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What Was Happening in
Nineteenth-Century Germany
That Ignited Diakonia?

by

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What Was Happening in Nineteenth-Century Germany that Ignited Diakonia?

by Dr. Susan Wilds McArver

This presentation was originally given at the Fall 2006 meeting of The Ecumenical Network of the Diaconate in the USA (TEND) in response to the question, "What was happening historically in Germany in the middle 1800's that inspired the diaconate to grow?" Some of the oral character of the original presentation has been maintained. Dr. McArver is a faculty member at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary.

The question of "origins" is always a fascinating one. We often take for granted that things have "always been this way," no matter what the subject under discussion. But movements do not arise in a vacuum; they are born into a context. In the case of the modern diaconate, a movement emerged due to two large factors coming together in Europe in the nineteenth century to give it birth, two factors that can be put under the oversimplified headings of "external" and "internal". A study of these two major areas as they emerged in nineteenth-century Germany invites one to consider in what ways, if any, similar forces are at work in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that have increased interest in *diakonia* today.

Background: Before the Nineteenth-Century

Before we can begin to look at nineteenth-century Germany, we must take a step backwards briefly to see where the diaconate was *before* the great changes of that time in order to set the stage for understanding both continuity and change. In doing so, one discovers rather quickly that the diaconate as an order has changed much over the life of the church, and not just during the nineteenth century. Since the days of the early church, it has often responded to the changes in the larger church and the society.

I am sure that this group is familiar with the orders of deacon and deaconess as they existed in the early church, but let me review briefly these roles in a general way.

By the second century, deacons had assumed four specific areas of responsibility in the life of the church: liturgical leadership, assistance to the bishop, service to the poor, and administrative oversight. In each of these four areas, the ministry of deacons was rich and varied, although the specific functions varied over time and place and ranged from the sublime to the mundane.

For example, in terms of *liturgical responsibilities*, many deacons assumed a role in the administration of the sacrament, although depending upon the congregation and location they served, they might be restricted to assisting in the breaking of the bread, or conversely, they might be in charge of administering the entire Eucharist alone. They made announcements during the service, gave instructions during the liturgy, read the gospel, led intercessions for the congregation, and perhaps most importantly, were charged to make sure that no one fell asleep during the service.

In terms of their second function, *assistance to the bishop*, they served in effect as a bishop's right hand assistant, carrying messages between distant churches, informing the bishops of the needs of the sick and poor, and often serving as the bishops' personal representative in church councils.

Third, deacons held certain *responsibilities for the poor* of the community. It was the deacon's responsibility, for example, to distribute any leftover food from the agape feast of the community to the impoverished. They coordinated the collection and distribution of alms, providing for those both within and without the Christian community.

And finally, deacons began to assume a wider role in *the general administrative oversight* of the Christian congregations. As Christianity moved outward from house churches to assume a more permanent presence, deacons often assumed responsibility for the everyday workings of the church, responsibilities that increased as the church's property increased.¹

All of these duties fell in various ways to male deacons. The situation for women proved somewhat different. Women who wished to commit themselves to service within the church were confined to service within a variety of orders specifically designated for women, and by the beginning of the third century, an order of "deaconess" with specific duties had emerged. While some of their functions paralleled those of the male deacons, the deaconess was specifically set apart to minister to women only. Early on in its life, the church found that male deacons could discharge certain duties quite well, but not others. For example, early church leaders found that decorum and the opinion of those outside the Christian community required that a bishop needed to appoint "a woman for the ministry of women. For there are houses whither thou canst not send a deacon to the women, on account of the heathen, but mayest send a deaconess."² For certain duties noted an early document, the "ministry of a woman deacon is especially needful and important," and after all, "our Lord and Savior also was ministered unto by women ministers, *Mary Magdalene, and Mary the daughter of James and mother of Jose, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee*, with other women beside."³ Bishops particularly required the services of deaconesses during the ceremony of Christian baptism. Since those presenting themselves for baptism were required to remove clothing and be washed and anointed in the nude with holy oil, "it is not fitting that women should be seen by men . . . let a woman deacon . . . anoint the women." Following baptism, the deaconess instructed the newly baptized on "how the seal of baptism ought to be (kept) unbroken in purity and holiness."⁴

I mention in some detail these four areas of the deacons' ministry – liturgical duties, assistance to the bishop, responsibilities for the poor and administrative oversight – and the corresponding duties of deaconesses, because over time, so much began to change. Beginning in the fourth century, as the church moved from its precarious marginal existence under persecution to become the official religion of the Roman Empire, transformation occurred in almost every facet of the church's life, including the diaconate. Increasingly, the church became more hierarchical and more structured, and as part of this effort, restrictions on the role of deacon began to appear. Eventually, many of the deacons' traditional duties fell to the priest instead. Of the four

areas of responsibility once held in the early church, deacons eventually retained responsibility only in the area of liturgy. But while deacons' liturgical duties, in fact, actually *increased* over time, their specific responsibilities for *sacramental* functions within those roles were vastly curtailed as priests and bishops appropriated these roles.

Eventually, the changes resulted in a diminished concept of the diaconate. Over time, the office of deacon lost its own integrity of function entirely. The diaconate became less a distinctive order of ministry than a transitional stepping stone to the priesthood. Men desiring ordination to the priesthood served as deacons only temporarily as part of a rite of passage on their way to a "higher" ministry. This evolution eventually initiated a gradual decline in the ministry of the diaconate.⁵

The office of deaconess also underwent similar change, and eventually, it also began to diminish. With the church now a legal entity, women were less likely than before to be given public roles and administrative responsibility. The Councils of Orange (441 CE) and Orleans II (c. 533 CE) ended what had apparently been common practice by ruling respectively: "In no way whatsoever should deaconesses be ordained . . ." and "No longer shall the blessing of women deaconesses be given because of the weakness of the sex."⁶

For both deacons and deaconesses, the various monastic orders gradually absorbed the responsibilities and roles of the diaconate, particularly the responsibility for dispensing charity to the poor. This reality brought great changes for both lay men and women, but particularly for women, as the gradual disappearance of the order of deaconesses removed an opportunity for women to serve within the Christian community. Ironically, however, at the same time cloistered communities were removing certain options for women, they also provided women with other newfound opportunities. In their own religious communities, for example, sisters found that they could take greater responsibility for their own affairs, both in matters of worship and administration, than had been possible before.⁷

By the end of the fourth century, then, the future pattern was established. Men served as deacons only temporarily as they passed on to the priesthood, and women who wished an official role within the church became nuns, not deaconesses. This pattern would continue with little substantive change through the Middle Ages until the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.

The Protestant Reformation

The Protestant Reformation created a fundamental turning point in the history of the diaconate – as it created a fundamental turning point in so many things.

When Martin Luther posted his 95 theses for debate in 1517, he did not intend to cause a decisive break within the Roman Catholic Church or to permanently split Christendom. Luther's intention was not to reform church structures, orders, or even morals. Instead, his efforts focused on theology: all of his reform flowed from his belief that sinners are justified before God by grace, not by works.

In the end, of course, Luther's teachings *did* revolutionize structures, orders, and morals in the church, as well as theology. No part of the established church remained untouched by the implications of the Protestant Reformation. For example, the Catholic emphasis on living a holy life of good works had attracted many during the Middle Ages to the cloistered life, as men and women attempted to serve God and become better Christians through extreme self-denial. Luther's emphasis on the priesthood of *all* believers, however, and on salvation through God's grace, not a person's works, subtly but implicitly undercut an important incentive for entering the monastic orders for many: why should one deny oneself of so much that was good in life, if, in the end, such denial did nothing to earn one salvation? Luther's understanding of "vocation" was one which emphasized that *all* of life, not just a cloistered life, could be lived in service to God. The monasteries and convents emptied, as many monks and nuns left to marry and live a life of service to God through a variety of everyday vocations, from parenting to shoemaking.

Unfortunately, as an unintended consequence of this disruption of monastic life, the organized charity system administered by the monasteries of Western Europe also suffered disruption. The monastics had long served essentially as the social service providers of the Middle Ages – who was to take on this role now in the new Protestant order?

Partially to address this need, Luther proposed that the diaconate once again become an office with its own integrity, one that concentrated on service to the poor and did not serve merely as a transitional phase on the way to the priesthood. Not only would such a re-establishment of the diaconate free pastors to concentrate on preaching the Word and administering the sacrament, argued Luther, it would also return the office to something closer to what Luther understood as its original intent: serving the poor, instead of merely reading the Gospel and the Epistle in the worship service. Luther believed "The diaconate is the ministry, not of reading the Gospel and the Epistle, as is the present practice, but of distributing the church's aid to the poor, so that priests may be relieved of the burden of temporal matters and may give themselves more freely to prayer and the Word."⁸

Church leaders followed Luther's suggestions for such a reordering of the diaconate only sporadically. In Lutheran Germany, political leaders attempted various ways to provide relief for the poor. Ultimately, in some communities, those charged with welfare responsibilities for the state were called deacons; in other communities they were not.⁹

By the late-sixteenth century, the diaconate had come to be defined in greatly differing ways. Particularly in the Reformed Protestant tradition, deacons became involved in social welfare and care of the poor. John Calvin, ever the systematic organizer, for example, proposed four distinct offices of the church: pastors, doctors, elders and deacons. Eventually, he even proposed a sort of "double diaconate": one type of deacons would be the "givers," those who would be in charge of the public property of the church, and another would be "those who show mercy," who cared for the sick and the poor.¹⁰ Lutheran usage of the term proved more varied. In some Lutheran areas, the title of deacon was used to indicate either an administrator of poor

relief, or to indicate that one was an “assistant pastor,” depending on the context.¹¹ In the Roman Catholic Church, some discussion about the diaconate took place at the Council of Trent, but for both Catholics and later the Anglicans, the diaconate remained essentially unchanged from the medieval period – the deacon maintained a strong liturgical role while serving as an office transitional to the priesthood.¹²

The impact of the Reformation proved somewhat different for women than it did for men. While Protestant men could now leave the monasteries, marry, and still continue to serve in an official role as pastor, no similar public ministry emerged for women. On the one hand, Luther elevated the role of women in new and profound ways. His emphasis on the importance and responsibility of mothers, as well as fathers, for example, to raise their children in the Christian faith, proved a radical concept. Luther’s emphasis on the home, not the church, as the primary locus of Christian training of the young, created a new sphere of important religious activity for women. “Every father of a family is a bishop in his house,” Luther proclaimed, “and every wife a bishopess.”¹³

But even this role had its limits. Pious women who left the Catholic convent found that, ironically, they had left behind the one place in the church where they had held religious office and experienced a certain amount of freedom and independence. Thus, while Protestant leaders affirmed the important role women played in family life, by removing the cloister as a possibility for service, they also essentially left women “no official role in the Protestant church beyond that of worshiper.”¹⁴ For the next two hundred years, the only “formal,” public role available to Protestant women remained a singular one: the role of the pastor’s wife, often with Katherine Von Bora Luther, Martin Luther’s spouse, held up as the ideal.

The Nineteenth Century

All of this history, then, serves as necessary background to the question of “what happened in Germany in the nineteenth century,” because the events of nineteenth-century Germany both built on and departed from the earlier history of the diaconate. In the nineteenth century, the greatest changes came not from within the Catholic Church but from the Protestant churches. A number of both external and internal forces proved determinative for the diaconate’s future. *Externally*, it was a time of great transition in society. War, revolutions and more brought enormous needs to the forefront of society. *Internally*, it was a time of both renewal theologically in the church and change sociologically in the society.

First, consider the external factors driving the emergence of *diaconia*. It is critical to an understanding of nineteenth-century Germany to understand first of all – that there *is* no such thing as “nineteenth-century Germany”. “Germany,” as we know it today, simply did not exist as one country, or even as a country subdivided into just East and West. It existed as a region divided into dozens of small, more or less independent territories, a loose confederation of states, each ruled over by a noble, lord, or prince.

One of the most important external forces can be illustrated simply — and graphically — by examining the map of Europe between 1789 and 1820. Maps illustrate in extremely clear form the enormous changes taking place in Europe during these years, the years of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars (1789-1815). These conflicts, which took place over the course of twenty-five years, not only changed the map of Western Europe through their upheavals, they spurred enormous changes in the society itself.

The legacy of these conflicts left the continent in ruins and struggling to recover. The final defeat of Napoleon in 1815 brought a time of peace but hardly, at least at first, of prosperity. An enormous rise in population, occasionally coupled with crop failures, created an often desperate situation. Enormous social displacements followed in the wake of both military and industrial revolutions, as the countryside emptied of desperate, poverty-stricken farmers looking to begin a new life in a new location, and major cities developed into urban sprawls. The poor packed into the cities, living in terrible conditions of overcrowding and poor sanitation. Epidemics raged and life expectancy, already low, plummeted. As young people fled to the cities looking for a better future, family life became irrevocably disrupted as the centuries-old patterns of intergenerational life in small, sheltered communities dissolved.¹⁵

Patterns of work and industry also underwent change. The traditional system of craftsmen operating in guilds was beginning to fail. One can see this in an almost complete shift from hand-crafted goods manufactured in guild shops to mechanization by mid-century: by 1856 in Hamburg, Germany alone, for example, 85% of all goods were manufactured by factories, not by hand.¹⁶ Such statistics indicate the enormous social upheaval going on across both the German states in particular and Western Europe in general. Conservative political governments often compounded the problems through policies that often had unexpected results. For example, in the early nineteenth century, the number of illegitimate births in German regions soared – not so much because all those young people migrating to town were having “sex in the city” (though of course they were), but more fundamentally because most young people simply could not meet the stringent residency and economic conditions required by law to marry. So instead, they lived together as man and wife without benefit of clergy, and when their children were born, saw them labeled as “illegitimate”.¹⁷ In sum, a number of *external* factors – war, social dislocation, and industrial revolution among others, were creating a situation crying out for change.

But *internally*, a number of factors were also at work and proved just as powerful, though perhaps they were not as well appreciated and understood at the time. Thus internal factors fall under two heads: *theological* – changes in ways individuals began to talk about God and the responsibility of the Christian in the world, and *sociological* – changes in the role of the family, and particularly, in the role of women.

The major response in Germany among Lutherans – and eventually among other denominations as well - to the enormous external factors of war and social dislocation grew out of a specific movement within Lutheranism of the eighteenth century known as Lutheran pietism.

Pietism was a renewal movement that emerged in the eighteenth century as a heavy critique of the Lutheranism of its day. After the death of Luther – and to his horror had he known about it – much of Lutheran theology had gone off in the direction of a dry, soulless orthodoxy, an orthodoxy that almost smothered the life out of Luther’s “Reformation discovery” that the just shall live by grace through faith. Lutheran Orthodoxy emphasized – to excess - the importance of *right theology*, of getting every detail of theology worked out in precise ways.

While none in eighteenth-century circles would have denied the importance of theology *per se*, a new group emerged to say that the orthodox had taken their concentration on theology to an extreme. A movement known as pietism emerged to argue that the main point of Christianity should not be a fight over dogma – it should be instead a struggle for the heart and soul. Pietists encouraged individual Christians of whatever denomination to have a *personal experience* of salvation, to develop an unmediated sense of interaction with God, and to live a moral and upright life marked by obedience to the Ten Commandments and other ethical codes. To support each other in these endeavors, pietists encouraged the formation of small Bible study groups, groups that could hold each other accountable in daily life, pray for each other, and learn from each other.

To oversimplify, pietism tended to concentrate on the *heart* of the individual Christian believer and his or her resulting actions, whereas the Lutheran orthodoxy of its day, which pietism tried to counteract, tended to concentrate on the *head knowledge* of the individual believer to make sure right belief existed.

Pietism did not remain a movement solely within Lutheranism for long. It influenced almost all major Protestant denominations in some way throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many an immigrant to the New World brought in his or her pocket three volumes: a Bible, John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and Johannes Arndt’s *True Christianity*, the major pietist work outlining what Christians should be and do. During the first and second Great Awakening in North America - major, enormous revivals that took the new nation by storm - pietism provided a common language and common beliefs for individuals across denominational lines: Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Moravian, even Anglican – all had some Pietist roots within them.

From the root of Lutheran pietism grew another distinctive movement that would have enormous implications for the future of the diaconate, a new program of social activism and evangelism known as the *inner mission* movement.¹⁸ As opposed to “foreign missions,” which sent missionaries to evangelize persons in other lands, and “home missions,” which concentrated on establishing churches domestically, “inner missions” centered their programs on social outreach to the poor and marginal of society. With its roots sunk deeply within Lutheran pietism, this all-encompassing vision of social action and evangelism soon called for the church to be in mission to the society, and this theology eventually became the forerunner of much later social activism in the Lutheran church. Supporters of inner mission established a multitude of institutions and agencies to address the needs of diverse groups within nineteenth century society. In each region of the nation presently known as Germany, the work

looked somewhat different, depending on the needs of the church and the region, but much was held in common.

It was the inner mission movement that gave birth to a new form of the diaconate. Three Germans in particular, Johannes Wichern, a lay person in Hamburg, the Rev. Theodore Fliedner, the pastor of a small congregation in the predominantly Roman Catholic town of Kaiserswerth, and his wife Friedericke, took the lead in founding new forms of service for both men and women. Their work would greatly impact the resulting development of the diaconate.

Johannes Wichern was a layperson deeply touched by the plight of homeless and vagrant boys in the streets of Hamburg. In 1833, he established a home for such boys built on the model of the Christian family. Gathering the boys into small groups, he enlisted young men to serve as surrogate older brothers (*bruder*) to them. Within six years, he had organized a *Bruderhaus* to train the young men to work not only with the boys of the home, but in other ways as well among the poorest of society. Eventually, as Wichern's movement spread across Germany and beyond, these young men came to be called "deacons." From Germany, the inner mission movement spread to the Netherlands and Scandinavia. In time, the term *diakonia* came to be used to describe this and other work among the poor and impoverished.¹⁹

Thus, a new definition of the diaconate emerged, one that emphasized ancient diaconal traditions of service to the poor while de-emphasizing traditional liturgical and administrative functions, as well as the function of assistance to the bishop.

While Wichern was establishing a new form of diaconal ministry for young men among the poor of Hamburg, Theodore and Fredericke Fliedner were doing the same for women. While serving as the pastor of a Lutheran congregation in Kaiserswerth, Fliedner became interested in prison reform after traveling to England and becoming influenced by the work of a Quaker, Elizabeth Fry.²⁰

Fliedner became convinced after his tour that young women as well as young men could and should become involved in the work of inner mission in Germany. Both Theodore and Friederika believed that pietism called them to social service, a ministry that might go in many different directions. The Fliedners began their work with a halfway house for women prisoners in 1833, but within a few short years, the ministry had expanded enormously. By mid-century, inner mission work might mean staffing day school nurseries, industrial homes, teaching sewing and carpentry, or appearing in juvenile court. It often meant starting kindergartens, in the belief that one had to start training children by the age of two or three in a Christian setting in order to train them properly. It often meant founding orphanages or mental hospitals – in a day when mental illness was often mistreated and almost always misunderstood. The wife of American Patrick Henry, for example, suffered from mental illness throughout most of her marriage to Henry. But because no reliable treatment or understanding of her condition existed, she spent most of the 1770s confined to the basement in the Henry family household while her husband was out giving revolutionary speeches. The work of many social reformers, including those of the inner mission movement, began to change that.

Fliedner eventually began to call the young women who did this work “deaconesses,” taking the term from Mennonite deaconesses in Holland. Initially, Fliedner encountered opposition to his desire to place women at the forefront of such work. Even the concept of women as teachers was frowned upon in a society where male teachers remained the norm. But female teachers were eventually accepted on the grounds that “womanly modesty, morality and discipline, love of cleanliness, a sense of order and sensitivity” more naturally embodied the highest aims of education than those that could be inspired by male teachers.²¹ Powerful arguments were also mounted against the idea of women serving as nurses because of the nature of their work. But Fliedner eventually won acceptance for the idea of female nurses, and eventually, all of his students received nurses’ training, regardless of where they would eventually serve.

The Fliedners adopted a strict regimen to prepare the deaconesses for their service, a regime that invited comparison to that of women in Catholic orders.²² Candidates for diaconal service lived segregated from the laity in a motherhouse and wore a distinctive garb. The wages earned for their service went to the motherhouse, and deaconesses received perpetual care if they retired as members of the diaconate. They followed strict obedience to a rule that called for a daily routine often lasting from 5:00 in the morning until 10:00 at night, which coupled practical training in nursing, teaching, and other skills with intentional times for spiritual development. The motherhouse required morning and evening prayer in the chapel, as well as additional time for meditation, Bible reading, and spiritual reflection. To assist the deaconesses in their private devotional periods, Fliedner assembled a collection of hymns and a manual of recommended Bible reading. A later author writing in 1911 America explained that the mother-house needed to give “close and constant attention” to the inner spiritual life of the deaconess, because her ministry:

often makes large demands upon her spiritual resources . . . Hence every well-organized motherhouse seeks to nourish this life and to develop a strong Christian character by the beauty of its worship, the frequency and variety of its services, the abundant preaching and teaching of the Word, faithful pastoral care in private, so as to enable its sisters to meet discouragements, overcome difficulties, endure hardships, and retain their buoyancy and freshness of spirit.²³

As this pattern of life makes clear, similarities existed between the Protestant deaconesses of the Fliedners and more traditional Roman Catholic sisters. Indeed, more than once Fliedner was accused of creating the deaconess as a Protestant “counter” to Roman Catholic sisterhood. It would appear, alas, that this was at least part of Fliedner’s motivation. Fliedner wrote to Elizabeth Fry in 1839 that the Sisters of Charity were a “flood everywhere...in Protestant countries and hospitals.... [and] they endeavor artfully to place their church in the best possible light to make proselytes of the sick and poor.”²⁴ Sadly, anti-Catholicism was alive and well in nineteenth-century Protestant Germany.

At the same time, much more was involved in Fliedner’s work than simply trying to counteract the influence of the Roman Catholics, and clear differences existed between Protestant deaconesses and Roman Catholic nuns. In contrast to Roman Catholic sisters, for example, women enlisted as deaconesses for five-year renewable terms of service, not for life. As one scholar has described it, in fact, the model for the deaconess community proved less the Catholic convent than the Lutheran parsonage.

As always, the example of Martin and Katie Luther was lifted up, and the Fliedners were referred to by their charges as “mother” and “father,” while the deaconesses themselves were called “sister.”²⁵

Some objected that the Protestant deaconess community still resembled Roman Catholic orders too closely, and that such public activity by women constituted poaching on a male preserve and was not “befitting of the female sex.” But despite these complaints, the movement proved enormously successful. Kaiserswerth’s most famous alumna, Florence Nightingale, wrote a brief booklet in support of the institution at Fliedner’s request, making the movement better known to the English-speaking world. Nightingale was not a deaconess, not even a Lutheran, but she, like many, took advantage of the Fliedner’s “open door” policy which trained any woman interested in becoming a nurse, whether they wished to formally enter the deaconess community or not. She then utilized that skill to great advantage in the Crimean War, becoming the “Angel of the Battlefield” to an entire generation in Great Britain. Nightingale’s subsequent fame and the resulting recognition she gave to the Fliedners elevated their stock even further.²⁶

Fliedner’s skills as an administrator and the obvious needs for laborers in the fields both contributed to the movement’s success. Kaiserswerth served not only as a benevolent cluster of institutions in its own small community, it served as a training facility that exported deaconesses and the deaconess idea across the world. The idea spread to London in 1846. Then to Jerusalem in 1850. Then to other parts of the Middle East and North Africa. Paris, the British Isles, Strasbourg, Switzerland, Holland, Scandinavia and eventually, America. It was not only Lutherans who became interested in this work. Many denominations saw a revival of interest during the nineteenth century in diaconal ministry centered around service to the poor. Most of these groups were directly influenced by Kaiserswerth, while others arose independently. At first, deaconesses were most common in Lutheran or Reformed churches, in keeping with the original institution at Kaiserswerth, but the movement soon spread to almost all Protestant denominations of the time. The Methodists in particular embraced the deaconess model by the late nineteenth century as did other traditions as well, from the Anglicans to the Moravians.²⁷ By 1861, on the 25th anniversary of the founding of Kaiserswerth, the far-flung motherhouses were organized into a General Conference. By the 50th anniversary, at least fifty motherhouses and over 14,000 deaconesses were spread across the world.²⁸ They were working in poorhouses, “rescue houses,” prisons, schools, hospitals, hospices, and institutions for persons with mental retardation or epilepsy. Where ever they worked, they gradually won approval even from those who had been most reluctant at first to give it.

The male diaconate in the Protestant churches fared somewhat differently during this time period. The male bruderhouse concept continued in Germany, but while the German deaconess model was exported to America with some success, the male diaconate model of the bruderhouse did not export as well. When William Passavant brought German deaconesses to America, for example, he also attempted to start a training center for deacons. Johannes Wichern promised to send him some deacons in the early 1860s, but the American Civil War delayed their arrival. When they did arrive, Americans tended to ignore the Germans’ suggestions and as a consequence, the

deacons returned to Germany. In every case, in the United States the women's movement succeeded better than the men's.

Partially, this discrepancy arose because of the cultural expectations placed on women and men of this era. In nineteenth-century Europe and America, a middle-class woman was expected to exhibit the characteristics of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. These attributes proved so powerfully shaping that scholars often refer to these four characteristics collectively as a "cult of True Womanhood," not because they represented brain washing, but because this ideology held powerful sway over ideas of the "proper place" for both men and women.²⁹ The call to selfless service, therefore, seemed to fit more neatly with the cultural expectations of women of the time than it did for men of the era, who were expected to be virile and engaged in work in the more "aggressive" public arena. Many women entered a deaconess community believing that work involving care for the less fortunate would be appropriate to their "womanly sphere." Ironically, however, many of these same women eventually found that work in one "sphere" soon led to another, as their experiences, prayer, study, and sense of mission led them to expand their vision of their possibilities and call.³⁰ The diaconate opened up new worlds for them and often to their surprise, pushed them out into the more "public" realm. As one scholar has noted, to send sisters out to slums, saloons, and the battlefield was in effect to say that woman have no sphere.³¹

This sometimes produced tension – between the way clergy saw deaconesses and the way the deaconesses saw themselves. Sometimes the two groups came into conflict when pastors expected the women to submit to their authority, and the women, because of their expertise or their experience, expected not to. It was a tension relived over and over among many a directing deaconess and her (all male) board of trustees for many years.

Despite the inevitable tensions, the movement grew quickly in Europe. Why did this nineteenth-century deaconess movement succeed so well? For many reasons, some unique to the time and place in which the movement arose. First, theological renewal and pietistic revival within the church had a decisive role in moving women to this work as an outgrowth of their own piety. At the same time, the movement also clearly held an appeal to women that may be explained, at least in part, by the lack of vocational opportunities available for single women of the age. Kaiserswerth tended to attract two types: those who were pious and those who had little in the way of marital futures – attributes that were not necessarily mutually exclusive. In post-war nineteenth-century Europe, where a surplus of marriageable women existed, women simply had few options available to them. If unmarried, poor, and "without prospects," society relegated single women to a life of dependency on a father, brothers, or other family member, or a life as a servant in another's household. For women such as these, the deaconess community offered an alternative: a place that provided training in a profession, a secure future, a certain degree of independence unavailable in other areas of the nineteenth-century world and a public role of useful ministry in the church, in a day long before women's ordination in the Protestant churches. And perhaps equally important, the deaconess community offered a surrogate family and the possibility of companionship in a world where these women might well have suffered a less-happy fate.³² The life of a deaconess could prove varied and challenging, and her assignments

could take her anywhere in the world. Even when posted to distant lands, sisters received newsletters and correspondence regularly, sometimes even weekly, and were brought back to the motherhouse for periods of refreshment after long absences.³³

And finally, the movement succeeded simply because the needs of nineteenth-century European society proved so very great. While deaconesses pushed the boundaries of a “woman’s place,” they never completely violated them, and their “push” came at a time when society needed them most. The nineteenth century saw the rise of enormous social needs, needs that required the organized, systematic service that deaconesses could fulfill. Through their example, deaconesses exemplified Jesus’ ministry of mercy to the most wretched of society in ways that elicited not only the gratitude of those on the margins, but the respect of those at its center. As Elizabeth Fedde, a Norwegian deaconess later working in America put it, “You sisters are the Bible your patients will read.”³⁴

The work of Kaiserswerth therefore represented both a continuation with earlier traditions of the diaconate and a break from them. The stimulus of the inner mission movement which inspired both Wichern and the Fliebers, proved highly successful in reinvigorating the idea of a modern diaconate adapted to serve the poor and needy in the contemporary setting. But it also represented a new model of service. The deaconesses of Kaiserswerth had little to do with liturgical service, assistance to a bishop, or administrative oversight of the larger church, though certainly the deaconesses gained at least some oversight of their own organizations, even if it most often came under the direct supervision of male authorities. As one scholar has noted of the nineteenth-century deaconess movement, “Appeals to patriotism, to vocational and social utility, even to domesticity were something altogether new to the literature of the diaconate.”³⁵

The rise of the diaconate in nineteenth-century Germany, then, was a response to both external and internal forces. *Externally*, it responded to the great needs of society – to war, to social dislocation, to the needs of the church. *Internally*, it was a response to a changing theology, to a concept of pietism and inner mission, as well as to changing possibilities in cultural roles and expectations of men and women.

Today we are seeing a revival of interest across churches in *diakonia*. Perhaps today, as in the nineteenth century, this interest is arising out of at least some of the same impulses in church and society. Certainly the needs of the society are as great, or even greater, than they were almost two hundred years ago. And as in that century, dedicated men and women are emerging to take up that challenge.

Endnotes

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- ¹ More detailed description of these four general responsibilities may be found in J. Robert Wright, "The Emergence of the Diaconate," in *Liturgy: Journal of the Liturgical Conference* 2:4 (Fall 1982), 20 ff. and 67 ff.; James Monroe Barnett, *The Diaconate: a Full and Equal Order*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 43 ff. and Jeannine E. Olson, *Deacons and Deaconesses through the Centuries*, rev. ed. Of *One Ministry, Many Roles* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 28 ff.
- ² "On the Appointment of Deacons and Deaconesses," in *Didascalia Apostolorum: The Syriac Version Translated and Accompanied by the Verona Latin Fragments*, with an introduction and notes by R. Hugh Connolly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), 146-48, as cited in Barbara J. MacHaffie, *Readings in Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 18.
- ³ MacHaffie, *Readings*, 18. Italics in original.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ Wright, 67-68.
- ⁶ Cited in Olson, 61, n. 94 and 95.
- ⁷ Barbara J. MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) summarizes much of the scholarship on women's roles in the medieval church, 43-60.
- ⁸ Martin Luther, "Babylonian Captivity of the Church," (1520) trans. In *Three Treatises: Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 249, as cited in Olson, 108.
- ⁹ Olson, 109-118.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 123-129 and 133-135.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 117-118 and 133-135.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 135-136 and 143.
- ¹³ Luther, *Ten Sermons on the Catechism* (1528) from the Introduction to the First Commandment in *Luther's Works*, Volume 51, ed. and trans. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 137.
- ¹⁴ L. DeAne Lagerquist, *From Our Mothers' Arms: A History of Women in the American Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), 67.
- ¹⁵ Olson, 205-208.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.
- ¹⁷ Catherine M. Prelinger, *Charity, Challenge, and Change: Religious Dimensions of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Women's Movement in Germany* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 17-18.
- ¹⁸ The best introduction to the inner mission movement is Jeremiah Franklin Ohl, *The Inner Mission: A Handbook for Christian Workers* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication House, 1911).
- ¹⁹ Olson, 209-210.
- ²⁰ Unless a specific notation indicates otherwise, the following descriptions of the Fliedners' work and the spread of the Kaiserswerth movement are taken from Prelinger, *Charity*, 18-28 and Olson, 210-229.
- ²¹ Theodore Fliedner, quoted in Prelinger, *Charity*, 168.
- ²² The following description of the life and training of deaconesses is taken from Prelinger, *Charity*, 20-23; Catherine M. Prelinger and Rosemary Skinner Keller, "The Function of Female Bonding: The Restored Diaconessate of the Nineteenth Century," in *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition II* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 322 ff. and Olson, 212-214.
- ²³ Ohl, *Inner Mission*, 96.
- ²⁴ Fliedner to Elizabeth Fry, 2 December 1839 as reported in Prelinger, *Charity*, 19.
- ²⁵ Prelinger, *Charity*, 20.
- ²⁶ Olson, 212-15, 218, 249-50.
- ²⁷ Olson details the spread of the movement across Europe and to other denominations, 217-241.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.
- ²⁹ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" in *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976) 21-41.
- ³⁰ Rima Lunin Schultz, "Woman's Work and Woman's Calling in the Episcopal Church: Chicago, 1880-1989," in *Episcopal Women: Gender, Spirituality, and Commitment in an American Mainline Denomination*, ed. Catherine M. Prelinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 26-45. See also DeAne Lagerquist, *In America the Men Milk the Cows: Factors of Gender, Ethnicity, and Religion in the Americanization of Norwegian-American Women* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, Inc. 1991), 153-154 and Prelinger and Keller, *Female Bonding*, 336-7.
- ³¹ Prelinger and Keller, *Female Bonding*, 337.
- ³² Prelinger and Keller, *Female Bonding*, discuss this extensively, especially 321 ff. Olson also summarizes this reality, 238-39.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 238 ff.
- ³⁴ Lagerquist, *From our Mothers' Arms*, 69.
- ³⁵ Prelinger, *Charity*, 168.

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