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HISTORY OF DIACONAL MINISTRY

IN

THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

1925 - 1991



Produced by the Committee on Diaconal Ministry

Division of Ministry Personnel and Education

The United Church of Canada

1991

CHAPTER FIVE

1982-1989

The year 1982 would prove to be a turning point in the history of deaconesses, certified churchmen and commissioned ministers. The first major event for this group would be the February consultation that was being planned.

Cheryl Kirk, a Centre for Christian Studies graduate (1979) was among those on the steering committee. She had been chairing the Task Force on Commissioned Ministers/Diaconal Ministers and resourced the sessional committee at the 1980 General Council that dealt with that area. Part of the process in preparation for the consultation was the establishment of Conference groupings. These Conference groupings held regional meetings to discuss the concerns, such as the name, transfer and settlement, and sacraments. In this manner, people would have more time to talk over issues before the national meeting. Support was received from the executive of MP&E, and funding provided for the process.

She recalls that there had been much anger at the previous consultation as deaconesses had been largely left out of the process to date. The steering group spent time putting together lists of people whose names had been lost over the years, women who had been taken off roles when they married for example. They spent time wrestling with the question of whether deaconesses, commissioned ministers should even exist, whether there was a valid ministry for them. Cheryl says that the Task Force on Commissioned/Diaconal Ministry went through several stages, one was of self-understanding, recognizing the importance of hearing from other women in different eras, (younger folk not having much of an appreciation of the deaconesses that had come before, their struggles, the "feistiness" of carrying on without much recognition or support.) (1)

The 1982 Consultation

The 1982 Consultation took place February 16-19, 1982, at Cedar Glen in Bolton, Ontario. The consultation dealt with the issues of ordination/commissioning, support systems and education of the Church, sacraments, the theological base, description, and definition of the name, and education for commissioned/diaconal ministry, including basic training and Continuing Education. More than 60 people attended the consultation that Glenys Huws describes as a "watershed experience."

Barb Elliott picks up the story:

I do think that consultation was a highlight for many people. There was a high attendance, and we worked very hard at decision-making. We used the consensus model of decision-making and when we couldn't reach consensus, (and by that I mean consensus in the best sense, not that everyone had to agree, but that everyone agreed to go along with it.) We took care... we gave people time. We put them in small groups, once they had heard the ins and outs of it. And it took us a day to make five major decisions. I think it knit all of us together...(2)

Cheryl Kirk, who co-chaired the decision-making process with Barb Elliott feels that the gathering at Cedar Glen was held together by the need to make decisions about the future, as people were being pushed by reports that deaconesses, certified churchmen and commissioned ministers should be abolished. Cheryl says that

the process of modified consensus was the most creative process I had ever seen. The name almost didn't get done, but people who were not happy with the name decided to go along for the sake of the community, to show that the group could hold together and take a stand on their future. There was a lot of caring for each other in the group...(3)

An audio-visual resource prepared by Kay Heuer, entitled *Waiting as Fast as We Can*, was shown to the group. It proved to be an excellent resource on the history of the diaconal ministry in The United Church of Canada. The group managed to accomplish what had been impossible just two years earlier at the consultation in 1980. The recommendations were agreed upon, and taken to the 1982 Annual Meeting of the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education.

One of the recommendations would result in a study of the meaning of ordination. It read as follows:

Whereas the Task Force Report has clarified certain issues about Commissioned/Diaconal Ministry, and

Whereas the Commissioned/Diaconal Ministry have chosen a name that focused on their function rather than on the rite by which they are admitted to the order of ministry, and

Whereas the consultation discussion about the possibility of being ordained to the Diaconal Ministry raised many question about the meaning of ordination and the term "ordained ministry"

It was moved that the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education conduct a study to clarify our understanding and use of the term "ordination" consistent with 1980 General Council as soon as possible and report no later than 1985.(4)

Another recommendation taken to the Annual Meeting of the Division of MP&E was in regard to the decision that the name of diaconal minister "be used to refer to those members of the Order of Ministry who are commissioned to a diaconal ministry of education, service and pastoral care, and who have been previously known as Commissioned Ministers, Certified Churchmen and Deaconesses." (5) This issue of selecting a name was perhaps one of the thorniest, and the one that required the most process. Much of the debate centered around issues of relating to the laity, and how ministry was perceived. Some deaconesses were reluctant to give up their traditional lay positions, and felt that changing the name would remove them from the laity. Others were concerned that as professionals in ministry, the name must be changed in order to receive the recognition that study and call deserved. In the end, the decision referred to above was arrived at, and is just one example of the deaconesses' and commissioned ministers' commitment to each other and their calling. Other recommendations based on decisions made at the consultation on such matters as sacraments, the Manual, education and support were approved by the Division.(6)

The Impact of the 1982 Consultation

Two recommendations arising from the 1982 consultation went to the 29th General Council in Montreal the same year. The following were carried.

That the 29th General Council request the Manual Committee to integrate all sections of the Manual referring to Diaconal ministers under the category of order of ministry. Within the category of ministry, distinctions between Ordained and Diaconal ministers should be made only when necessary."

and

That, consistent with the spirit of the report's recommendations regarding the sacraments, there be created a new section in the appropriate place in the Manual to authorize Conference in this regard.(...) Further, that the proposed wording be as follows: That upon application by a Presbytery or its Executive, a licence to administer the sacraments for the duration of the pastoral relationship or appointment may be granted a Diaconal minister if:

(a) the Diaconal minister is part of a team where the administration of the sacraments is seen as part of the shared functions of the team.

(b) the Diaconal minister is the only order of ministry person on the charge.

(c) the Diaconal minister is involved in pastoral-care functions such as chaplaincy in hospitals or other institutions or visitation to shut-ins.

Further, that an additional item (d) be added:

(d) or the position description and the needs of the context in some other way are deemed to warrant it.(7)

This policy seemed to have been seen as a threat by some people and was challenged by Belleville Presbytery, the Bay of Quinte Conference in 1984, in the form of a memorial to General Council. The memorial, which was subsequently defeated, seemed to raise the concern that the granting of sacramental privileges to Diaconal ministers had:

(T)ended in practise to remove any actual differentiation or distinction between Ordained and Diaconal Ministry;

Therefore be it resolved that the Belleville Presbytery, through the Bay of Quinte Conference, petition the General Council that permission to a Diaconal Minister to administer the Sacraments be granted by Conference, at the request of a pastoral charge, through Presbytery, only in cases of extreme geographic isolation, when the Diaconal Minister is the only Order of Ministry person on, or available to the pastoral charge.(8)

It was also in 1982 that diaconal ministers came within the transfer and settlement guidelines of conferences and the national Church, bringing them into the system more completely.(9) Diaconal ministers were aware of the fact that their style of ministry was not always well known in the Church, and felt that they should be present on committees that dealt with settlement. This would ensure that pastoral charges were aware of the availability of diaconal ministers, and would be able to make more informed decisions about the type of minister they were seeking to serve their congregations. A petition from Saskatchewan Conference had asked that ... a minimum of one person in Diaconal ministry be on the Pastoral Relations and/or Settlement Committee of each Conference.(10)

This petition was defeated but an alternative was agreed upon: That the General Council establish a policy that a minimum of one person in Diaconal

ministry be on the Pastoral Relations and/or Settlement Committee of each Conference wherever possible.(11)

The Committee on Diaconal Ministry

The Committee on Diaconal Ministry began its work as a standing committee of the General Council Division of Ministry Personnel and Education in the fall of 1984. The existence of the Committee came into being through the efforts of a sub-committee of the Candidature Committee and its recommendations to the Division. At the same time the Women in Ministry Overview Group made similar recommendations with regard to establishing a Standing Committee for Women in Ministry. At the November 1983 meeting of the Executive of General Council permission was given for 2 half-time staff persons, one to relate to Women in Ministry and one to relate to the Committee on Diaconal Ministry. In February 1984, at the Annual Meeting of the Division of MP&E, a motion passed to have the Committee on Diaconal Ministry become a full Standing Committee of the Division. (12) The first chairperson of the committee was Carol Stevenson Seller who served for 4 years.

Glenys Huws, staff for MP&E recalls:

The impetus for a half-time staff person came from the Cedar Glen consultation. In some of the discussion there was a sense that the same staff could have been used for Women in Ministry and diaconal people. Then there was an initiative from the Women in Ministry Overview Group that the proposal for the half-time person not be allowed to go ahead, a full-time staff was needed. There was further discussion around the different needs of diaconal and ordained women, a move then to 2 half-time positions, recognizing differences among the needs of the groups.(13)

The earliest tasks of the committee were ones of making presbyteries and other groups more aware of diaconal ministry as part of the Church. One member remembers seeing a pamphlet from a presbytery in recent years that still referred to deaconesses and certified churchmen. This lack of knowledge about diaconal ministry convinced the committee that much more educational work was needed.

Lori Crocker, a member of the committee for several years, says that the committee had to work hard at articulating its identity. As a minority in the Church and in the Order of Ministry, diaconal ministers are often in the position of explaining their role and style, more so than ordained ministers, who are considered the norm.

The Committee on Diaconal Ministry has also worked on a series of projects that would raise the profile of diaconal ministry in the Church. These have included the production of resource kits, entitled "Diaconal Ministry: All About Diaconal Ministry in The United Church of Canada", and the slide-tape "Called to Serve". Part of its role is capturing and reclaiming the history of diaconal ministry within the Church, through oral history projects and publications such as this one.

Since 1984, the committee, with Virginia Coleman as staff person, has been involved with numerous consultations within the Division of MP &E in the area of educational programmes for diaconal ministers. One such project was entitled Educated Ministry: Diaconal Ministry which looked at the history of diaconal ministry, its Biblical roots, a discussion of the essential elements of both diaconal ministry and educational preparation, and proposal for expanding access to preparation to other parts of the country. The project was carried out in consultation with the Committee on Theological Education for Ministry.

The committee also evaluates educational proposals for diaconal ministry and continues to work with other sectors of the Church in order to ensure that diaconal ministry is seen as a part of the Church's history and reality.

The Diakonia of The United Church of Canada (DUCC): The Beginnings

The consultations of the early eighties led many diaconal ministers to understand that they needed a professional association that would speak and advocate on their behalf. Glenys Huws, a lay professional, comments on the need for the DUCC:

The original mandate of the Committee on Diaconal Ministry was for five years, there was not a sense that a long term commitment was important. Diakonia is needed to provide the ongoing support, lobbying and networking, and advocacy. History had shown that the Church would not "take care of everything for [diaconal ministers]".(14)

A national development committee was formed to pursue the organization of what would become the Diakonia of The United Church of Canada (DUCC). Members of that committee were Mary Ellen Nettle, Ann Marie Allen, Barbara Vavasour, Eric King, Betty Marlin, and Kathy Toivanen. In addition to the task of setting up the national organization, the development committee found itself being invited to consultations and asked to make position statements even before the actual association had been formed. In a letter to regional contact people, Betty Marlin wrote that

One of the things that keeps happening to us is that several groups seem to be: i) interested in diaconal ministry and ii) assuming we are the association. We are not unhappy about these actions for we believe it shows interest and some ownership by the Church. It does however leave your development committee in a slightly awkward position. We found ourselves i) being called in on consultations; ii) invited to consultations; iii) expected to write position papers or otherwise make statements about diaconal ministry. We see no creative alternative but to respond to these situations and to keep you informed about what we are doing.(15)

The statements that were produced as founding policy go far to explain the self-understanding of diaconal ministers. The statements dealt with diaconal ministry as a style, more than a function, and affirmed the process of collegiality. The association was set up to allow for a national forum for professionals to be able to publicize and advocate on behalf of their members, and to increase the Church's awareness of diaconal ministry. The association would also act on behalf of its membership in areas of concern to diaconal ministers, such as education and policy decisions.

As part of the process of establishing the national association, regional groups were asked to meet together so that they could be better represented at the founding meeting. The founding meeting was held at Five Oaks, Paris , Ontario June 15-17, 1984.

The following are excerpts of a statement from the national committee meeting in April 13-15, 1983;

Diaconal Ministry Association

1. Working Style of Diaconal Ministry
 - i. Takes seriously the ministry of all people
 - ii. offers variety and diversity to the Church
 - iii. has the primary function of empowering others
 - iv. sees service as our primary focus
 - v. works within and/or outside the Church structures

We are called with all of God's people to be:

agents of change
agents of support and caring
agents of reconciliation
agents of justice and mercy encouraging all to fullness and wholeness

This statement was used as a working document and was revised and affirmed as part of the policy statement in 1988.

The Association also laid out its philosophy on the educational model for diaconal ministry which would put emphasis on education as a lifelong process, and one that was best carried out in community. The educational process should take seriously the needs of the individual and the community with whom they interact.

Barb Elliott....

It's been a little difficult these last few years to work out from that how we pick up from that [1982] consultation. We then moved into the next stage to set up a task group that moved us into becoming a diakonia association and one of our problems is that that, plus the national Committee On Diaconal Ministry, plus a staff person for diaconal ministry all came into being in the same year. They had all been needed and it was great to have all of them happen but there has been therefore some unclarity as to how the roles get carried out in those groupings. But certainly there is now a lot more self-determination possible if diaconal ministers care to work at it and to take responsibility and to help shape policy and so on.(16)

In spite of the initial lack of clarity, time has proven that there is a need and a place for all the various efforts for diaconal ministers. To date four national meetings have taken place for Diakonia, and there is still a struggle to be clear in its role as an association. There is some tension between the role of the Committee on Diaconal Ministry and Diakonia, since having two organizations tends to diffuse energy. The dynamics of complementing each other's work are still to be worked out, but each national meeting of the Diakonia has affirmed the idea that both groups are necessary. The 1988 meeting of Diakonia gave diaconal ministers an opportunity to focus on the meaning of their ministry. It seems that one of the learnings was the articulation of the concept of diaconal ministry as a style, and that diaconal ministry was carried out by many people in many places. Those who are named diaconal ministers are people who have made a choice to engage in this kind of ministry in a professional capacity in the Church, but diaconal ministry is a much wider concept.

Changes to the Manual: Reflecting Diaconal Ministry

Much work had been done by Virginia Coleman and the Committee on Diaconal Ministry in regard to the Manual. At the 32nd General Council in 1988 changes were made to the Manual of The United Church of Canada.

The changes were in response to a remit that would write diaconal ministry into the Basis of Union. The first was

That the Basis of Union under the section on Doctrine be revised as follows:

2.17 Article XVII. Of the Ministry. We believe that Jesus Christ, as the Supreme Head of the Church, has appointed therein an *Ordained Ministry of [the] Word, [and] Sacrament[s], and Pastoral Care and a Diaconal Ministry of Education, Service and Pastoral Care* and calls men and women to [this ministry] *these ministries*; that the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, recognizes and chooses those whom He calls, and should thereupon duly ordain or commission them to the work of the ministry.(17)

The motions were carried. (Note: The deletions are enclosed in square brackets[]. Words to be inserted are italicized). Other changes were made to the Manual that would reflect the presence of diaconal ministers and their commissioning to the Order of Ministry.(18)

After many years of struggle for identity and recognition, diaconal ministers were now included in the official Church documents.

Alternative Preparation Opportunities

Over the years, there had been some agitation from people in other parts of the country to set up a preparation programme for diaconal ministers outside Toronto. In Alberta and Northwest Conference, women like Margaret Short and Marilyn Carroll, both of whom were active in the Church and had an interest in preparing for diaconal ministry, began lobbying for a western based programme. There proved to be a number of women and men who for family and other reasons were not able to leave their homes to engage in a course of study. Diaconal ministers Betty Marlin and Dorothy Mundle worked on the concept from the beginning, and a planning committee of diaconal ministers, staff from St. Stephen's College in Edmonton, and persons interested in participating in such a course was formed. After much negotiation and extensive consultation with the Centre for Christian Studies, a one-time western field-based education programme for diaconal and lay professional ministry was approved by the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education and opened at St. Stephen's College in 1989. For the first time since 1939, when the Manitoba College closed its preparation courses for deaconesses, women and men interested in preparing for diaconal or lay professional ministry had a chance to study outside Toronto.

The five year, field-based programme has three major components:

1. An integrated community learning component in which participants meet each year in order to determine their own needs and to plan programmes to meet those needs.
2. Fifteen to 20 hours of field education which includes 10 hours of supervised field work per week, some of which is academic and some of which grows out of the needs of the group.
3. An academic component that includes 18 academic courses, some of which are through regular semester sessions and five-day concentrated sessions.

The course includes the basic academic requirements, as well as extensive learning in the field, facilitated by supervisors. As of the course's commencement there were 30 people from four Conferences enrolled in the programme. A second entrance class into the programme was approved and began in the fall of 1991.

Epilogue

The future of diaconal ministry in the United Church is not clear. Many diaconal ministers feel that their style of ministry is still undervalued by the Church. Several, in response to questions, have stated that they see the budget cutbacks as dangerous for their work. With their salaries being at the same level as those of ministers ordained to Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care, there is a tendency among congregations to get, as one diaconal minister put it, "the real thing" for the same amount of money.

In spite of many years of struggle, the story of diaconal ministry is not familiar in the Church. Students who are offering themselves for ordered ministry frequently have no clear understanding of diaconal ministry, and often the committees they encounter along the way neither offer this clarity nor encourage the students to consider diaconal ministry

Many diaconal ministers see their role in the institutional Church as one of agents of change. They believe that the institutional Church must radically alter itself, or be transformed in order to be the Church in the future. They are also aware that change does not happen without pain, and that their ministry of service will become more of a challenge in the years ahead.

Eric King, a diaconal minister, expresses his vision for diaconal ministry in this way:

I see diaconal ministry constantly pushing the edges of the Church to be responsive to the needs of the world at present and what we can anticipate future needs might be....Diaconal ministers, because of our tradition of being mostly women, have a gift for nurturing community in the Church and in the broader community. This nurturing is not a docile attribute, but a courageous characteristic that challenges death, suffering, disrespect..(19)

The history of diaconal ministry in The United Church of Canada is one of struggle for respect, understanding and change. Underlying the movement have been women and men who are committed to a new understanding of service in the Church and in the world. The United Church has been privileged to have had such people of vision as part of its heritage.

NOTES

CHAPTER FIVE

1. Interview with Gail Campos , December 1989.
2. Response to Questionnaire, November 1989.
3. Interview with Gail Campos, December 1989.
4. The United Church of Canada *General Council Record of Proceedings* 1982, p 146.
5. *Ibid*, p 146.
6. *Ibid*, pp 142-8.
7. *Ibid*, p 75.
8. The United Church of Canada *General Council Record of Proceedings*, 1984, p 556.
9. The United Church of Canada, *General Council Record of Proceedings*, 1982, p 94.
10. *Ibid*, p 447.
11. *Ibid*, p 95.

12. Letter from the Committee on Diaconal Ministry, August 9, 1988, courtesy of Betty Marlin, personal files.
13. Interview with Gail Campos, December 1989.
14. Interview with Gail Campos, December 1989.
15. Letter to Regional Contact people from the Diaconal Association Steering Committee, courtesy Betty Marlin, personal files.
16. Response to Research Questionnaire, November 1989.
17. The United Church of Canada, *General Council Record of Proceedings 1988*, p 115.
18. *Ibid*, pp 115-160.
19. Response to questionnaire, November 1989.