according to Vennard's biographer, was that "evangelism was not the method of the WHMS."<sup>44</sup> Robinson also declined to pursue Vennard's idea for an evangelistic department to train deaconesses in evangelism through a course of study. When they could not reconcile their opinions on evangelism, Vennard resigned her position with the Deaconess Bureau.

A cryptic editorial note buried at the end of Robinson's annual report for the year 1899-1900 encapsulates the conflict between Vennard and Robinson. After a column of statistics on Vennard's work for the Deaconess Bureau, including the number of miles traveled, addresses given, and funds raised, this note was appended by Jane Bancroft Robinson and her sister, Henrietta Bancroft, who was also active in the WHMS Deaconess Bureau. "Miss Durham's service and influence are not to be measured by material standards, as her work as Deaconess-at-Large has aimed at spiritual rather than material results. She has, however, procured substantial money aid for the Society, as future events will disclose."<sup>45</sup> One observation about the note is that its curious wording evinces a distinction between the material and spiritual realms, though the preference is clearly for the material. The material realm filled every one of Robinson's annual reports with an overwhelming display of financial, personnel, property, and institutional statistics.

Another observation is that Vennard's contribution to the Deaconess Bureau had to be judged by a standard other than the usual one of material statistics. In other words, her accomplishments in the spiritual realm had to be justified by a final reference to materials results, the "substantial money aid for the Society" which she raised. The very addition of an editorial note to interpret Vennard's statistics suggests how maladroitly evangelism suited Robinson's conception of deaconess labors. In fact, Robinson did not consider evangelism to be a deaconess labor at all; in this regard she differed from both Meyer and Vennard. In the penultimate chapter of her book, *Deaconesses In Europe and Their Lessons For America*, she outlined dea-

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<sup>44</sup> Mary Ella Bowie, *Alabaster and Spikenard: The Life of Iva Durham Vennard, D.D., Founder of Chicago Evangelistic Institute* (Chicago: Chicago Evangelistic Institute, 1947), 90.

<sup>45</sup> Jane Bancroft Robinson and Henrietta A. Bancroft, "Bureau for Deaconess Work," *Nineteenth Annual Report of the General Board of Managers of the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, For the Year 1899-1900* (Cincinnati, OH: Western Methodist Book Concern, 1900), 134.

coness work as encompassing three areas: nursing, teaching, and assisting a pastor. None of these areas was remotely related to evangelism, not even that of a pastor's assistant who would need skills in nursing, education, and perhaps even in financial planning—but not in evangelism. As adamant as Robinson was that evangelism was *not* a deaconess labor, Vennard believed with equal ferocity that evangelism was *the* priority of deaconess work.

Vennard left Robinson's employ and in 1902, founded Epworth Evangelistic Institute, a deaconess training school in St. Louis. Her school was characterized, as its name suggested, by its intent to train deaconesses in evangelism. Epworth was designed by Vennard "to give the impulse of direct soul-winning to every department of Christian service."<sup>46</sup> "Real, genuine, soul saving work," stated Vennard, "is the fundamental mission of all deaconess work, and no deaconess measures up to her privilege in service or fulfills her responsibility toward God who does not aim persistently at the definite regeneration of her people."<sup>47</sup> However, the school's name did not encapsulate all that she believed and taught about deaconess labors, for even though evangelism was her priority, she and her school were thoroughly involved in social service. As with Meyer, Vennard crafted a training school curriculum that expressed her commitment to various deaconess labors. Along with evangelism, Epworth's curriculum required students to gain practical experience in social service. Such experience came readily, since Epworth was located in a notorious tenement district in St. Louis called Kerry Patch. This neighborhood was vividly described by Maria Woodworth-Etter, an evangelist who had held a revival for several weeks in Kerry Patch a decade before Epworth was founded.

The only place we could get room enough was "Kerry Patch," a place noted for the hoodlum element, where they gathered from all parts of the city. People have been shot down or robbed or stoned here, any hour of the day . . . . The Christians tried to persuade us not to pitch our tents in "Kerry Patch" . . . they said there had been several show tents put up where ours stood, and the rough element cut the ropes and tore their tents down . . . . Many of our best friends were afraid to let their wives and daughters come, and felt they were running a great risk in coming themselves, as the congregation was stoned coming and going. The first night the tent was crowded . . . . They would shoot off firecrackers, and when we sang, they sang the louder; when we prayed, they clapped their hands and cheered us. Several ministers tried to talk, but they were stoned down or their voices drowned out. It looked like surrender or death.<sup>48</sup>

The deaconess work sponsored by Epworth in Kerry Patch included a combination of evangelism and social service. Deaconesses visited in homes, jails, juvenile court, and the red light district. They ran a Travelers' Aid ministry to care for runaway children and unchaperoned girls. They

<sup>46</sup> *Minutes of the Thirty-Ninth Session of the St. Louis Annual Conference, Held in Clinton, MO, March 20<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup>, 1907* (Clinton, MO: Republican Printing Co., 1907), back page.

<sup>47</sup> Iva Durham Vennard, "'Help Those Women': XIV. The Evangelistic Department of Deaconess Work," *Inasmuch* 2 (1906): 8, Vennard College Archives, University Park, Iowa.

<sup>48</sup> Maria Beulah Woodworth, *The Life, Work, and Experience of Maria Beulah Woodworth* (St. Louis, MO: Commercial Printing, 1894), 342-343.

also provided nursing care in homes and city hospitals, pursued evangelistic work in city missions, and staffed the Epworth Emergency Home, which sheltered girls considered incorrigible by the Juvenile Court. In addition, some deaconesses lived in Epworth Settlement, a settlement house outreach offering programs for the community, such as a Sunday School, Kindergarten, Sewing School, Kitchengarten, Girls and Boys Club, a Library, and a Thrift Fund.

Like Meyer, Vennard envisioned deaconess labors to be a combination of evangelism and social service. Yet, even between Meyer and Vennard, there were differences concerning evangelism as a deaconess labor. Vennard believed that evangelism was paramount in everything a deaconess did. Rather than considering evangelism as one category of deaconess work, with nursing as another and so on, as Meyer did, Vennard stipulated that *all* deaconesses were to be evangelists no matter what their specific assignment. Deaconesses trained at Vennard's school would be taught to evangelize as they visited door to door, nursed the sick, taught sewing, or supervised children. Nevertheless, despite a difference in priorities, two deaconess leaders, Lucy Rider Meyer and Iva Durham Vennard, considered evangelism to be a significant deaconess labor.

Therefore, the implications of this discussion call once again for an expanded reconstruction of the deaconess movement that incorporates evangelism along with social service as labors in which deaconess engaged. Such an expansion recognizes the evangelistic programs of two deaconess training school founders as well as the many graduates of Epworth Evangelistic Institute and the Chicago Training School who engaged in evangelism. Evangelism, as Meyer declared, "may well claim the intensest energies of every one of us, until it is done."

### **A "Dangerous and Powerful" Woman**

The import of this study focusing on complexities and conflicts among the leaders and labors of the Methodist deaconess movement can be illustrated quintessentially by a brief story from the life of Iva Durham Vennard. Vennard may appear at first glance to be a seemingly innocuous, uninteresting deaconess leader compared to a proto-feminist like Lucy Rider Meyer; yet a group of Methodist leaders in St. Louis at the turn of the twentieth century were consumed with ousting this "dangerous and powerful woman" from her position as principal of Epworth Evangelistic Institute.<sup>49</sup> The story begins shortly after the founding of the school when these prominent clergymen and laymen began to raise multiple objections about the school as well as about Vennard. They criticized the appointment of women faculty to teach courses in theology and the Bible. They objected to women being trained in evangelism because women, in their opinion, were not suited for evangelism but rather for religious education. And they lodged the accusation that Vennard

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<sup>49</sup> Bowie, *Alabaster and Spikenard*, 136.

was "training women preachers under the guise of deaconess work."<sup>50</sup> For that reason, the Presiding Elder of the St. Louis Annual Conference of the MEC called Vennard a "dangerous and powerful woman."

Their accusations were not entirely unfounded. They had easy access to faculty rosters, book lists, deaconess activities, and to the many announcements about Epworth graduates who were leading revivals, preaching, and occupying pulpits. Such announcements filled the "Personals" column of Epworth's monthly newsletter. These men might have read about Miss Rebecca Bell who "visited Epworth a few days before going South for a three months' revival campaign. Her first engagement is with Rev. Wm. R. Chase's church in New Orleans, La."<sup>51</sup> Or, they might have informed themselves about deaconesses who became pastors, such as "Mrs. Cooper, a Deaconess who has been acting as Pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Harrisonville, Mo., by appointment of the Presiding Elder of that District, spent the week after Conference resting at Epworth."<sup>52</sup>

Opposition from these men rose to a crisis point in the fall of 1909 when Vennard returned from maternity leave—having given birth to her only child, William—to find sweeping changes at Epworth. Indeed, these men took advantage of her absence to stage a coup of sorts, for they revised the school charter, removed evangelism courses from the curriculum, and replaced Epworth's female faculty with clergymen who taught Bible and theology. Their rationale for these changes, according to Vennard's biographer, was that these women, like Vennard and her deaconesses, had overstepped women's sphere and moved into male arenas where they did not belong. "Methodist preachers do not want deaconesses who study theology. We can attend to that ourselves. We want women as helpers who will work with the children, care for the sick, and visit the poor. If our deaconesses are trained in theology they will become critical of the preachers, and that will be the end of the deaconess movement."<sup>53</sup> After Vennard resigned as principal of Epworth Evangelistic Institute, the minutes of the St. Louis Annual Conference provided an ironic epitaph to her departure: "Epworth Deaconess Institute is getting a firmer grip on the situation in St. Louis."<sup>54</sup>

It was not Vennard's vision for forging political inroads for deaconesses in the MEC hierarchy or championing publicly the ordination of women (though she did among her students) that made her such a threat. She was neither theologically nor socially progressive. In that respect, it is no wonder that she has fallen through the historiographical cracks of contemporary studies in American religious history in general or even the deaconess movement more specifically. Rather, what her opponents, both male and female, found

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<sup>50</sup> Bowie, *Alabaster and Spikenard*, 124.

<sup>51</sup> "Personals," *Inasmuch*, 1 (1905), 8, Vennard College Archives, University Park, Iowa.

<sup>52</sup> "Personals," *Inasmuch*, 8.

<sup>53</sup> Bowie, *Alabaster and Spikenard*, 145.

<sup>54</sup> *Minutes of the Forty-Third Session of the St. Louis Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Held in Mountain Grove, MO, March 22 to 26, 1911* (Warrensburg, MO: Perry E. Pierce, 1911), 307.

so disturbing was her vision of deaconesses as evangelists and preachers. For Jane Bancroft Robinson, she was an anomaly. For the Methodist clergymen and laymen in St. Louis, she was a “dangerous and powerful woman.” For historians of religion in American culture, she represents a tragic loss of memory when any movement, particularly one that was vibrantly active in every major metropolis in America throughout the Progressive Era, is reduced simply to one leader, one labor.