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# Serving on Bended Knee, Serving on Tiptoe: The History and Future of the Diaconal Movement in the United States

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In 1903, American German Methodist pastor Christian Golder set out to document the historical development of the “promising and rapidly growing” worldwide deaconess movement. He gave “special mention” to the work of Wilhelm Loehe in Neuendettelsau, Germany, praising him not just for his institution-building but also his broad understanding of the biblical character of deaconess work. Loehe, according to Golder, “aimed at a wide range for Deaconess Work. It was to include both the most menial and the most exalted service of woman.”<sup>1</sup> I focus here on this breadth of deaconess service identified by Loehe and on how it manifested in changing ways, particularly among Lutheran deaconesses in the United States in the past 100 years.<sup>2</sup>

For deaconesses and their supporters, it all began with Phoebe. They read of her in the New Testament, in the sixteenth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans: “I commend unto you Phoebe, our sister, which is a [deaconess] of the Church which is at Cenchrea. That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succorer of many, and of myself also” (Rom 16:1-2; KJV). In the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, debates raged over women’s voting rights (in and out of the church), women’s preaching, and women’s work. Christians on both sides searched their Bibles and found scriptures to support their views. But the founders of the deaconess movement found the words of Romans 16:1 beautifully clear; this verse was their proof-text that deaconesses were biblical and thus of unquestionable authenticity. The simplicity of that one verse, however, belies a more complex history of interpretation.

English-speaking Protestants reading the King James Bible would have read the words, “Phoebe, our sister, which is a servant of the Church which is at Cenchrea.” Likewise, the German text

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of the Luther Bible translated Phoebe’s role as “in the service of” the church at Cenchrea.<sup>3</sup> The word “deaconess” appeared nowhere in the keystone passage establishing the office of deaconess! Why then were deaconess advocates so confident in the office’s biblical pedigree? During the 1870s, while Americans were endeavoring to garner support for a United States deaconess movement, a group of biblical scholars was laboring on the first major revision of the King James Bible.<sup>4</sup> The Revised Version of 1881 brought little apparent change to these verses of Paul, adding only a textual note to the word “servant” that read, “Or, deaconess.” Methodist deaconess founder Lucy Rider Meyer lamented that “the revisers of the New Testament” had “done Phoebe the half justice of calling her what Paul called her, ‘Deaconess,’ in the margin.” Meyer huffed, “Paul

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3. “Ich befehle euch aber unsere Schwester Phöbe, welche ist im Dienste der Gemeinde zu Kenchreä, daß ihr sie aufnehmet in dem HERRN, wie sich’s ziemt den Heiligen, und tut ihr Beistand in allem Geschäfte, darin sie euer bedarf; denn sie hat auch vielen Beistand getan, auch mir selbst” (Luther Bibel 1545).

4. Peter J. Thuesen, *In Discordance with the Scriptures: American Protestant Battles over Translating the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 45.

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1. Christian Golder, *History of the Deaconess Movement in the Christian Church* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye, 1903), 91-94.

2. This paper draws on my published work *Sanctified Sisters: A History of Protestant Deaconesses* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

seems to have been less afraid that poor Phoebe would become puffed up if called by any other name than servant.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, the power of that novel little footnote is not to be underestimated. The Revised Version represented the best of contemporary biblical scholarship, championed by Christians of conservative and liberal persuasions. So, even though it appeared only in a marginal note, the entry of this word “deaconess” into the printed Bible must have carried great weight. When deaconesses quoted Romans 16 in their promotional literature, they were apt to substitute without comment the word “deaconess” for “servant.”<sup>6</sup> It was no coincidence that the deaconess movement in the United States sprang to life in the same decade as the Revised Version of the New Testament.

Although United States deaconess advocates insistently pointed to the biblical warrant for the office, they could not help glancing over their shoulders at Europe for contemporary examples of the diaconate in practice, primarily in Germany and England. As industrializing countries where women were agitating for an increased public role, both countries were ripe for the movement. Between the Protestant Reformation and the nineteenth century, women were largely absent from charitable work in Germany. The country’s Lutheran heritage had eschewed celibacy, instead stressing woman’s role within the family as educator of her children and supporter of her husband’s vocation. The primacy of the preached Word, over against the performance of good works, privileged the male clerical position.<sup>7</sup> In the 1830s, religious awakening swept through Protestant Germany. A development of this revival was the Lutheran Inner Mission, which coupled missionary zeal for personal redemption with an attempt to heal the wounds of industrialization on German society. According to the Lutheran principle of the universal priesthood of believers, the human capital for the new Inner Mission was to come from the “the living and active members of the Church.”<sup>8</sup> In 1833 Heinrich Wichern opened the Rauhe Haus in Germany for the training of deacons, or Brothers, to exercise this diaconal function. Pastor Theodore Fliedner took note of Wichern’s deacons and could not help but notice the earnest work of the Catholic Sisters of Charity in his predominantly Catholic village of Kaiserswerth in the Rhineland.<sup>9</sup>

5. Lucy Rider Meyer, *Deaconesses, Biblical, Early Church, European, American* (Chicago: The Message, 1889), 13.

6. For two examples, see the epigraph in Lucy Rider Meyer, *Deaconesses, Biblical, Early Church, European, American* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1892) and Jubilee Committee, *Deaconess Program: A Great Door and Effectual* (1929), box 2–14, folder 26, Nippert Collection of German Methodism, Cincinnati Historical Society Library, Cincinnati Museum Center.

7. Catherine Prelinger, *Charity, Challenge, and Change: Religious Dimensions of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Women’s Movement in Germany* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 2–3.

8. J. F. Ohl, *The Inner Mission: A Handbook for Christian Workers* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication House), 12.

9. Frederick Sheely Weiser, *Love’s Response: A Story of Lutheran Deaconesses in America* (Philadelphia: Board of Publication, United Lutheran Church in America, 1962), 40; Meyer, *Deaconesses* (1889), 32. Sioban Nelson points out that mention of the Catholic impetus is conspicuously absent in most histories of the Kaiserswerth deaconesses. Nelson, *Say Little, Do Much: Nurses, Nuns, and Hospitals in the*

By the 1930s, ... more than two thousand women had been trained and consecrated as deaconesses and were hard at work in myriad avenues of nursing, teaching, and social service.

On a visit to Holland he observed Mennonites, whose deaconesses performed works of charity in their local congregations, and in England, Fliedner studied Quaker Elizabeth Fry’s work among the poor and imprisoned. Inspired by these disparate examples, Fliedner resolved to introduce the idea of deaconess work to Germany, and in 1836, with his wife, Frederike Münster Fliedner, opened the first German deaconess institution. The Kaiserswerth endeavor inspired the proliferation of deaconess motherhouses in Germany, including the one in Neuendettelsau founded by Wilhelm Loehe.<sup>10</sup>

In the wake of the Civil War, very few Americans had ever heard of deaconesses, whose numbers were already quickly multiplying in Germany and England. By the 1880s, stories—and proponents—of the deaconess movement had traveled to the United States, and Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, and Episcopal Americans were attempting to plant the movement in American soil. They began in haste to consecrate women as deaconesses and to fund and erect the brick-and-mortar institutions in which deaconesses would train, work, and live. By the turn of the century, deaconess advocates were breathless with excitement and optimism about the movement’s potential to transform the nation by harnessing the power of women to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and spread the good news of the gospel. In 1900, famed evangelist Dwight L. Moody remarked, “Deaconesses? Oh, I see them everywhere I go, and I believe in them heartily.”<sup>11</sup> By the 1930s, deaconess institutions peppered the landscape of the United States, concentrated in the cities of the Midwest and Northeast but stretching out even to the Pacific Northwest and deep South. More than two thousand women had been trained and consecrated as deaconesses and were hard at work in myriad avenues of nursing, teaching, and social service. This was the height of the American deaconess movement, at least as far as numbers go.

However, just as the first generation of deaconesses succeeded in braiding together care-giving work and a consecrated lifestyle, younger women emerged intent on untangling these two strands. The uniform garb that provided early deaconesses with recogni-

*Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 134.

10. Herman L. Fritschel, *A Story of One Hundred Years of Deaconess Service* (Milwaukee: Lutheran Deaconess Motherhouse, 1949), 14–15; Golder, *History of the Deaconess Movement*, 604.

11. Dwight L. Moody, “Introduction,” in Lucy Rider Meyer, *Deaconess Stories* (Chicago: Hope Publishing Company, 1900).

tion and respect began to seem old-fashioned and restrictive. The system of support comprised by the motherhouse and allowance had enabled deaconesses to support themselves and each other while keeping them at arm's length from the wage economy. But the system felt paternalistic and degrading to younger deaconesses. And as the years went on, women began to question why they could not marry and continue in their chosen work of *diakonia*.

By the middle of the twentieth century, it was clear that Protestant women were saying “yes” to deaconess work but “no” to distinctive aspects of the deaconess life. The story of the deaconesses almost ended, as institutions closed one after another and the number of new consecrations dropped precipitously.

Yet, a new generation of deaconesses emerged who have again taken up the threads and begun weaving together a new consecrated deaconess identity, one that reinterprets both diaconal work and the diaconal life in entirely twenty-first-century ways. Women, and men, have been redefining the diaconal vocation in expansive new ways. Today the deaconess office continues to offer women an alternative way of being Christian in the world, and numbers are growing once again.

We turn now to examples from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Lutheran Deaconess Association, and The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod that show how different Lutherans have expanded the diaconal identity over the past hundred years.

### The Diaconal Movement in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Deaconesses in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) have spent the past century re-envisioning their office. Beginning in the 1920s, new Lutheran deaconesses asked for more concessions to popular culture, particularly in issues of personal liberty. In 1929, Philadelphia *Oberin* (Superior) Julie Mergner instructed Sister Edith Baden to stop waving her hair, adding that a little self-denial would not harm her. Marshaling her biblical training in her defense, Sister Edith invoked the Jewish woman who “washed our Master’s feet with her tears and wiped them with her . . . abundance of wavy hair” and challenged, “Is the Philadelphia motherhouse style of parting the hair in the middle, drawing it tight back off the head and putting it up with hair pins in accordance with the biblical hairdressing of the women in the days of St. Paul?”<sup>12</sup> Sister Edith questioned how such a mutable cultural issue could be essential to her deaconess vocation. We do not know whether Sister Edith continued waving her hair, but we do know that she remained a deaconess until her death in 1977, living her vocation in various Lutheran outstations, rather than under the watchful gaze of the sister superior in the Philadelphia motherhouse.

By the 1940s, Sister Edith’s more expansive views on the deaconess lifestyle had won the day. The home-based sociality of

12. Sister Edith Baden to Julie Mergner, March 1, 1929, Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

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late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century deaconess groups gave way to a mixed gender public commercial culture, such as in the winter of 1946, when deaconess sisters attended a performance of the Philadelphia Ice Follies.<sup>13</sup> In 1948, Lutherans revamped their garb, this time to a “modern blue garb” with “simple lines.”<sup>14</sup> Sister Mildred Winter, who was recruiting for the diaconate during this era, urged her sisters to adopt modernized language to appeal to the younger women. She described the diaconate as a type of sorority, replacing the word “motherhouse”—too authoritarian and institutional—with “deaconess fellowship center.” “*Allowance*,” Sister Mildred reported, “is another term which grates upon the ears of any young adult who likes to think of herself as self-sustaining.” She suggested changing it to “dividend,” “as any business firm calls the sharing of profits.”<sup>15</sup>

The generational communication failure that Sister Mildred hoped to solve with a simple vocabulary change went far deeper. The deaconesses would have to rethink not only the emblems of their office but its very nature if they were to appeal to a new generation. In 1952, the United Lutheran Church instituted a parallel track for deaconesses who chose to wear “civilian clothes” instead of the garb and chose to be paid a salary instead of receiving the allowance. Such deaconesses were instructed to take out private health insurance in lieu of relying on the motherhouse for care in old age or illness.<sup>16</sup> We can almost see the older deaconesses shudder. Private health insurance! In the nineteenth century, joining the deaconess community *was* health insurance. With one policy change, the diaconate was recast as a job, instead of a way of life. Yet the new policy mandated that these women were to be addressed by the title of “sister”; these were still deaconesses, just modern ones. In 1978, the traditional “cooperative plan” was

13. Sister Florence Guither, “Ice Follies Enjoyed by Deaconess Group,” *The Deaconess Messenger*, January/February 1946.

14. “New Garb Gains General Approval,” *The Deaconess Messenger*, Spring 1948.

15. Sister Mildred Winter, “Recruitment for the Diaconate,” in *The Twenty-Eighth Lutheran Deaconess Conference in America* (Omaha: Lutheran Deaconess Conference in America, 1948), 21-25.

16. “Policies Concerning the Non-Garbed Salaried Deaconess,” ed. Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (United Lutheran Church in America, [1952]).

phased out, and all new deaconesses received a salary.<sup>17</sup> Lutherans were slow to warm up to the idea of permitting deaconesses to continue to serve after marriage. Although disagreement persisted, they adopted this carefully worded statement in 1969: “Deaconesses who marry may be privileged to continue to serve in their office as deaconesses as long as in the opinion of the Sisters’ Council they are available for full time service.” It was not until 1982 that the policy was amended to allow for part-time service.<sup>18</sup>

One of the more sweeping changes to the Deaconess Community of the ELCA has been the transformation from the motherhouse model to a covenanted community of geographically dispersed women. In 1953 the Philadelphia motherhouse had moved into the mansion known as Skylands on a lush piece of land in the suburbs of Gladwyne, donated to the order by friend and supporter Mary Ethel Pew. In 1963, deaconesses from the Baltimore motherhouse joined their sisters in Gladwyne, and in 1966, the Omaha sisters did the same.<sup>19</sup> For the next thirty years, deaconesses in what would become the ELCA were consolidated in this one motherhouse. A monumental change came in 1998 when the deaconesses decided to sell the multi-million-dollar property. Facing a 1.5-million-dollar renovation just to bring the estate up to code, directing sister Nora Frost explained, “For us, the whole impetus for the move came from our desire to be able to free up monies for mission and ministry in the church. We have been saddened for a very long time that funds needed for ministry were being used to maintain buildings.”<sup>20</sup> The Deaconess Community of the ELCA now has an office in Chicago at the denominational headquarters, but, outside of retirement homes, its individual deaconesses no longer live in community.

Despite their geographical dispersion, a redefined commitment to an intentional community remains a defining feature of the ELCA deaconess office.<sup>21</sup> Deaconesses do meet in conference once a year. Yet, just as important seems to be the virtual community, linked together through the intertwined practices of prayer and digital media. Today, the tradition of intercessory prayer is manifest in the frequent uses of the #prayingisters hashtag on the Deaconess Community’s online Facebook page. This digital

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presence provides daily scripture quotations, community news, photos, and, of course, prayer concerns. In a new online ritual, “likes” serve as digital amens to the prayers posted on Facebook.

ELCA deaconesses now also live in the tension of holding a gender-neutral office in a gender-specific community. Although still members of the Deaconess Community, in 2017 ELCA deaconesses officially became “deacons” when the church merged three rosters of lay workers (deaconess, associate in ministry, and diaconal minister) into a unified roster with the gender-neutral title of “deacon.” When I asked Sister Louise Williams in 2019 how she was dealing with the name change, she responded with a sense of equanimity: “I’ve been a deaconess for fifty-one years now. I’m not likely to cease to be known as a deaconess, but I also embrace the title deacon because I think it’s more ecumenically recognized. It’s also a little more representative of a more contemporary and forward-looking sense of ministry. But I’m happy with either title.”<sup>22</sup> As of 2022, there were sixty-two sisters in the Deaconess Community of the ELCA, with fifteen candidates preparing for consecration. The story of deaconesses in the ELCA will evolve with them.

### The Diaconal Movement in The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod

The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) was a latecomer to the American deaconess movement. The most theologically and socially conservative of the many United States Lutheran bodies, the Missouri Synod remained suspicious of Romanism lurking in the deaconess office throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. It was not until 1919 that five ministers and three laymen independently organized the Lutheran Deaconess Association (LDA), which although founded by and for LCMS members has never been formally affiliated with the Missouri Synod, or any other Lutheran synod. From its inception, the LCMS emphasized more explicitly than other denominations the circumscription of woman’s role. The Rev. F. W. Herzberger, a city missionary in St. Louis, became a vocal early advocate for training LCMS deaconesses.<sup>23</sup> In the first issue of *The Lutheran Deaconess* he insisted, “The office, as we all know, is limited in its

17. Frederick Sheely Weiser, *To Serve the Lord and His People, 1884–1984: Celebrating the Heritage of a Century of Lutheran Deaconesses in America* (Gladwyne, Pa.: Deaconess Community of the Lutheran Church in America, 1984), 22.

18. Weiser, *To Serve*, 27.

19. Marc Schogol, “Gladwyne Deaconess Estate Is Saved from Development,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 11, 2002.

20. Carolyn Lewis, “ELCA Deaconess Community Moving to Chicago,” News Release, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, May 28, 1998; [https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/3152?\\_ga=2.138957363.1613660134.1706829921-1118956307.1706829920](https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/3152?_ga=2.138957363.1613660134.1706829921-1118956307.1706829920), accessed February 2, 2024.

21. The updated 2023 Candidacy Manual states that Ministers of Word and Service shall “be grounded in a gathered community for ongoing diaconal formation.” Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Candidacy Manual,” 2023, 27; [https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Candidacy\\_Manual\\_2023.pdf?\\_ga=2.146554932.1808728150.1707236244-1829151280.1707236244](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Candidacy_Manual_2023.pdf?_ga=2.146554932.1808728150.1707236244-1829151280.1707236244), accessed February 7, 2024.

22. E. Louise Williams, interview by author, September 6, 2018.

23. Cheryl Naumann, *In the Footsteps of Phoebe: A Complete History of the Deaconess Movement in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 17.

scope by the physical nature of woman and certain limitations of Holy Writ. Within these limitations our Society purposes to carry on its deaconess work.<sup>24</sup> Writers from other denominations were more oblique about the scriptural limitations of women's role in the church, but for the LCMS, this was, and remains, a key part of their confessional identity.

The LCMS stopped recognizing LDA deaconesses in 1979 and began its own synodical deaconess training program. Rostered LCMS deaconesses now can choose to join the new Concordia Deaconess Conference (CDC).<sup>25</sup> As in other contemporary diaconates, LCMS deaconesses live independently, receive a salary, and are permitted to marry. Yet, in contrast to other deaconess groups that have abandoned the wearing of the garb in favor of, at most, a special lapel pin, the new Concordia Deaconess Conference reinstated the full deaconess uniform: a navy-blue suit or dress with jacket. The cross pin is worn on the lapel, and the left sleeve is marked by a cross insignia, newly designed to be "sufficiently feminine as well as rich in symbolism."<sup>26</sup>

Deaconesses of the LCMS have participated in the crafting of an office that upholds their theological distinctiveness. The LCMS affirms that because man and woman were created individually, "the identities and functions of each are not interchangeable; they must remain distinct."<sup>27</sup> All the Pauline proscriptions against females speaking in church or holding authority over men remain binding today and the church does not ordain women to the clergy. The LCMS's most recent teaching on gender, the 2009 "Creator's Tapestry," confirms that "a human being is not an independent soul or mind that just happens to be encased in a male or female body"; rather, a person's entire identity is gendered.<sup>28</sup> The confessional position of the LCMS is co-constitutive of the gendered hierarchy in Missouri Synod polity, families, and society, where men are the leaders and women play supporting roles.

In 2005, the CDC created and adopted a code of ethics that clearly articulates the deaconess's role supporting the ordained ministry. She promises to "point others to Word and Sacrament provided by the Office of the Public Ministry" and to refrain from performing the distinctive works of the clergy.<sup>29</sup> LCMS deaconesses argue that women are divinely created with special gifts for diaconal service. Missouri Synod deaconess Kristin Wassilak affirmed, "We do believe the Lord has created women with by and

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large some unique skills and perspective on life," elsewhere defining deaconess work as "a uniquely feminine care, perceiving need and responding with gentle helpfulness, expressing the compassion of Christ in a tender nurturing way."<sup>30</sup> Because Missouri Synod clergy are all male, deaconesses argue that they play a crucial role in the pastoral care of women. In 2017, LCMS deaconess Grace Rao described her role as a parish deaconess as especially helpful for the women of the congregation in situations of domestic abuse, depression, and difficult family situations. Rao's explanations evoke nineteenth-century understandings that deaconesses were especially effective in the spiritual care of women.<sup>31</sup> As men and women are seen as complementary, so deaconesses understand themselves as complementary to the male pastorate. As these examples demonstrate, the twenty-first-century female diaconate of the LCMS retains strong connections to the movement's founding era. As of 2022 there were 324 deaconesses on the roster of the LCMS. The LCMS deaconesses, on their website, continue to affirm Loehe's poetic ode to "The True Deaconess Spirit": "What is my want? I want to serve . . . I go my way in peace casting all my care upon Him."<sup>32</sup>

### The Lutheran Diaconal Association

Headquartered at Indiana's Valparaiso University, the Lutheran Diaconal Association (formerly the Lutheran Deaconess Association) remains open to Lutherans from the different confessional branches and focuses on forming deaconesses and deacons to exercise their ministry within or beyond the institutional church. The LDA builds on its history of constructing diaconal ministry as an identity rather than a vocation. In 1977 Norma Cook Everist became the first LDA deaconess ordained to the Word and Sacra-

24. F. W. Herzberger, "The Lord Hath Need of Them" *The Lutheran Deaconess* 1, no. 1 (January 1924): 1-2.

25. Naumann, *In the Footsteps*, 436.

26. Naumann, 408, 448-49.

27. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission of Theology and Church Relations, "Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice" (1985), 22, 24, 27; see "Resources," Deaconess Ministry web page, <https://www.lcms.org/how-we-serve/mercy/deaconess-ministry>, accessed February 2, 2024.

28. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission of Theology and Church Relations, "The Creator's Tapestry: Scriptural Perspectives on Man-Woman Relationships in Marriage and the Church" (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod 2010), 10, 12.

29. Concordia Deaconess Conference, "Code of Ethics," adopted May 18, 2005.

30. Kristin Wassilak, interview by Andy Bates, *Faith and Family*, "KFUO Audio: Deaconess Story and Formation," KFUO, December 7, 2016; The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, "In Service to Our Lord: Deaconess Ministry Overview—English," video, posted on YouTube, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DJcxqXumYE>, accessed February 2, 2024.

31. Grace Rao, interview by author, February 16, 2017.

32. See "Motto," LCMS Deaconess Ministry web page.

ment ministry, and in 1979 she became a professor at Wartburg Theological Seminary. She says, “I think Wilhelm Loehe would be pleased that the first tenured woman professor in the American Lutheran Church and at Wartburg was a deaconess.”<sup>33</sup> In an interesting twist, two ordained Lutheran ministers have recently completed diaconal training and added “deaconess” to their titles. Co-director of education and formation Valerie Webdell explained in 2016 that both women discovered “that their identity is as a deaconess, as one who serves, and that ‘pastor’ plays a role in that identity.”<sup>34</sup> In other times and expressions of the Lutheran diaconate, the ordained ministry and the diaconate have been seen as discrete vocations, mutually exclusive.<sup>35</sup> But the LDA’s emphasis on forming diaconal identity makes the combination of pastor and deaconess possible. The LDA encourages the deacon or deaconess to be a diaconal presence in whatever job one has been called to by God, whether that be pastor or “burrito chaplain” (as one deaconess who works at Chipotle Mexican Grill and ministers to her coworkers and customers has named herself). In 2014 the Lutheran Deaconess Association began training men alongside women for the diaconate and in 2018 changed its name to the Lutheran Diaconal Association. As of 2022, the LDA has 792 deaconesses and 7 deacons, making it the largest contemporary diaconal body.

One way in which the LDA is redefining the diaconate as gender neutral is by broadening the biblical imagery of diaconal service. The paramount biblical image for the deaconess founders was Phoebe. But in the LDA formation process, Phoebe steps aside to make room for five different images of diakonia: foot washing, table serving, storytelling, door keeping, and light bearing.<sup>36</sup> Former executive deaconess Louise Williams explained that she adapted these five images, each of which has its own biblical origin in the life of Jesus and the early church, over decades of training LDA deaconesses. The images represent a spectrum of service, moving from the most personal, embodied service of foot washing out to the public, prophetic leadership of bearing the light of hope. It spans serving on lowly bended knee to stretching up to serve on tiptoe.<sup>37</sup> This twenty-first century redefinition of diaconal service seems a direct expansion of Pastor Loehe’s nineteenth-century vision, wherein he advised that “A deaconess must know and be able to do that which is lowly and that which is great; she must not be ashamed of the lowliest service, and must not prejudice the highest work of woman; her hands and feet must be in the service of the higher, but also of the coarser and meaner forms of

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labor; her head must bathe in the sunlight of true devotion and the fellowship of her Master.”<sup>38</sup> Yet in emphasizing images other than Phoebe and expanding the vision beyond images of care of the body, the LDA contributes to the construction of a less gender-bound vision of the diaconate. Forming the “servant heart” at the center of diaconal identity is the essential mission of the Lutheran Diaconal Association.<sup>39</sup>

### Summary

In the twentieth century, Lutheran deaconesses shed certain aspects of the consecrated lifestyle, such as the allowance, almost effortlessly. Although it required more incremental steps, most deaconesses shrugged off the garb with few regrets. The possibility of combining marriage with the deaconess office proved a greater challenge to resolve, although it too has been settled. Deaconesses continue the process of working out the relationship of the office to constructions of gender. Most diaconates have had to address the question of what it means to be in a gender-specific ministry once all the other church offices have become gender neutral.

If the work of the twentieth century seemed to unravel the tapestry of diaconates woven by the nineteenth-century founders, perhaps the twenty-first century is the time of weaving the tapestry anew. Taken together, these groups of contemporary deaconesses illustrate different aspects of the reimagined vocation. Although all the groups have creatively reimagined community, the Deaconess Community of the ELCA is a remarkable example of how, in one generation, deaconesses have adapted from living together in a traditional motherhouse to living separately around the country, meeting periodically in person and regularly online and in prayer. The Lutheran Diaconal (formerly Deaconess) Association best articulates a new understanding of the diaconate as an identity that transcends job, synod, and even gender. The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod has also left behind the nineteenth-century commitments to singleness, communal living, and allowance but holds fast to the traditional understanding of the diaconate as the female expression of ministry complementary to the male pastorate. Though their numbers remain small, women in American churches have reclaimed the diaconate for the twenty-first century.

33. Norma Cook Everist, communication with author, February 6, 2024.

34. Valerie Webdell, interview by author, December 13, 2016.

35. As of 1984, the Lutheran Church in America did not permit deaconesses who became ordained as pastors to remain in the deaconess community. Weiser, *To Serve*, 27.

36. Webdell, interview.

37. Williams, interview. Williams explained that she adapted these images from Antonia Lynn, “Finding Images,” in *The Deacon’s Ministry*, ed. Christine Hall (Leominster, United Kingdom: Gracewing, 1992), 103–122.

38. Golder, *History of the Deaconess Movement*, 91–94.

39. Jennifer Clark Tinker, interview by author, March 7, 2018.

And the deaconess movement, or what today would better be called the diaconal movement, appears to be growing again. Chaplaincy scholar Wendy Cadge argues that in the United States today, a person is more likely to meet a religious professional in a secular setting than in a church.<sup>40</sup> Deaconesses are well positioned to respond to this phenomenon, attempting to meet people out in the world, people who may never darken the door of a church. Deaconesses draw on their history of ministry at the margins, and the flexibility of the diaconal vocation encourages a ministry of service in secular settings. Lutheran Valerie Webdell points to a deaconess who teaches math in a public school, where she cannot even talk about her faith but where “her presence and her being ... is very much diaconal.”<sup>41</sup> Drawing on a century and a half of presence in the United States, Lutheran deaconesses argue that they are poised to meet the needs of the world today.

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40. Wendy Cadge and Michael Skaggs, “Chaplaincy? Spiritual Care? Innovation: A Case Statement.” White paper. Brandeis University, September 1, 2018, 15; <http://chaplaincyinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Chaplaincy-Innovation-Lab-case-statement.pdf>, accessed February 2, 2024.

41. Webdell, interview.