

# *Orders of Laywomen in Ministry: A Historical Consideration*

*Ellen Blue*

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This paper will examine the existence and roles of laywomen's Orders in Christian history.<sup>1</sup> The Order of Deaconesses within Methodism and other Protestant denominations parallels and continues two millennia of organized ministry by Christian laywomen.

The paper will specifically consider the Order of Deaconesses in light of the creation of the Order of Deacons in the last decade of the twentieth century, during the reorganization of United Methodist Church (UMC) clergy. It will place applying the term "Order" only to ordained clergy against the backdrop of nearly two thousand years of use by Christians laity. It will argue that there is an overwhelming amount of powerful evidence both from Methodist history and from the larger field of Christian history that the term "Order" has never been limited to the ordained. It has long been used by and is absolutely appropriate for the UMC's Order of Deaconesses.

Throughout the history of the Methodist tradition, laywomen have played crucial roles, many as unpaid volunteers in local congregations. However, since the late nineteenth century, deaconesses in The United Methodist Church (UMC) and its predecessor organizations have served as set-apart ministry professionals in a wide variety of settings. The year 2013 marked the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Methodist deaconess movement. Deaconesses have strengthened our connection not just through the service they have performed, but also by affirming through their very existence the identity of laypeople in full-time professional church careers.

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The New Testament depicts women as having provided for Jesus from their resources during his ministry (Luke 8:3) and being the first to discover his absence from the tomb. Throughout the next two millennia, a majority of Jesus' followers were women. Women have been and still are of inestimable importance in the performance of the church's ministries, despite the fact that for most of Christian history, ordination was available only to men. Some of most significant contributions ever made to the church have been accomplished by laity in the context of their membership in Orders.

Though there are some clergy who belong to Orders, the term "Order" has most frequently been applied to groups of lay people organized for lives of service. These have included both men and women.<sup>2</sup> Benedictine Sister Joan Chittester, O.S.B. has observed, "Almost the entire social service network of the Catholic church in the United States was owned or operated by communities of women religious for more than 150 years," and "With their own money and with their own personnel, women religious built and staffed most of the Catholic colleges, academies, hospitals,

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<sup>1</sup> For purposes connected with reading theory and comprehension, I have chosen to violate a grammar rule and to capitalize the noun "Order" every time it occurs, even when it is not a proper noun. I have made exceptions only when it occurs with a lower case "o" within a direct quotation. When it occurs with a capital "O" inside a quotation, it was capitalized in the original source.

<sup>2</sup> Though some men who are monks are also ordained as priests so that a member of the monastery can preside over Eucharist, most male monks are not ordained; ordination is still denied to women in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions.

orphanages, and special-care facilities in the country.”<sup>3</sup> (Note that “religious” in this usage is not an adjective but rather a noun used in the Roman Catholic Church for people who have joined a religious Order.)

Lay leadership has been essential for the success of Methodism since the time of John Wesley, when classes, bands and societies all depended on strong lay leadership. During the days of frontier circuit riders, the tasks involved in nurturing the church fell primarily to the laity. Today there is still, and in the foreseeable future there will be, a need for strong lay leadership, and especially for the kind of committed, visionary leadership which Methodist deaconesses have always demonstrated.

It may be helpful to recall that the terms “clergy” and “lay” are not synonymous with the terms “professional” and “non-professional.” Many laypeople hold advanced degrees in fields such as Christian Education or Sacred Music and spend their entire careers in church vocations. Deaconess training schools played pivotal roles in creating the field of social work.<sup>4</sup> They saw that field not in opposition to but rather as a part of Christian evangelism, noting that Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, and called upon his followers to meet not just the spiritual but also the material needs of humanity. Many other kinds of service to church and society are accomplished by laypeople who are called by God and view their work as Christian service. Indeed, a major section of the *Book of Discipline* discusses “The Ministry of All Christians,” harking back to the Reformation concept of the priesthood of all believers and emphasizing that all who are baptized are called to Christian ministry.<sup>5</sup>

### Diaconal Ministers and Deaconesses

While individuals are no longer being welcomed as diaconal ministers in the UMC, some persons remain in that category. At one time, some United Methodists lacked clarity about why there were both diaconal ministers and deaconesses in the UMC, The fact that the position of diaconal minister is being phased out is making the need for that distinction moot.

The website of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM) states, “Diaconal ministers are United Methodist laypeople who lead in service ministries. The United Methodist Church no longer consecrates new diaconal ministers. However, many diaconal ministers are still in active service.” The page goes on to suggest, “If you feel called by God to be a layperson in a ministry of love and justice, check out the office of home missionaries & deaconesses,” providing a hyperlink to their page.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Joan Chittester, “Leaven and Labor: The Ministry of American Women Religious,” *Sojourners*, April 1985, 25-26.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Sloan Kreuziger, “Going on to Perfection: The Contributions of the Wesleyan Theological Doctrine of Entire Sanctification to the Value Base of American Professional Social Work through the Lives and Activities of Nineteenth Century Evangelical Women Reformers,” D.S.W. diss., Tulane University, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> The book which all persons in candidacy for ordination in the UMC must read, *The Christian as Minister*, also emphasizes that baptism is itself a form of ordination for ministry. The book is available in many formats, including a .pdf download, and is a product of the General Board of Higher Education & Ministry (GBHEM).

<sup>6</sup> “Deacons and Diaconal Ministers,” General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, United Methodist Church, Online: <http://www.gbhem.org/clergy/deacons>, accessed 3 August 2014.

## The Permanent Deacon

Today, restructuring of ministry in the denomination has led to a different kind of confusion. Many individuals lack clarity about why there are both permanent deacons and permanent deaconesses within the church's structure. Both diaconal ministers and deaconesses remained laypeople; because permanent deacons are clergy while deaconesses are laypeople, a different kind of clarification about the terminology that applies to each role is necessary.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the UMC made changes in its structure of ordained ministry in order to create a place for the permanent deacon as a member of the clergy. Previously, candidates pursuing the clergy status of elder were ordained twice, once as deacons (a probationary status) and again, if they successfully completed their probationary periods, as elders. Although United Methodists do not regard ordination as sacramental, it was still seen as theologically problematic to have individuals undergo two separate rituals, both of which were called and both of which were understood to *be* ordinations.

Thus, deacons were ordained clergy who had been ordained simply on a probationary basis. By its very nature, a probationary period makes provision for some persons who will not successfully move to the next level, and in fact, there actually were individuals who were ordained as deacon but then never ordained as elder, either through their own decision to withdraw or because a Board of Ordained Ministry decided to discontinue them. Once discontinued, they were no longer considered by the UMC to be clergy, making the fact that they had already been ordained an awkward reality which was not dealt with in a ritualized way. They were never within the context of a church ritual "defrocked." Thus, their previous, provisional ordination became a problem on (at least) theological, ecclesiological, pastoral and personal levels. In the 1990s, when the *Book of Discipline* incorporated the results of a broad study on this and other aspects of ministry, the provisional ordination was replaced by a "commissioning." Those on the track to become an elder are commissioned at their Annual Conference's gathering, and it was clear that this ritual is not an ordination. This solved some of the problems mentioned above.

At the same time, the UMC made the office of "deacon" a second way to be permanent clergy. Being a deacon would not be identical to being an elder, nor was it, as before, equal to today's provisional elder. This new category was intended for persons who did not experience a call to serve as a senior pastor or sole pastor of a congregation. Ordination as a deacon does not bestow sacramental authority; deacons cannot baptize or consecrate the elements for communion. Further, they do not itinerate, and deacons are not guaranteed an appointment.

Thus, what it means to be a deacon in 2014 is dramatically different than what it meant to be a deacon in 1984. (Dr. Sarah Lancaster's paper for this conference, written from an ecclesiastical standpoint, will help us consider the implications for hierarchical understandings of leadership.) Yet neither the previous nor the current definition of "deacon" is identical with the definition of a "deaconess" which has undergone little or no change during that same period.

### Sketching the History of Christian Orders

Deaconesses trace their history back to New Testament times, and particularly to the person of Phoebe, mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Romans. In the opening of chapter 16, he refers to her as a deacon, with the Greek word being exactly the same one he uses to refer on another occasion to himself. Many English translations have reflected cultural mores and translated the word into English as "deaconess."

However, Phoebe is not the only foremother of Methodist deaconesses found in the canon. There are also New Testament references to groups of widows who provide services for the community. Acts 9:36-42

recounts a story of Dorcas (Tabitha) who sewed garments for those in need, and it is commonly understood that this is a foreshadowing of laywomen's Orders. In an article entitled, "Practicing the Orders of Widows: A New Call for an Old Vocation," M. Therese Lysaught has argued that reinstating an Order of widows like the one that existed in the early church would benefit not only the elderly whose needs for a livelihood and a vocation would thus be satisfied, but also the church itself.<sup>7</sup>

Orders of lay women do exist today in great numbers and perform incalculable service in mission, in mercy ministries, and in work for justice. Some groups were cloistered in medieval times at the demand of the larger church, but even then, some women religious had profound ministries not limited to their walls of their convents, and there were always women who made profound contributions to the church and the larger world.

There were other women who not affiliated with church-approved, cloistered groups but who were nevertheless part of religious sisterhoods called Beguines. These women, many of whom were left widows or orphans after the Crusades, banded together to help people who were in need. A few eventually adopted the Rule of St. Francis, but most were only semi-monastic. Even as conservative a source as the 1907 *Catholic Encyclopedia* calls the Beguines "an Order." The movement was particularly strong in Belgium and the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup>

In truth, even a cursory examination of the contributions of laywomen's Orders is far beyond the scope of this paper. From Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, a writer who lived in the 1600s in New Spain (now Mexico), to Mother Theresa of Calcutta (1910-1997), a woman from Albania whose work in India won her the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 and beatification in the Roman Catholic Church, religious women have been servants and shapers of Christianity. Some like Theresa of Avila, founder of the Discalced Carmelites; Catherine of Siena, and Hildegard of Bingen are the subjects of multiple biographies that recount their work in preaching, administration, and the arts, including writing, painting and music.

Others left living legacies in the form of women's Orders that are still extant and vital. Saint Scholastica (c. 480-c. 542) was the founder of the women's branch of the Benedictine Order. She was the sister (some sources say twin) of Benedict of Nursia, the author of the Rule of Benedict, and she and her group of women lived near his monastery, Monte Cassino.<sup>9</sup> The Benedictines were crucial in the development of *cenobitic* monasticism – that is, monastics who live together in community as over against living as hermits.

Another founder, Clare of Assisi, was a friend of Saint Francis. As Francis founded the Franciscans, Clare gathered women around her and founded the Order known as the Poor Clares. "Clare had fulfilled her life-time dream, the work which God had given her to do. With Francis, she had established an Order which would continue to live the Gospel, emphasizing poverty, behind enclosed walls, becoming a church within a Church and as loyal a daughter as the Church would ever know."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> M. Therese Lysaught, "Practicing the Orders of Widows: A New Call for an Old Vocation," *Christian Bioethics* 11 (2005), 51-68.

<sup>8</sup> Ernest Gilliat-Smith, "Beguines and Beghards," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907). Online: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02389c.htm>, accessed 26 July 2014.

<sup>9</sup> "Saint Scholastica, Virgin and Religious Founder," The Order of Saint Benedict, Online: <http://www.osb.org/gen/scholastica.html>, accessed 8 August 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Frances Ann Thom, "Clare of Assisi: New Leader of Women," chapter in *Medieval Religious Women, 2: Peaceweavers*, Lillian Thomas Shank and John A. Nichols, eds. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1987), 197-209.

A one-volume history by John J. Fialka entitled, *Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America*, chronicles some of the achievements that laywomen's religious Orders have accomplished in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Several of their leaders have been canonized or are now moving through the process toward sainthood, and three are mentioned here.

Sister Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821), who was canonized in 1975, established the Sisters of Charity, the first religious Order in the United States and founded the first Catholic school in the country, seen as the beginning of the parochial school system. She was the first person born in what would be the United States to be named a saint.

Sister Katharine Drexel (1858-1955) of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church in 2000. Born into a wealthy family, she became convinced that discrimination against Native people and African-Americans was wrong and that she should work to end it in the church and in the nation. She founded an Order of women who worked with her to establish and staff Catholic schools for students from ethnic minority groups. Those schools include Xavier University, a premier Southern university that has educated many African-American scientists.<sup>12</sup>

The Venerable Henriette Delille (1813-1862) is the first African-American woman to be entered into the process of canonization. She founded the Sisters of the Holy Family, an Order for free women of color. The Order "opened America's first Catholic home for the elderly of its kind . . . Noteworthy are the heroic efforts of the early Sisters who cared for the sick and the dying during the yellow fever epidemics that struck New Orleans in 1853 and 1897."<sup>13</sup>

Since Vatican II and the subsequent freeing of Roman Catholic sisters to operate in society in different ways, work accomplished by dozens of laywomen's Orders has expanded and taken on different forms. Some have given their lives, as did the four martyrs of El Salvador, women who were murdered in 1980 just months after the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero. Two Maryknoll sisters, Maura Clarke and Ita Ford; a member of the Ursulines Order, Dorothy Kazel; and a lay missionary, Jean Donovan, were serving in justice ministries when they were raped and killed by military forces.<sup>14</sup> Many Orders engage in justice ministry through advocacy at the United Nations and with individual national governments. For instance, the Carmelite Order is registered as an NGO (non-governmental organization) with the United Nations and advocates for the achievement of the Millennium Goals developed at the turn of the twenty-first century. Sister Jane Remson, O.Carm., serves as president of that NGO and also works with Bread for the World and the Twomey Center for Peace and Justice at Loyola University in New Orleans (an institution founded by Jesuits, most of whom are also laypeople). Sister Helen Prejean, a member of the New Orleans congregation of St. Joseph, has become extremely well-known as the author of *Dead Man Walking*; she was portrayed by Susan Sarandon in the movie of that name which focused on the issue of the death penalty.

The ministry accomplished by these women is no less valuable for their lay status. Their ministries are also dependent on their membership in an Order that provides structure and support for their spiritual lives

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<sup>11</sup> John J. Fialka, *Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America* (St. Martin's Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Xavier University, "Catholic Identity and Mission: Overview," Online: <http://www.xula.edu/catholic/>, accessed 4 August 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Sisters of the Holy Family, "Venerable Henriette Delille, 1812-1862, 'Servant of Slaves,'" Online: <http://www.sistersoftheholysfamily.com/AboutHenrietteDelille.html>, accessed 4 August 2014.

<sup>14</sup> National Council of Churches, "Twenty-five years after their martyrdom, Four American women are remembered," 2 December 2005, Online: <http://www.nccusa.org/news/051202Martyrs.html>, accessed 4 August 2014.

and their activities. This is also true for the myriad of ministries performed by the United Methodist Deaconesses.

### The Order of Methodist Deaconesses

Although Methodist deaconesses often lived in community with one another, they have never lived in isolation from the rest of the world. Their ministries have enriched the church and the world in countless ways. In fact, many of the vibrant community centers in urban areas began as settlement houses where Methodist deaconesses lived and served their neighborhoods in vital, innovative ways. Schools, hospitals, children's homes and a host of other facilities owe their success, if not their existence, to the work of deaconesses.

The founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley, licensed women to preach during his lifetime; however, it was not long after his death that new leaders of Methodism stopped this practice. Much of our more than two hundred twenty-five years of existence as a denomination has been marked by deep resistance to the presence of women in positions of authority and leadership. Yet women have remained profoundly faithful to Methodism throughout those centuries.

Beginning in the mid-1800s, women saw the benefits of forming organizations that would let them promote evangelism, mission and service in effective ways. First addressing the need to serve the peoples of other nations, they formed societies engaged in funding Foreign Mission. Since there were tasks that only women could perform for other women, some single women began to be sent to foreign mission fields. Called by God and determined to serve, women carved out professional space for themselves within our predecessor denominations, and other laywomen supported them, both spiritually and financially.

Faced with the new social problems in the United States that occurred around the turn of the twentieth century, Methodism adopted a practice used by Protestants in Europe and, claiming Scriptural authority in the person and work of Phoebe, created the Order of Deaconesses. Noted Methodist women's historian Jean Miller Schmidt wrote that deaconesses "responded to Christ's call with the resolve to become useful, to further God's purpose for the world. Methodist deaconesses formed a new breed of church women. Trained for and consecrated to the Order, they became experts in the field of Christian social service."<sup>15</sup>

Laywomen established and funded deaconess training schools; they were also the visionary leaders who established many of the ministry settings, such as settlement houses and community centers, where the deaconesses would serve. Between 1888 and 1910, the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS), the Methodist Protestant Church, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, the Evangelical Association, and the United Evangelical Church created Deaconess Orders.<sup>16</sup>

"Deaconesses, who are lay women, and home missionaries, who are lay men, are professionally trained persons who have been led by the Holy Spirit to devote their lives to Christlike service under the authority of the Church" (§1314.2).<sup>17</sup> Their extensive training prepared them for "lives of full-time Christian service." According to Alice Knotts, "Deaconesses . . . gave their lives to serving people in need. As did the early

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<sup>15</sup> Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: A History of Women in American Methodism, 1760-1939* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 207-8.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Agnes Dougherty, *My Calling to Fulfill: Deaconesses in the United Methodist Tradition* (New York: Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries, UMC, 1997), x, 36.

<sup>17</sup> "Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner," *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2012* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing Company, 2012), ¶1314, 623.

Christians described in the Bible in the book of Acts, they held office in the church as people who serve.”<sup>18</sup>

The early deaconesses were expected to remain single. Though they did not take a vow to remain celibate, they could no longer remain a deaconess if they married. (Eventually, change occurred, but in The Methodist Church, it was not until 1959 that women could remain deaconesses after they married.) They also wore clothes that set them apart in the same way that nuns’ habits made their affiliation immediately apparent to any who saw them. The long black dress and the distinctive bonnet which tied with a large white bow was called the deaconess “garb.” In the 1920s, the garb became optional and almost all deaconesses quickly abandoned it so that they could more easily relate to the neighbors they served. While Lucy Rider Meyer had imagined the garb would make life easier for the deaconesses, in part by relieving them of deciding what to wear each day, it is certain that the long, heavy garment did not make moving around in an urban environment more convenient, especially in the summer.

Even before the first Methodist deaconess was consecrated, the woman’s societies were sponsoring female City Missionaries. They entered urban work to address new social problems that accompanied urbanization, industrialization, and high levels of immigration. Soon woman’s societies recognized that such workers needed formal training, and they established schools to prepare deaconesses and missionaries for lifetimes of Christian service. Lucy Rider Meyer founded the first such school in 1885 in Chicago. Soon there were schools across the nation, set up by various branches of Methodism.

Deaconesses were supported both financially and spiritually by local churchwomen’s organizations. These local lay women took theology very seriously and had great affinity for the Social Gospel version of it. They manifested their theological beliefs by establishing and funding dozens of cutting-edge urban ministries across the nation.<sup>19</sup>

Deaconess work helped to shape the character of Methodism in the United States. Deaconesses were the trained professionals who lived in settlement houses and community centers, operating the facilities day-by-day. Nurse deaconesses worked in health clinics operated in many of these ministry settings. Women who served as head residents of community centers, superintendents of rural and urban schools, directors of children’s homes and directors of hospitals held positions that equated to CEOs of multi-purpose, non-profit organizations. From coast to coast, they have served in locations that ranged from inner city settings to the mountains of Appalachia and the bayous of south Louisiana. They have served faithfully in many capacities in other countries, as well.

At mid-century, laywomen’s long effort to open ordination and membership in full connection in annual conferences to women bore fruit, and Methodists began the lengthy process of adjustment to a new field of service for women in the context of pastoral, congregational leadership. Women were ordained, and over time, moved into cabinet-level positions and into the episcopacy. Women who formerly might have organized mission work and served in local women’s societies, along with women who might have taken professional training and worked as missionaries or deaconesses, answered the call to ordination instead.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Alice Knotts, *Lifting Up Hope, Living Out Justice: Methodist Women and the Social Gospel* (San Diego: Frontrowliving Press, 2005), 8-9.

<sup>19</sup> Ellen Blue, *St. Mark’s and the Social Gospel: Methodist Women and Civil Rights in New Orleans, 1895-1965* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Ellen Blue, *St. Mark’s and the Social Gospel*, 133-4, 188-91.

The turbulent era of the 1960s saw enormous change within the Roman Catholicism, especially within religious Orders for men and for women. Joan Chittester, a prolific author who is one of the most widely known nuns in the United States, noted that the Second Vatican Council “called for the renewal of religious life according to ‘the charism of the Order, the intentions of the founder, and the signs of the times.’” Many left their Orders, but many others remained and restructured the way they did ministry, both as individuals and as a community. Those who made changes “were bringing the gospel to bear on the issues of the time; they were standing with and for the new poor; they were standing between two cultures with one foot firmly planted in each. They were now, however, as intent on removing the obstacles to justice as they were to doing charity.”<sup>21</sup>

The 1960s were also a time of change for deaconesses, as The Methodist Church approved ordination for women in 1956. Some deaconesses made the decision to move into ordained ministry, but many more worked to accommodate the calling of deaconess to changing times and understandings of how church and secular institutions and even society itself operated, moving from “ministries of mercy” to “ministries of justice.” Their original charge was to “minister to the poor, visit the sick, pray for the dying, care for the orphan, seek the wandering, comfort the sorrowing, save the sinning and relinquishing wholly all other pursuits, devote themselves in a general way to such forms of Christian labor as may be suited to their abilities.”<sup>22</sup> Later, reflecting deeper understandings of how society organizes itself, their charge was to “share the love of God with those on the margins of society, serve the needs of the whole person, participate in the cutting edge of mission, work to address the root causes of poverty, belong to a supportive community of women.”<sup>23</sup>

The *Discipline* states that the charge of the deaconess and home missionary “shall be to express representatively the love and concern of the believing community for the needs of the world and to enable, through education and involvement, the full ministry and mission of the people of God. Deaconesses and home missionaries function through diverse forms of service directed toward the world to make Jesus Christ known in the fullness of his ministry and mission, which mandate that his followers: a) Alleviate suffering; b) Eradicate causes of injustice and all that robs life of dignity and worth; c) Facilitate the development of full human potential; and d) Share in building global community through the church universal” (§1314.1).<sup>24</sup>

### *Orders*

When the changes in the office of deacon were made in the 1990s, the *Book of Discipline* also mandated the existence of an “Order of Elders” and “an Order of Deacons” within each conference. There was some confusion in most conferences about exactly what this language meant and how these “Orders” should be implemented. Most clergy acknowledged a need for mutual support, and in many conferences, that was a major goal for the newly created groups. Mutual support was an especially appropriate assignment for the Order of Deacons, since the new position and status of deacon needed much explanation.

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<sup>21</sup> Joan Chittester, “Leaven and Labor,” *Sojourners*, 25-26.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Meredith Lee, *As among the Methodists: Deaconesses Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (New York City: Woman’s Division of Christian Service, Board of Missions, The Methodist Church, 1963), 37.

<sup>23</sup> “Deaconesses: Pioneers Yesterday and Today.” Brochure issued by the General Board of Global Ministries, Cincinnati, Ohio, stock #5294, February 1998, cited in Ellen Blue, *St. Mark’s and the Social Gospel*, 236.

<sup>24</sup> “Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner,” *The Book of Discipline*, 2012, ¶1314, 623.

The language in the study of ministry prepared for the most recent General Conference (2012) reads: “Currently, the UMC recognizes two Orders,” with those being deacon and elder.<sup>25</sup>

The Study of Ministry Commission report is constructed in such a way that “set-apart ministry” is used to mean “ordained and licensed ministry.” Because ordained and licensed ministers were the persons whose work was the focus of the commission’s attention, the commission’s tacit definition of “set-apart ministry” is limited to ordained elders, ordained deacons, and licensed local pastors. Because “set-apart ministry” is used interchangeably with “ordained elders, ordained deacons, and licensed local pastors,” the construction of the report may lead some readers to infer that only persons in these three categories are engaged in “set-apart ministry.” The unfortunate result is that the entire category of set-apart lay ministry is omitted. The usage of “set-apart” should clearly recognize and include the “set-apart” status of those United Methodist laypeople who have made a life commitment to professional Christian service.

Specifically, the terminology of “Order” has long been applied to deaconesses, as reflected by prominent, well-informed historians of Methodism. Jean Miller Schmidt, author of the most substantive history of the pre-1939 work of Methodist women, wrote that deaconesses were “trained for and consecrated to the order.”<sup>26</sup> Robert W. Sledge, a historian of mission, wrote that in the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), a recognition of the need for special status for women serving in city missions “led to the establishment of an order of women called ‘deaconesses’ in 1888.”<sup>27</sup> Charles Ferguson wrote that in 1888, “General Conference accepted the plan and announced that women wishing to engage in this work were to abandon other pursuits and ‘to devote themselves in a general way to such forms of Christian labor as may be suited to their abilities.’ No vows were to be exacted of those who joined but the order was to be set apart with a uniform and it was free to draw up rules and regulations and lay out a program of ministering to those in sore bodily need.”<sup>28</sup>

#### Deaconess Orders in Other Denominations

Writing about Baptists in England, Nicola Morris asserted that despite devaluing of their status due primarily to gender discrimination in that organization, “The Order of Baptist Deaconesses represents the Baptist Union’s most distinctive form of female ministry in the twentieth century and as such contributes to the ongoing debate about how gender inclusive models of ministry can develop.”<sup>29</sup>

Historian Barbara Brandon Schnorrenberg wrote about a group of Episcopal deaconesses in Alabama founded by Bishop Richard Hooker Wilmer. The fact that he began the Order in part to address the “problem” of “redundant women” in post-Civil War Alabama may help to explain his failure to develop an Order that was

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<sup>25</sup> Study of Ministry Commission, “Report & Recommendations, 2009-2012: Final Report to the 2012 General Conference,” 13. Copy furnished by the General Board of Higher Education & Ministry (GBHEM) in possession of the author.

<sup>26</sup> Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient*, 207-8.

<sup>27</sup> Robert W. Sledge, *“Five Dollars and Myself”: The History of Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1845-1939* (New York City: General Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church, 2005), 291.

<sup>28</sup> Charles W. Ferguson, *Organizing to Beat the Devil: Methodists and the Making of America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 347-8.

<sup>29</sup> Nicola Morris, *Sisters of the People: The Order of Baptist Deaconesses, 1895-1975* (Bristol: University of Bristol, 2002), 1, cited in Charles W. Deweese, *Women Deacons and Deaconesses: 400 Years of Baptist Service* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2005), 88.

internally healthy enough to survive for long past his death. Schnorrenberg maintains that he kept the women disempowered in part so that they would staff orphanages for which he was responsible, though she notes that “why he decided to create an order . . . is impossible to determine precisely from the evidence available.” The fact that he and the women involved understood that they were members of an Order is, however, clear.<sup>30</sup>

Some two decades later, the Episcopal Church created a much larger and more focused deaconess program. According to Mary Sudman Donovan, the 1889 General Convention “passed a canon establishing the Order of deaconesses in the Episcopal Church.” Two years of study and an internship were required for admission to the Order.<sup>31</sup>

In an essay entitled, “Faithful and Courageous Handmaidens,” Mary Anne MacFarlane discussed the process of making decisions about the Deaconess Order during the unification that created the United Church of Canada from previous Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational bodies. She notes that the Methodist deaconesses came to the table having been treated more poorly by their church than the other women. They received a grossly inadequate salary and often worked in very poor conditions. She attributes this to a lingering sense that being a deaconess was only a temporary endeavor that would end as soon as a woman married, even though in reality over half the deaconesses in any given period never married.

Most of the problems were not corrected at that time, including the circumstance of women who had been “disjoined” when they married, but who wanted later to return because they were widowed or divorced, and of women who were ready to return to their service as deaconess after they had left to care for aging parents, “a caretaking role that was assigned by society to single women. They, too, found it difficult to return to paid church work. As a result there was a constant decrease in the numbers in the order every year.”<sup>32</sup>

She also talks about deaconesses being assigned as lay ministers in Canada during WWII. “Though many of the women employed in these positions performed admirably and were respected in their congregations, they were seen as exceptional, as temporary, as ‘less than’ an ordained minister. They were praised publicly for ‘holding down the fort’ while the shortage of ordained men continued, but there was little understanding that their work had an integrity within itself and was making a distinct contribution to the practice of ministry. It was always assumed that when the war was over, things would return to normal, every church would want a ‘real’ minister, and deaconesses would quickly be replaced.”<sup>33</sup>

One point to be taken from this discussion is that despite the assignment of “less than” status to individual deaconesses by their denominational policy-maker and by various individuals and congregations, those who constructed the agenda for the United Church of Canada’s general council in 1928 did not think to deny to the women the status of Order. “The new United Church quickly established an inter-board committee on women workers to take responsibility for directing the deaconess order and ‘for studying the

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<sup>30</sup> Barbara Brandon Schnorrenberg, “Set Apart: Alabama Deaconesses, 1864-1915,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 43, no. 4 (1994), 469-490.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Sudman Donovan, “Paving the Way: Deaconess Susan Trevor Knapp,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 43, no. 4 (1994), 491-502.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Anne MacFarlane, “Faithful and Courageous Handmaidens: Deaconesses in the United Church of Canada, 1925-1945,” *Changing Roles of Women within the Christian Church in Canada*, Elizabeth Gillan Muir and Marilyn Färdig Whiteley, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995),” 244-45.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Anne MacFarlane, “Faithful and Courageous Handmaidens,” 248.

whole question of a permanent policy regarding the scope and supervision of the Deaconess Order and of other trained women workers in the United Church.”<sup>34</sup>

### Parallels Overseas

In Ghana, in South Africa, in the Philippines, and in Britain, Methodist deaconesses are members of Deaconess Orders.<sup>35</sup> Deaconesses and home missionaries are members with voice and vote in the annual conferences where they are appointed, but they simultaneously benefit from membership in the worldwide diaconal community. They have served and continue to serve throughout the world, and deaconesses from within the United Methodist Church have been strong leaders in the ecumenical and global diaconate, including participation in the founding of the Diakonia of the Americas and the Caribbean (DOTAC), and participation in DIAKONIA: The World Federation of Diaconal Associations and Diaconal Communities.<sup>36</sup>

Challenges, benefits and realities of being a “global church” are becoming better understood by United Methodists each year. Usage of the term “Order” for Methodist deaconesses in other countries is an added reason not to deny its usage. Retaining the language of Order will maintain standardized terminology in the Methodist connection.

### Secular Orders

It may also be helpful to consider briefly how the term “Order” has been regarded in secular history. There is usually no connotation of ordination and sometimes no actual connection with Christianity at all. For instance, students who are attending law school often hope to be inducted into the Order of the Coif, a well-known honorary scholastic society. In Britain, the monarch appoints honorees to the Order of the Garter. The Order of the Eastern Star, an extremely large fraternal organization founded in the mid-1800s, is an affiliate of Freemasonry. While these groups may attract members who share a set of values and are committed to similar goals, becoming a member is hardly comparable to becoming an ordained minister.

### Other Religious Orders within the UMC

One of the early forerunners of the United Methodist Men, called the Brotherhood of St. Paul, was established around the turn of the twentieth century. At one point, it had 25,000 members. “What distinguished the BSP from other Protestant brotherhoods was its resemblance to the Masons, Odd Fellows and other secular fraternities. This resemblance primarily manifested itself in elaborate initiation ceremonies, in the establishment of mutual aid funds, and in the conferral of orders: the Order of Jerusalem for new

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<sup>34</sup> *Agenda of the Third General Council 1928*, United Church of Canada, 160, cited in Mary Anne MacFarlane, “Faithful and Courageous Handmaidens, 241, 256 n.4.

<sup>35</sup> *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Church and Religions in the Modern World*, 2nd ed., Vol. 2: *The World by Segments, Religions, Peoples, Languages, Cities, Topics*, David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, Todd M. Johnson, eds. (Oxford University Press, 2001), 793-4.

<sup>36</sup> A small amount of the material in this report, including this paragraph, is found in a paper I prepared in 2012 that focused on the ritual of consecration for deaconesses. Ellen Blue, “Historical Support for Legislation Regarding Deaconesses and Home Missioners,” paper prepared for the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner, April 2012.

members, the Order of Damascus for full members, and the Order of Rome . . . for members of two years' good standing."<sup>37</sup>

The Order of St. Luke (O.S.L.) is a current example of a United Methodist-recognized Order that is composed of both laypeople and clergy. Many United Methodists enjoy and profit from their affiliation with the O.S.L. which was established over sixty years ago. Their website calls the organization "a dispersed ecumenical religious order." It continues, "Founded by Methodists, the Order also includes Lutherans, Episcopalians, Baptists, members of Holiness movement churches, and many others in the Christian families besides. Our focus is on sacramental and liturgical scholarship and practice, and continuing spiritual formation guided by the Rule of Life and Service." They state on their home page that "We are clergy and lay, married and single."<sup>38</sup> On its website, the UMC's General Board of Discipleship (GBOD) lists the Order of St. Luke as an "Affiliated Organization" and describes it as "a religious order dedicated to sacramental and liturgical scholarship, education, and practice."<sup>39</sup>

The *Book of Discipline*, 2012 mentions the O.S.L. in two places; in ¶630.4.c, cooperation with "the Order of St. Luke in promoting seminars and training events in the area of worship, including music and the other arts" is listed as a responsibility of the Conference Board of Discipleship, and in ¶1113.14, cooperation with the Order of St. Luke [and the Fellowship of United Methodists in Worship and Worship Arts] "in affirming the sacramental life embracing liturgy, preaching, music, and other arts appropriate for the inclusive worship life of the Church" is listed as a responsibility of the General Board of Discipleship.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, the *Book of Discipline* affirms the existence and usefulness of this religious Order which includes members who are interested in worship but who have not been ordained and are not seeking to become so. This Disciplinary acknowledgement would seem to represent an "official" challenge to the idea that only the ordained can belong to an Order.

#### Gender Consideration

John Wesley's decision to ordain individuals to perform baptisms and serve Eucharist to Methodists on the North American continent despite his lack of standing within the Church of England to ordain anyone stands as a challenge to any unquestioned reverence for ecclesiastical rules. This is very much in keeping with his decision to use lay ministers and to license women to preach, decisions which his mother Susannah encouraged him to make.

It seems important to acknowledge that the origin of ordination and ecclesiastical structure is itself murky. Though ordination emerged early, there seems to have been little exactitude and no universal agreement about terms and functions. Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek's research for *Ordained Women in the Early Church* showed that the term "deacon" was not used with consistency from East to West, from century to century, or from church official to church official. They note that at the time Paul wrote of Phoebe in Romans 16, there was "no distinction by sex" in terminology; Paul refers to her as *diakonos* (the same term he uses elsewhere for himself). In later years, the term *diakonissa* appeared but was used interchangeably

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<sup>37</sup> Clifford Putney, "Men and Religion: Aspects of the Church Brotherhood Movement, 1880-1920," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 43, no. 4 (1994), 450-467.

<sup>38</sup> "The Order of St. Luke," Online: <http://www.saint-luke.net>, accessed 20 July 2014.

<sup>39</sup> "Affiliated Organizations," General Board of Discipleship of the UMC, Online: <http://www.gbod.org/about/affiliated-organizations>, accessed 20 July 2014.

<sup>40</sup> *The Book of Discipline* 2012, ¶630.4.c, ¶1113.14.

with *diakonos*.<sup>41</sup> Despite murky origins, it is without doubt that as the centuries passed, the concentration of power in an ever more complex and authoritative hierarchy of clergy proceeded with very little except the occasional challenge from monarchs and emperors to abate it.

Although the more relevant issue seems to be a potential devaluing of lay ministry, it is also possible to place any denial of the term “Order” to deaconesses against a history of gender discrimination in the church. Particularly in Roman Catholic history, the relative worth of the laity is not unrelated to gender issues, since after Pope Gregory VII’s “reforms” at the end of the eleventh century, Roman Catholic clergy were expected to be celibate. The regarding of men who were intimate with women as being spiritually suspect and the claim that they could not possess “the cultic purity of men whose hands would consecrate the body and blood of Christ” has been a key theological underpinning of the prejudice that women have experienced throughout much of Christian history.<sup>42</sup>

Madigan and Osiek note that high church office was beginning to be denied to women “already by the end of the sixth century.” They add, “Certainly the rise of cultic sacramentalism that highlighted cultic purity as requisite for approaching the increasingly sacred sacramental celebration was a key factor. Anthropological research rather consistently shows that in a variety of cultures, norms of cultic purity have been controlled by males, who exclude females from the sacred because of the awesome fear of contamination associated with the blood of menstruation and childbirth and project their fear of impurity onto women themselves. Cultic purity becomes associated with males, impurity with females.” Soon, “the normal marital sexual activity of male presbyters and bishops” was “questioned from this perspective.”<sup>43</sup>

Again, while this history cannot be totally disregarded in a study of a position filled exclusively by females, it does not seem to be as relevant as does the devaluing of both laymen and laywomen as over against both clergymen and clergywomen. Thus, it is more accurate to examine the current question against the history of substantial disempowerment of the laity throughout the centuries.

### Conclusion

Writing as an Episcopal priest about the need for a revival of respect for diaconal ministries, James Monroe Barnett asserted, “The single model of ministry, the ordained priesthood of presbyterate, is like a persistent virus that infects our thinking and acting in subtle but insidious ways.” He wrote, “The presbyterate of the past has aptly been called the ‘omnivorous priesthood,’ having become all-encompassing, although not so much by intention as by an unintentional evolution over the centuries. Its tendency to be perpetuated both by the ordained and the laity is certainly natural in an institution that rightly holds its tradition in high esteem. However, the renewal and vitality of the Church in our time requires that its subtle encroachments on other ministries be recognized and abandoned.”<sup>44</sup>

Now that women are becoming assimilated into the clergy hierarchy, the need for professional, theologically trained laypersons is reasserting itself. In recent years, more and more women and men with professional credentialing are feeling called to express their service as part of their vocation. As God

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<sup>41</sup> Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, eds. and translators, *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> Fiona J. Griffiths, “The Cross and the *Cura monialium*: Robert of Arbrissel, John the Evangelist, and the Pastoral Care of Women in the Age of Reform,” *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 83, no. 2 (April 2008), 311.

<sup>43</sup> Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 205.

<sup>44</sup> James Monroe Barnett, *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1995), 153-4.

continues to call women and men into ordained ministry, God also continues to call women and men to professional, trained ministry which they perform among the laity, all of whom are called to service through their baptisms. The UMC continues to reflect upon, to learn about, and to celebrate the different kinds of leadership that we will need in the decades to come. Part of that reflection will involve how we might best empower laypeople for formal and informal leadership.

The *World Christian Encyclopedia* says the word “Orders” refers to “the office and dignity of a person in the Christian ministry.”<sup>45</sup> The *Book of Discipline*, in a discussion of the current clergy Orders, states: “An order is a covenant community within the church to mutually support, care for, and hold accountable its members for the sake of the life and mission of the church” ¶1306.<sup>46</sup> This same strong sense of community undergirds, empowers, and supports deaconesses and home missionaries in their ministry. It calls them into accountability, affords them opportunities to struggle together to find answers to critical problems, and supports them in their personal and professional struggles.<sup>47</sup> “Deaconesses and home missionaries function as a lay order, always struggling with and trying to appropriate to themselves emerging forms of Christian discipleship. This kind of commitment and obedience requires structure, culture, relationship, and community.”<sup>48</sup>

The fact that the *Book of Discipline* has mandated an Order of Elders and an Order of Deacons within United Methodism should not be viewed as an indication that these are the only two ways that “Order” can correctly be used within the UMC, or that “Order” should now be limited to those who have been ordained. To deny the language of Order to deaconesses would be to usurp a status that has throughout all of Christian history been shared by laity.

The deaconesses of the early twentieth century often spoke of themselves as seeking to bring “life abundant” to their neighbors.<sup>49</sup> They have brought life abundant to Methodism, as well, and their Order should continue to foster life abundant among the deaconesses and home missionaries themselves in the future just as it has in the past.

*Dr. Ellen Blue is the Mouzon Biggs, Jr. Professor of the History of Christianity and United Methodist Studies at Phillips Theological Seminary. She is the author of St. Mark's and the Social Gospel: Methodist Women and Civil Rights in New Orleans, 1895-1965 (University of Tennessee Press, 2011) and the co-author, with Charles M. Wood, of Attentive to God (Abingdon, 2008). She holds the Ph.D. from Tulane University and the M.Div. from Southern Methodist University, and she is an elder in full connection with the Louisiana Annual Conference of the UMC. She received a Lilly Faculty Fellowship awarded for her research on the UMC in post-Katrina New Orleans; a Women in United Methodist History Research Grant awarded by the General Commission on Archives and History (GCAH) for her interviews with*

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<sup>45</sup> *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 669.

<sup>46</sup> *Book of Discipline*, 2012 (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), ¶1306, 221.

<sup>47</sup> “Theology of Mission and Relationship with the Church Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner,” Internal document developed by the Deaconess Program Office in collaboration with the Committee on Deaconess Service, September 2008.

<sup>48</sup> “Theology of Mission and Relationship with the Church Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner,” Internal document developed by the Deaconess Program Office in collaboration with the Committee on Deaconess Service, September 2008.

<sup>49</sup> “I am come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.” John 10:10, KJV

*deaconesses at the Brooks-Howell Home; and a Women in United Methodist History Writing Award from GCAH for an article on the women of Hartzell UMC in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans.*