THE METHODIST DEACONESS
A Case of Religious Feminism

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In 1888, Methodist churchwomen approached the meeting of General Conference in a mood of high expectation. Heading the agenda of “important” business before the twentieth delegated General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in May of 1888 was the “agitating question” of eligibility for female delegates. As the proceedings opened on May 1, the presiding Bishop told the audience, “For the first time in our history several elect ladies appear, regularly certified from Electoral Conferences, as lay delegates to this body.” For the occasion, an unusually large audience of churchwomen packed the galleries of New York City’s Metropolitan Opera House to witness what they hoped would be a feminist victory. On the convention floor, twenty-three women, five regular and eighteen reserves, sat expectantly waiting to hear their fate. Across the country, too, Methodist women waited for good news from the Conference. The wait was suspenseful but brief.

Until the troublesome question of delegate status was settled, General Conference could not get on with the agenda so it lost no time in creating a special committee to consider the matter. It took the special committee only a few hours to reach an eleven to six decision which judged the women ineligible. According to the committee, the church Discipline specifically granted the privilege of delegate status to laymen. General Conference agreed that women, because of their gender, did not qualify as laymen and were therefore ineligible to sit as delegates.

Summarily, the twenty-three would-be women delegates were dismissed from the Conference floor and sent home where the majority of their brethren believed they properly belonged. To their supporters in the

3Charles W. Ferguson, Organizing to Beat the Devil (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971), p. 335. The five women delegates were Frances Willard, Illinois; Angie Newman, Nebraska; Mary C. Nind, Minnesota; Amanda Rippey, Kansas and Lizzie D. Van Kirk, Pittsburgh.
5Ferguson, Organizing to Beat the Devil, p. 336. He points out that the Conference chivalrously voted to pay the women for their travel expenses.
galleries, to sympathetic men in the denomination, and to Methodist churchwomen across the country the message seemed clear — 1888 was not the year for a feminist victory in Methodism.

If female enfranchisement had been the only feminist issue confronting General Conference in 1888, churchwomen would have been justified in feeling discouraged. However, only one week after General Conference sent the women delegates packing, it recognized the right of its female members to hold church office. This decision issued from the Committee on Missions which had been strongly influenced in its thinking by a prominent Bishop. On the committee’s recommendation, the Methodist Episcopal Church officially sanctioned the activities of a small group of churchwomen who, for a year, had been engaging in Christian social work in the city of Chicago. The women were calling themselves deaconesses.

With almost the same breath, then, the General Conference had denied all churchwomen their political rights while making it possible for some churchwomen to occupy ecclesiastic office. Understandably churchwomen were perplexed by what appeared to be a contradiction in the church’s treatment of them. Deaconesses, of course, were heartened by the ruling but some religious feminists, particularly the political faction, saw recognition of the female diaconate as an act of appeasement. One rate advocate of enfranchisement complained, “The women delegates asked for a crumb of the bread of life and were given the stony consolation of Deaconesses!”

Lacking documentary evidence, I will remain noncommittal on the issue of political motives behind these twin decisions. When confronting the choice between enfranchising all churchwomen and consecrating a few, the male hierarchy doubtless saw political wisdom in the latter. Some 62% of Methodist church members were female, a reality which bred caution in an already cautious hierarchy. By contrast, the deaconess movement counted only a few members in 1888. The office required of its adherents total commitment to a religious way of life, a requirement that churchmen may have taken as assurance that the movement would remain small and controllable.

Quite likely General Conference’s action on the woman question in 1888 was more conditioned response than calculated reaction. Churchmen who resisted and resented women’s push for political rights in conference felt equally adamant in their disapproval of the female diaconate. According to one movement leader, ministers saw “dark hints of hen-preachers and a general upheaving of ecclesiastical and time-honored custom” in the offering as a result of the decision to recognize and support the deaconess movement. The Methodist ministry did not welcome com-

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*Message, July, 1889, p. 6. She considered the female diaconate a “Romish substitute” for women’s rights.

petition from "Methodist nuns" anymore than churchmen in general welcomed the full political participation of their sisters in the administration of the church.

Whatever motives lay behind the decisions, the Methodist Episcopal Church wittingly or not took an unprecedented step in 1888 by including the female diaconate in its polity. Not since the Reformation had eliminated the religious life as a legitimate vocation had Protestant women considered it as an option to marriage or spinsterhood. By restoring the female diaconate to the church, nineteenth century Methodist women declared that they wanted to exercise that religious option. This situation raises two tantalizing questions. Why did Methodist churchwomen decide late in the nineteenth century that they wanted to form a religious sisterhood when they had been content for over a century with lay status? And, why did the Methodist hierarchy agree in 1888 to admit this female religious order to its ranks when it suspected deaconesses of having designs on the ministry? Male suspicions were fed by the movement's rhetoric. "Why," asked the leaders, "should there not be at least as many Methodist deaconesses in all our large cities as there are ministers? They are needed, terribly needed." Deaconesses were not to be dallied with, it appeared.

If the pastor needs a stenographer let him hire one. If the church needs some one to collect funds for the preacher's salary let stewards be appointed. A deaconess trained in soul-winning is too valuable to be used for such routine.9

Methodist women had to reach back through the centuries to recover the deaconess as a religious role model. In his letter to the Romans, 16:1-2, Paul refers with affection and respect to Phoebe, a deaconess whom he has sent to serve the temporal needs of the Christian community at Corinth. Phoebe appealed as a model to the imaginations of Methodist women in 1888 because they were seeking an official role in the administration of their church and Phoebe legitimized that effort. The ancient deaconess had been an officer in the church, and modern churchwomen coveted that office. The Methodist deaconess movement was a grasp at ecclesiastic power by women who wanted official as opposed to unofficial status in the church.

The Methodist Episcopal Church was susceptible to the arguments for a restored female diaconate in 1888 because like all Protestant denominations it was confronting a crisis. Historians have labeled Protestantism's response to Industrialism the "Social Gospel" and have attributed its rise to reform-minded clergymen like Walter Rauschenbusch.10 C. Howard Hopkins cites 1912 as the year of its "official

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8Editorial, *Deaconess Advocate*, July 1895, p. 4.
10Among these historians are C. Howard Hopkins, Sidney Mean, Robert Handy, and Henry May.
recognition" because in that year the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America adopted a "social creed" subscribed to by twelve denominations, each pledged to promote its sixteen point program for social justice.11

The existence of the Methodist deaconess movement in 1888 — a movement aimed at serving humanity's physical needs — indicates that the Social Gospel was formulated much earlier than scholars have claimed and that churchwomen played a central role in its evolution.

Lucy Rider Meyer revived the female diaconate in the summer of 1887 when she and seven other Methodist women canvassed Chicago's tenements seeking to help people in whatever way they could. Meyer used this experience to demonstrate that Methodism needed an order of religious women whose attention to the physical needs of the city's poor would bridge the gap between them and the church. In her opinion the urban poor, the newly arrived immigrants who were swelling into Chicago in the mid-1880's, were alienated from the established urban churches because Protestantism was not using the right methods in ministering to these people. She blamed the church's impotence on its lack of a truly "feminine element" in its polity. Meyer pointed to the Roman Catholic churches in the city and their reliance on a large force of religious women as an example of why they succeeded where Methodism failed. She maintained that until woman took her rightful place in Methodism's "household of faith," the denomination could not expect to devise the methods it needed to bridge the widening gap between itself and the urban poor. She recommended to Methodism a method she and her sister deaconesses used—"visiting"—as a first step in building a social program that would meet the Protestant crisis. Viewed from Meyer's perspective, the deaconess movement which she helped to revive is as much a barometer of the developing social Gospel as Walter Rauschenbusch's important work, Christianizing the Social Order.13

The female diaconate was relevant to Methodist women in 1888 because it offered them Scriptural authority to support their demand for church status and a revived diaconate received approval from the Methodist hierarchy because Protestantism was desperate for answers to the crisis it faced. In presenting the deaconess movement as an example of religious feminism, I do not presume to argue that every woman who became a deaconess was a religious feminist, nor do I want to minimize the glaring contradictions inherent in such a movement. Like other feminists of their day and our own, deaconesses struggled against their in-


12Lucy Rider Meyer, "The Mother in the Church," The Message and Deaconess Advocate, October 1901, p. 5.

stincts to conform to social expectations and their impulse to break the rules. Deaconesses rationalized their demand for church status with tried and true nineteenth century feminist logic.

The real origin of the work in America, Lucy Rider Meyer claimed, was in the mother instinct of woman herself, and in that wider conception of woman's "family duties" that compels her to include in her loving care the great needy world-family as well as the blessed little domestic circle.14

Jane Addams and her coterie of secular social workers employed the same argument to justify their bid for an expanded public role. Carrie Chapman Catt and other late nineteenth century suffrage leaders built their "expedience" argument for the vote on much the same foundation. Should we ask religious feminists to sustain any more criticism for their ideological lapses?

The "world-mother" image made good rhetoric but it didn't truly fit the needs of the modern diaconate. Modern deaconesses wanted to serve the church as sisters not mothers. Protestantism did not provide the movement with an appropriate model but Catholicism did. As much as Lucy Rider Meyer wanted to discount any suggestions that they were creating a Protestant nunnery, the movement relied heavily on Catholic sisterhoods for an appropriate image and identity.

During the first summer that Meyer's deaconesses took up their work in Chicago, she decided that they should have a distinctive garb. Knowing full well that a religious habit would be severely criticised within Methodist circles, she tried to create a habit that would be "Protestant not Romish" in character.15 The result was a modest black dress and a black cottage bonnet with white ties. In the fall of 1887, when she appeared dressed in the deaconess garb at Sunday services, heads turned.

Despite her efforts to design a "Protestant" habit, the costume was criticised as a "throwback to monasticism, a remnant of the dark ages, and antithetical to Protestantism."16 Meyer and her small group of deaconesses ignored the critics and persisted in their ways. So far as deaconesses were concerned the costume made practical sense. Meyer believed that the costume would protect deaconesses from "violence and insult" in the streets where the work took them, "promote sisterly equality" and diminish class distinctions between deaconesses, save precious time otherwise wasted in such worldly vanities as choosing the day's outfit each morning, and economize on clothing costs.17 The costume

16J. S. Meyer, "Modern Miracles," unpublished manuscript, 1925. Meyer, Lucy Rider's husband, claims of Methodism's attitude toward the movement, some "denounced" it as unthinkable that we should "imitate the Roman Catholic Church . . . we received almost threatening letters, stating that we had sold out to the C. C., and hoped to establish a nunnery."
17Lucy Rider Meyer, Deaconesses, pp. 147-148.
may or not have served these functions. More importantly for the women who wore the deaconess costume, it provided them with an observable religious identity that said, "I am an officer of the church."

In spite of its protestations, the movement drew inspiration from the Catholic sisterhoods. In 1895, a deaconess newspaper reported with undisguised envy that there were "1,400 Catholic sisters in the Chicago diocese and 30 deaconesses." Deaconesses looked toward the day when they would be as "equally well known" on Chicago's streets as the Catholic sisters they loved to hate. Clearly the movement was impressed with the way Catholic sisters conducted themselves, particularly in their able administration of social service institutions. Having observed Catholic sisters running a hospital, one deaconess exclaimed, "If this can be done in the Roman Church with the class of women that church produces, and with the limitations and abuses under which they labor, can it not be a thousand times the more and better done in the free and healthy Methodist Episcopal Church?""19

In placing the deaconess movement under its control, the Methodist Episcopal Church established rules for its administration in the Discipline. These rules forbade deaconesses to make vows. Regardless of this prohibition, deaconesses adhered to a variety of unwritten rules that simulated vows. Besides adopting a religious costume, they lived communally, survived on an allowance not a salary, lived modestly, and remained single. So long as they stayed in the movement they were asked to obey the authority of their superior in the Deaconess Home. Women could leave the movement at will and if they could not conform to its customs they were expected to leave.

Communal living was an aspect of deaconess life that drew heavy criticism. If deaconesses were not nuns, critics asked, why did they insist on living together in homes that resembled convents? From the start, Lucy Rider Meyer expected this practice to be attacked. Recalling the first few months of the movement's existence, she claimed, "We did not call our workers Deaconess, but we did apply the name to the Home with bated breath, however."20 Just as deaconesses would not hedge on the issue of a religious costume, they remained firm on the issue of communal living.

We from the inner circle smile in happy self-congratulations, remarked a deaconess, and also with some pity for our critics, when we are told that these homes . . . are con-

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18The Message and Deaconess Advocate, July 1895, p. 8; The Message and Deaconess Advocate, "Editorial," September 1902, p. 8. "There are 70,000 nuns in the Roman Catholic Church in America. Does the devotion of the women of that Church, where entering a religious order must mean sometimes walking into a living tomb, exceed that of the women of our Church, in which to enter this religious class means a life of free and joyous service for Christ? Who does not know that the real work — the telling work of the Roman Catholic Church — has been done very largely by its women?"
19Deaconess Advocate, January 1897, p. 4, elicited in reaction to a tour of Catholic Hospitals run by nuns.
20Lucy Rider Meyer, Deaconesses, p. 113.
vents and contrary to the spirit of Protestantism. It seems to us that only prejudice, amounting almost to superstition, could object to anything so reasonable, so practical, and so comfortable.  

This spirited defense gives a clue as to why the female diaconate was revived in the 1880's. Women, who had once been dependent daughters in rural households, were moving off the farm and out of the small town into the urban world.

In 1888, the year that the Methodist Episcopal Church recognized the female diaconate, a pioneer of the movement asked, "Can not many a prairie town spare a woman for this work?" Her instincts were correct. Small-town, rural America had women to spare in the 1880's. The economic forces that were driving a younger generation of Americans off the farms into the cities affected women as well as men, although the experience of women in this massive rural-urban shift has received less attention from scholars. Deaconesses participated in this demographic phenomenon. Theirs was a uniquely religious response to historic change.

If deaconesses defended the communal life so strongly it was because the Deaconess Home provided a waystation for women in the transition from dependent daughter to semi-autonomous woman. There in the Home they found physical and material security as they adapted themselves to the urban world. "We might each climb to a lonely room in a lodging home, or sit at a boarding house table," explained one contented deaconess, "but we prefer to live together." The Home provided a supportive environment for women who preferred a single life to marriage. "It would seem that the time has come in the history of the world," said one deaconess, "when the unmarried woman no longer needs to excuse or defend her existence, when what she has done for the betterment of humanity should silence all adverse criticism." The women who joined the deaconess movement were motivated by the call to a religious vocation, yet the movement also served to facilitate their transition from dependent to independent women.

The Methodist deaconess movement peaked in 1910. It boasted six training schools, ninety institutions of Christian social service, and 1,069 women consecrated to the office. Just at the moment when it appeared so vital, however, churchwomen were finding fewer and fewer reasons to

21Isabelle Thoburn, *The Message*, December 1890, p. 10. Thoburn was a foreign missionary before she discovered the deaconess movement in 1888 and joined. Her brother, Bishop James Thoburn, was the man who argued the deaconess cause before the Committee on Missions at the General Conference in 1888.
22*Deaconess Advocate*, June, 1888, p. 1.
enter the diaconate. In 1888, when the first few deaconesses undertook their ministry, nursing, teaching, and social work were female avocations. By 1910, these occupations had been professionalized. The trend toward professionalization threatened to drain deaconess work of its religious quality thus rendering it secular. In nursing and social work, fields that the movement had concentrated on, professionalization bred secularization. Women trained as nurses and social workers were in demand by private and public agencies. As professionals, nurses and social workers no longer volunteered their services to society; they earned a salary and status for their expertise.

Professionalization and secularization placed the movement in a dilemma. Deaconesses reasoned that they really couldn’t charge fees for their services because to ask money in return for their help transformed their work from a religious vocation to a job. At the same time that the movement resisted professionalization, it promoted it. When Lucy Rider Meyer revived the diaconate, she insisted that women who entered it would undergo a two-year training program in social service methods. Training was critical to the making of a deaconess because it prepared her to hold church office and distinguished her from the army of churchwomen who volunteered their time as charity workers. The tension caused by this contradiction is revealed again and again in movement statements. Meyer told an audience of deaconesses in 1898,

> I commend unto you, Phoebe, as an office in the church — a set apart woman. I want to say a professional woman, but am afraid of the flavor of formalism, and perfunctoriness that gathers about that word. 26

Although professionalism threatened to “swallow up” the truly spiritual aspects of the deaconess personality, the movement could not help but foster professionalism in its women. 27 Unable to solve the dilemma, the movement taught its women to be all things to everyone. In describing the Deaconess personality, a major Methodist journal said in 1918:

> The Deaconess Girl ... has borrowed from the Sister her devotion, and from the social expert her modernity. . . . I have seen her act like Lady Bountiful without condescension, and like the janitor’s wife without embarrassment . . . I have discovered that she can be judge and advocate, housekeeper and hostess, investigator and friend, saint and woman, and count it all in the day’s work. 28

By 1918, the Methodist deaconess with her quaint costume and religious outlook became an oddity, an anachronism. Deaconesses abandoned the

27Bishop Vincent, Deaconess Advocate, June 1906, p. 3. Conservative churchmen routinely warned deaconesses that they were risking their femininity, i.e., their spirituality, if they allowed the movement to become professional. “What we need is less professionalism and more womanliness,” said Vincent to a class of graduating deaconess nurses. “A nurse’s womanliness is her pre-eminent beauty, her greatest power.”
costume in a useless effort to halt the dramatic decline in their numbers. Their efforts to revitalize the movement were doomed to fail, however. Following World War I, the Social Gospel came under attack from fundamentalists within the church. Growing conservatism led the hierarchy to re-evaluate its earlier commitment to the liberal ideas inherent in Social Gospel theory. As designers of those programs and as practitioners of the Social Gospel, deaconesses lost power and prestige. Nevertheless, during its heyday, 1888-1910, the Methodist Deaconess Movement inspired women with the possibilities of meaningful lives independent of a family role. In demanding the right to a religious vocation they facilitated their transition from nineteenth to twentieth century women.