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**THE OVERSEAS MISSION OF THE
WESLEY DEACONESS ORDER:
Theological Aberration or Inspiration?**

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THE OVERSEAS MISSION OF THE WESLEY DEACONESS ORDER: Theological Aberration or Inspiration?

There has been no published work on the history of the Wesley Deaconess Order overseas, nor has there been work done on a theological understanding which would underpin the re-formation of the deacon's ministry in the Methodist Church in Great Britain. The purpose of this dissertation is to consider the theological imperatives that gave rise to the overseas missions of the Wesley Deaconess Order and how they were affected by its praxis of ministry, while reflecting on how that theology and praxis could inform the developing theologies of its modern successor, the Methodist Diaconal Order.

In the opening chapters the roots of diaconal ministry, in both the Bible and its development in the early church, are surveyed in the light of modern scholarship. There is a focus on the positive aspects of this ministry in contrast to the sometimes negative position brought about by its debasement over several centuries of neglect. From the middle of the Nineteenth century several strands of deaconess ministry came into being and the place of the Wesley Deaconess Order in these developments is considered. Comparisons are made with the deaconess ministries of the various Protestant churches and the permanent diaconate in the Roman Catholic Church.

The main part of the work contains a review of the history of the overseas mission, drawing out a model of the deaconesses' praxis from which is extrapolated a theology, enacted rather than recorded. Methodism's view of the Wesley Deaconess Order was affected by the social position of women and it is the author's aim to demonstrate how the deaconesses developed a practical theology of diaconal ministry beyond the limitations of the institutional church of their time.

The historical record of the Wesley Deaconess missions and the evolution of indigenous deaconess orders in the countries in which they worked have produced findings which demonstrate an innovative ability to adapt to diversity. This innovation has occurred whilst maintaining a constant core of understanding which can be related to biblical concepts of diaconal ministry and to the practice of the primitive church.

1.0 AN INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM STATEMENT:

1.1.1 Theology

The context from which I have considered the question in the title is both theological and historical. I first encountered the theological question when researching for a Master of Ministry degree. There seemed to be a dichotomy between the statements of the Methodist Church regarding deaconesses (now deacons) and the praxis of the deaconesses, which continues to this day. While to some extent this can be seen in the work in the home field, the overseas mission brings this duality into an even sharper focus.

During the course of my research, it became clear that there was almost no published or collated literature about the Wesley Deaconess Order and that its overseas mission, particularly that period before the memory of any deaconesses still alive, was almost unknown. The history of other Deaconess Orders is somewhat better documented and these help to illustrate the development and variation brought about by the differing theological bases from which they grew.

1.1.2 The Historical Context

To explain the ethos and purpose of the present Methodist Diaconal Order to the Church in general terms, it seems important that the Order be given a context in time and within the framework so demonstrated. There would then be a logical process through which the ethos and purpose could be related to those of the Methodist Church as a whole.

In 1990, the Order celebrated its centenary. Even in that year, the only record produced was a short pamphlet with a very limited circulation. In 2002, at a time when most of the research for this project was completed, a new book on the history of the Order was published, entitled *Saved to Serve* by E Dorothy Graham. This useful publication draws on many of the same resources as my own research, but covers a wider historical field.

The material in overseas work is limited in quantity and to the purely factual record. Graham makes no attempt to comment on the work she records.

The primary source material I have used is to be found within the magazines of the Wesley Deaconess Order, which were produced in a variety of forms from September 1901 until 1990. *Flying Leaves* was the first of these magazines and by far the most detailed. Unfortunately, as each new format was produced the frequency of publication and the reduction in content have meant a falling off in the detail of the records. The records of the Methodist Missionary Society have provided information for some later work. Personal conversations with deaconesses who have served in some of the overseas situations have been invaluable for the period since the Second World War.

The principal purpose of this project has been to explore the theology in praxis and to examine its traditional roots alongside the culturally dictated stance of the church in each period and situation. This cultural influence can also be traced through biblical and early church interpretations. Barnett (1995) and others have examined the history and theology of the diaconate, although all of these attempts have come from within churches with a threefold ministry and have seen the ministry of the deacon as but a step in a hierarchical ladder. Collins (1990) has produced a valuable source work for the understanding of the early church's use of the terms '*diakonos*', '*diakonia*' and '*diakoneo*'. Despite the fact that the Wesley Deaconess Order developed in a singular manner, there has been no comparable examination of the theological basis of deaconess orders within the Methodist Church. Other Churches from the Reformed tradition have recently begun to produce some literature around diaconal theology, but there is as much difference as similarity between the Lutheran Orders and the Methodist Deacons.

1.1.3 The Questions Asked

The main research question is:

How does the practice of ministry adopted by the deaconesses inform the Methodist Church and the wider church in its search for an understanding of diaconal ministry

today? Other questions that are addressed within the research as a consequence of this include:

- Was there a justification in biblical authority or tradition for adopting this view of diaconal ministry?
- How does the establishment of the Wesley Deaconess Order relate to the other new orders in the nineteenth century?
- How did the different forms of service offered in the six areas of interest contribute to a unified understanding of diaconal ministry?
- Do the overseas orders planted by the deaconesses themselves offer any insights for this study?
- What conclusions about the understanding of diaconal ministry can we offer to the church today from the traditions established through the empirical theology of the deaconesses?

1.2 AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this work is to study the theological imperatives that gave impetus to the overseas missions of the Wesley Deaconess Order and its praxis of ministry, and to consider how these should inform the developing theologies of its modern successor, the Methodist Diaconal Order.

This will be achieved by working through the following objectives:

- A short examination of the historical diaconate. Looking at its roots in biblical traditions Canon (1989), the use made of '*diakonos*' and its cognates in the Bible and other sources (Collins, 1990).
- A survey of the nineteenth century diaconates. It will be beneficial to examine the roots of each of the different styles of diaconal order that arose at this time and to consider their relationship to each other. Equally, it will be profitable to establish why they were founded and consider the issue of women's ministry as a phenomenon of this period.
- The separate consideration of these areas of service for the Wesley Deaconess Order is similarly important because of the differing requirements in each of the

mission fields discussed. One of the objectives will be to establish in what way the service provided demonstrated a universal purpose. It is my intention to show that the purpose of all the deaconesses was primarily the same, although each was required to attain that purpose by a different activity.

- The Wesley Deaconess Order founded new orders in Australia, New Zealand, Ceylon, the West Indies, South Africa and parts of West Africa. There has been no attempt to record the planting, growth and status of these Orders. Questions that need to be addressed are how, and if, they differed from their mother order? What effect on their understanding of themselves has been brought about because their inception was wrought by women rather than men, as was the case with the European orders?
- What theological conclusions can be drawn from this work that would assist the present Methodist Diaconal Order and the Methodist Church of Great Britain in its attempts to define the ministry of the deacon within that Order and that Church? There should be a resultant benefit to the wider church, which is still uncertain of the way forward for permanent deacons.

1.3 CENTRAL THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

I will argue that the interpretation of '*diakonos*' lived out by the deaconesses is fully Scriptural and one that is both traditionally and currently held in parts of the Christian Church, and that it would provide the foundation for an appropriate Methodist understanding of the Diaconate as an order of ministry complementary to, but not identical with, the '*presbyteros*'.

1.4 METHODOLOGY

This theological historical study is done from within the Methodist tradition.

The research questions posed will be answered by use of the following methods:

- to study and evaluate the historical diaconate and analysis of the biblical evidence for such a ministry using a wide range of sources. The work of Collins (1990) in researching the source language will be of particular value. The

ministry of the diaconate in the early church will be considered from the writings of such as Barnett (1995), and a study of the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (Hoole, 1985) and other Early Church Fathers.

- to study the differences in the variety of nineteenth century orders through the writings of Stephenson (1890) and M^cCord and Parker (1960).
- to collate the data of the Wesley Deaconess magazines so that it can be a coherent source for the understanding of the overseas mission.
- to establish a consensus of understanding by interviewing or corresponding with the surviving deaconesses of the mission field and relating it to the written records of their former colleagues.
- to establish the justification for the theological standpoint adopted by the deaconesses.

2.0 THE HISTORICAL DIACONATE FROM THE EARLY CHURCH TO THE REFORMATION

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The Aim of this chapter is to look at the origins of diaconal ministry through the biblical and historical record and to consider what theological insights are available within this record. I will attempt to show that the concept of the deacon as a server at tables is not a viable image for the office that came into the church at this time. I will demonstrate that the office as we find it in the primitive church relates to a much more concrete concept of this ministry as one of agent or representative. We will then look at what happened to the office as the church developed.

2.2 BIBLICAL CONCEPTS

2.2.1 Service and the Servant in the Gospels

The word *diakonia* (for ease of use I will use the transliterated Greek throughout) only appears once in the gospels and *diakonos* only eight times and not at all in **Luke**. It is *diakoneo* that has the most frequent usage, appearing twenty-two times in all in eighteen verses and used by all four gospel writers.

A clue as to the way the word *diakonos* would have been understood by the writers of the gospels lies in **Mark 9:35**: “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all”. This story is told in all three of the synoptic gospels, but only **Mark** uses the servant term. **Matthew** speaks of being humble like a child, and **Luke** employs the phrase “least among you”. But the illustration that Jesus is using of a child does not fit with the sense of “table waiter” or “least important”. As an illustration of Jesus’ meaning, it more clearly implies powerlessness or someone who is under authority. His would seem to be the sense given to *diakonos* when it is used elsewhere in the gospels such as in **Matthew 22:13**, where it is used of a king’s attendants.

The other word in the servant group is *diakoneo*, which is used widely throughout the gospels. Much of the difficulty we encounter in our interpretation of this word comes

from our modern usage and the socio-political overtones we read into the word 'service'. *Diakoneo* is used in a number of situations, some of which can have the implication of menial work. If it were translated as "cared for" it would convey its original meaning more clearly to the modern ear. An example of how translation into English can create quite different understandings of what is going on is the story of the temptation of Jesus as told in **Mark 1:13** and **Matthew 4:11**. The NIV translated *diakoneo* as "attended" in each case and the NRSV as "waited on". To the modern ear, both of those terms come from the world of catering and only a few decades ago they would have suggested the servant's hall. In contrast the AV translates the word as "ministered to". Even today this terminology implies "caring for" rather than menial labour. When the gospel stories are read with this latter meaning they make much more sense as a description of diaconal ministry.

2.2.2 Service and the Concept of Deacon in Acts and the Pauline Epistles

Within the other New Testament writings these servant/service words have a more specific meaning than that used by the gospel writers. It is also within the translations of the New Testament epistolary writings that interpretation comes into play most vigorously as the translators attempt to fit the use of these terms to their understanding of 'minister'.

There are three Greek words that are important to the context of a study of the understanding of the deacon's ministry. The first of these is *diakonia*, which is usually translated 'service', with the understanding that the original had overtones of table service. *Diakonia* appears in 31 verses in ten New Testament writings outside the gospels and is used thirteen times in the epistles to the church at Corinth alone.

Next in frequency of use is *diakonos*, which appears in twenty verses but is never used in **Acts**. It is the word that we translate as 'deacon' when we refer to an office or title. It continues to be used this way in later church writings. The literal translation would seem to be servant or waiter. John Collins (1990) prefers the translation 'go-between' as giving more of the sense of how it was used by the society of the time. Along with this particular usage comes the idea of acting on behalf of or performing a service at the behest of another. We will look at this in greater depth later.

The Greek word most widely used, even if only appearing fourteen times within this section of the New Testament, is *diakoneo*, “to perform a service”, “to act as a servant”, or “to minister to”, for which many translators offer the meaning “to wait on someone at table”. In some ways, as I will indicate later, I feel that the use of this word has an important bearing on the way we should understand its two sisters. *Diakoneo* has been given a wide range of meanings by translators and, perhaps, has had most violence done to the sense of its original meaning in the attempt to make good English.

In the book of *Acts* there is no use of *diakonos*. No one is given that title by the writer in any part of this work and most modern scholars are of the opinion that the origin of deacons is not to be found in *Acts* 6. Nor is there anything within *Acts* that is equivalent to the later understanding of deacon except, that is, the differentiation made between the two roles as suggested in the text: the ministry of the word and the ministry of caring for the needy (Barth, 1962: 890). Although there has been discussion about the story of *Acts* 6 indicating a conflict between the Hellenists and the Hebrews, this problem did not seem to have any involvement in the early attribution of diaconal precedents.

From a very early stage in the life of the church, Irenæus (ca 165) claimed Stephen as the first deacon and in the *Canons of Neocæsarea* (ca 314 to 325) the seven in *Acts* are pointed to as the prototype for deacons (Stevenson, 1987: 293). Whatever actually happened in *Acts* 6, it is important to ascertain the role that the first deacons were asked to fulfil.

In *Acts* 6:1 *diakonia* is generally translated as “distribution of food” (NIV, NRSV). There is nothing in the text to make it clear that this is the precise ‘service’ that is being spoken of. This has to be inferred from the meaning of *diakonos*. This meaning includes the sense of waiting on tables, which is the usual translation of *diakoneo* in verse 2, linked with *trapeza* meaning not only a table, but a counting house. TF Torrance would suggest that the seven were in fact proto-presbyters, but nonetheless he says of deacons: “So far as deacons are concerned, there was never any suggestion in the New Testament or in the early church that their office was restricted to the ministry of alms and care” (Torrance, 1984: 13). This would fit well with the understanding of the Church Fathers as described by Ignatius in his *Epistle to the Trallians*: “The ministry of the deacon is not that of merely food and drink, but is the service of the Church of God.” That the ‘service’ alluded to in *Acts* 6:1 is about food and drink alone cannot be certain. That it

was the service of the church is certain and that it was a work of charity would fit the context, but that is as much as we can say with any confidence.

Collins (1992: 36) suggests that *diakonia* is equivalent to preaching (ie the ministry of the word) and he refers to **Acts 20:24**: “However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace” and **Acts 21:19**: “Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry” as evidence. The first text clearly speaks of a service of witnessing to the gospel, whilst the second text refers to the results of Paul's *diakonia* amongst the Gentiles. Yet only a little earlier we are told that: “The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide *help* for the brothers living in Judea” (**Acts 11:29**), where the text speaks of deciding to provide *diakonia* for the brothers living in Judea. In this context, *diakonia* was not the ministry of the word. This variation of the meaning as used by one writer implies that the context is crucial in our understanding of the meaning of this word. This suggests that it would be unwise to be dogmatic in our interpretation of the term *diakonia*.

In Paul's letter to the **Romans**, both *diakonia* (**11:13; 12:7; 15:31**) and *diakoneo* (**15:25**) are used in the sense of a ministry of service. The context in **Romans 12:7** – “If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach” – makes this particularly clear. Here teaching and prophecy express the ministry of the Word in contrast to the ministry of service.

It is in **Romans** that we first encounter *diakonos*. It is only used three times, but these are important passages for our understanding. First we read “For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” (**Rom 13:4**). *Diakonos* is used here twice to mean ‘someone who acts on behalf of God’. In the NIV translation this is reinforced by adding the word ‘agent’. As used in this passage, *diakonos* has nothing to do with table service, but is clearly seen to have an *ambassadorial* connotation.

Later, we read: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea” (**Rom 16:1**). There has always been dispute about the word *diakonos* here.

Feminist scholars are convinced it should read 'deacon', but those scholars opposed to the idea of Paul referring to a woman in ministry in the church insist that Phoebe was a benefactress, not an official (Fiorenza, 1990: 60-65). Paul's usage of *diakonos* in chapter 13 might lead us to assume that Phoebe was at least an agent of the church, someone who was acting on its behalf. Of course, when put in its context the passage follows the sending of Timothy into Thessalonica as Paul's *diakonos* (see **1 Thess 3:2**, where Ambrosiaster, Pelagius, Basil, Theodore and others have *diakonos*; Nestle/Aland has *sunergon*). It is in Timothy's churches that deacon is first seen used as a title (cf **Phil 1:1**; **1 Tim 3:8**). John Ziesler (1990: 137) comments: "Although we are uncertain about the exact nature of these offices, the letters' recipients clearly were not, and their knowledge can be taken for granted."

The use of the three diaconal words in the Corinthian epistles is so varied that it reinforces the contention that it is inappropriate to take one simple view on the use of the words, as though they were being employed uniformly. It is obviously more complex a matter than that.

Paul uses *diakonos* six times in the Corinthian epistles. In all but one case it is clear from the context that he is talking about an agent, a servant who acts on behalf of someone, or something, else. The New Jerome Biblical Commentary speaks of "instrumental ministry" (Brown, Fitzmyer & Murphy, eds, 1990: 802), Paul "mandated by God" (p 819), servants of righteousness who "do the work of Satan" and of representing Christ (p 827). He uses *diakonia* thirteen times. In almost all of these usages it is quite clear that he is speaking of a ministry of service: "This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God" (**2 Cor 9:12**). "You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints" (**1 Cor 16:15**). The New Jerome Biblical Commentary says of this verse: "Seeing a need, they met it. The basis of Christian authority is effective service to the community".

In Paul's epistle to the believers in Galatia we read: "If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not!" (**Gal 2:17**). The NIV translates *diakonos* as 'promotes', whereas the NRSV has 'servant', while the RSV uses the translation 'agent' keeping the

context of “acting on behalf of” which is inherent in the other translations, if not as clearly stated. Clearly ‘agent’ is one of the principal meanings for *diakonia* in Paul’s understanding.

The use of *diakonia* in **Ephesians** refers to works of service to build up the church and it is set in the context of gifts of ministry not of charity (4:12). It becomes clear, therefore, that Paul did not see those who carried out *diakonia* as mere waiters at table, which a literal translation would suggest. As one works through the New Testament material, Collins’ interpretation of the term *diakonia* as ‘go-between’ has much merit, and he goes on to provide a more complete understanding of the term as ‘agent’.

It is in one of the Pastoral Epistles that we first come upon the clear use of *diakonos* as a title (1 Tim 3:8). *Diakonos* is used alongside the word for bishop, so that there can be no confusion about it being a separate and different office. It appears this way on two occasions, whilst elsewhere it is translated as minister (4:6).

The use of deacon as a title appears in one other place. That is in Paul’s introduction to the epistle to the Philippians (Phil 1:1). Some authorities see it as a reference to a function rather than a direct reference to an office, and the NRSV translates the terms for bishop and deacon as overseer and helper. *Diakonos* was the term Paul used when describing those he sent to work on his behalf. According to some of the early texts (*The Greek New Testament*, 1993: 700, 701), when Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica, he describes him as God’s deacon (1 Thess 3:2). An interesting development is seen when Paul writes to Philippi on behalf of Timothy and himself: he refers to them both as servants, but uses the word *doulos*, which means slave. On other occasions he would normally have used *diakonos* in this context. If the church at Philippi already had bishops and deacons as offices then *diakonos* would no longer fit his needs in that context.

The Judeo/Christian churches of Antioch and the Syrian area seemed to favour the term elder (*presbuteros*) as being more in the tradition to which they were accustomed. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in all the churches they founded on that first missionary journey (cf Acts 14:23). These elders seem to have been closely related to the courts of elders of the Jewish synagogues and would thus fit comfortably into those churches from a Jewish background.

Diakoneo is the most widely used of these three terms. It occurs in 32 verses in all, appearing in all the gospels and fourteen times in the epistles. Its context always implies serving others. How that 'service' is interpreted depends very much on the situation in which it is used. CEB Cranfield (1966: 37) tells us that in Plato, *diakoneo* is only considered as honourable when rendered to the state, but its use in the New Testament seems to imply an honourable service rather than a servile one.

The most problematic usage of *diakoneo* is in Acts 6:2, where the NIV translates it as "to wait on tables". This could be a literal translation of the Greek phrase, although *trapeza* can mean 'a counting house' or even a bank. This translation offers a clear understanding of bringing food and drink to others sat at the table but the rest of the story in which it is set does not seem to fit this concept. These 'waiters' are 'set aside' by the laying on of hands and prayer. The virtues required are spiritual and some go on to evangelise. There is no clear answer to the difficulty this passage presents. This "service of others" is contrasted with the service of the Word of God and this would seem to be the only time when serving God is not linked with serving others.

Linking an honourable serving of others with the service of God makes a consistent sense of the usage throughout the New Testament (cf Heb 6:10; 1 Pet 1:12; 4:10). Despite its use in a variety of situations, understanding it in this way makes for a clear train of related ideas.

If *diakoneo* is understood as the service of others within a context of serving God, that understanding clarifies what we mean today in our use of *diakonia* as the service we offer within or on behalf of the church. In the same way we have a starting point for an understanding of *diakonos*/deacon as someone who serves God through the service of others. While this is still a much wider definition than a specific church office, it does offer a point of reference for our further consideration.

2.3 THE GOLDEN AGE

The period from Ignatius of Antioch to the Council of Nicæa, the five centuries from AD 100 until 600, has been referred to as "the Golden Age of the diaconate" (Barnett, 1995: 43). Despite the fact that the beginnings of decline can be discerned as early as

the fourth century, this is a time of growth and development of the diaconal ministry. It was the deacons' relationship to the bishops that brought about this state of their fortunes. By the fourth century, the rise in numbers and the changing role of presbyters created tensions that can be seen in the statements of some of the Councils and the response of some presbyters to their situation (Jerome, Epistle 146). It is almost certain that the changes that were taking place were regional at first, as would have been true of many of the changes happening to the church during this period (Brown, 1989: 1345). It could be said that the centralisation of power in Rome and the drive for unity of expression radically transformed the growth pattern of the church.

At the very beginning of this period, Clement, the third bishop of Rome, could write in his notes on the First Epistle to the Corinthians XLII.I.5:

So preaching in the country and city, they appointed their firstfruits, having tested them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should believe.

Only a little later, Ignatius writes (1985a) from what is obviously a different tradition and a different place:

Since therefore, I have been deemed worthy to behold you through Damas, your bishop, who is worthy of God, and your worthy presbyters Bassus and Apollonius and my fellow-servant the Deacon Sotion, of whom I have joy, because he is subject to the bishop as to the grace of God, and to the presbytery as to the law of Jesus Christ.

It would seem evident from these two examples that the church at Corinth was accustomed to bishops and deacons alone, while at Antioch and Magnesia they had bishops, presbyters and deacons. There has been much discussion as to the role of these Ignatian bishops, whether they were monarchical (ie autocratic) or monoepiscopal (ie presidential) with most authorities favouring the latter (Barnett, 1995: 48). In this case the bishop would be seen as a president of a council of elders/presbyters. Within this model the presbyter was a council member, a person of authority, but not a holder of a liturgical function himself. The liturgical functions were vested in the bishop, elected to carry these out.

Separate from this group were the deacons. Although it has been suggested that the council of elders could have included some deacons, there seem to be no references that

actually point to a deacon acting as an elder. Some feel that it was at this time, the beginning of the second century, when the Jewish Church and the Pauline churches came together to form a single body, into which both forms of ministry were grafted, with the council of elders having the ruling role with oversight being offered by a bishop, who may have been first among equals (Pinnock, 1992: 11). This union would not obviously alter the deacon's role in any significant way. Some commentators say that the deacon's role was one without any particular antecedents in either Judaism or elsewhere, but grew out of the Christian experience. Torrance (1984: 503-518) suggests, however, a relationship with Jewish law that entitled a community of one hundred and twenty strong to have its own Sanhedrin, numbering seven appointed by the laying on of hands. Calvin (1956: Book 4, Chap 19, Sec 32) accuses deacons of the Church of Rome of claiming descent from Levites. The Levites were consecrated and set apart to serve the tabernacle in every way except that of the priest. There are some parallels here to the deacons' role.

Whether there was any liturgical function invested in the deacon at this time is not certain. It is likely that it was normal for there to be some, since Tertullian (in Stevenson, ed, 1987: 172) includes deacons with presbyters amongst those on whom the bishop might confer the power to baptise. What is clear from a reading of the letters of Ignatius is that he himself held the deacon in high regard, speaking of deacons as his fellow servants or "those most dear to me". While Ignatius is considered the father of the threefold order of ministry, he could not be said to be the father of the downgrading of the deacon to a lesser third order. Ignatius (1985b) likens the deacon to Jesus Christ, the Bishop to God and the presbyters to the Apostles. In a ranking such as that there is no obvious reason to assume a tiered hierarchy, rather a representative ordering with each ministry having its own value and all being subject to the community through the process of election and selection.

Another description of the early church, by Justin Martyr, offers a further insight into the deacon's position within that church:

There is then brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of wine mixed with water... those who are called by us deacons give to each of those present to partake of the bread and wine mixed with water over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and to those who are absent they carry away a portion.

(in Stevenson, ed, 1987: 63, 64.)

Once again there is reason to understand that the deacon had a set function and role within the liturgy. Justin does not mention bishop or presbyter, but the use of the phrase “president of the brethren” suggests that we are encountering another term for bishop and elders.

Thus it can be seen that the early church provides us with a variety of accounts of the deacon’s role and that, during the second and third centuries, deacons were respected ministers of the church with a definite liturgical role alongside the bishop. Deacons were considered to be successors to the seven in some way, if only in that they included in their role the oversight of alms, which had been understood to be the service of the seven in **Acts 6**.

By the fourth century we find a change in the way deacons are perceived by some presbyters. Jerome delivered a famous polemic against “a mere server of tables”, whilst Ambrosiaster wrote of the inferiority of deacons in the following passage quoted by Barnett:

The Apostle Paul proves that a presbyter is a bishop when he instructs Timothy, whom he had ordained as a presbyter, what sort of person he is to create a bishop. For what is a bishop but the first presbyter, that is, the highest priest? Finally, he calls these men none other than fellow presbyters and fellow priests. Does a bishop call his minister fellow deacons? No, for they are much inferior, and it is a disgrace to mix them up with a judge. For in Alexandria and throughout Egypt, if a bishop is lacking a presbyter confirms.

(1995: 103.)

This period of conflict over the nature of the diaconate was to run over nearly 200 years as changes gradually took place in the Church. The various references to deacons in the Canons of the Councils at Arles and Nicæa indicate a pattern of withdrawal of rights and privileges from deacons. Wherever deacons were seen to be involved in what had come to be regarded as the role of the presbyter, this was to be forbidden. Canon 18 of the Council of Nicæa reads:

It has come to the knowledge of the holy and great Synod that, in some districts and cities, the deacons administer the Eucharist to the presbyters, whereas neither canon nor custom permits that they who have no right to offer should give the Body of Christ to them that do offer... let all such practices be done away.

(1899.)

Even as late as AD 625, the Quinsext Council complains of deacons with ecclesiastical office sitting above the presbyters at table.

2.4 DEACONESSES

At what point in the growth of the church women were first ordained as deaconess is even more uncertain than the origin of deacons as 'ministers'. There are possible traces going back to the early years of the second century with Lucian remarking on deaconesses visiting prisons (Smith, 1910: 10). In his letter to Trajan circa 112, Pliny writes of obtaining information about the Christians by torturing two women called deaconesses. Pliny's use of *ministrae* seems to infer a technical use of the term and since he has referred to them as slaves it would seem unlikely that he used this to mean servants of any kind.

By the time the Apostolic Constitutions were produced (ca 400), they were describing a role for deaconesses that greatly paralleled that of the deacon. In almost every instance of a mention of deacons, a similar role is ascribed to deaconesses and this document also offers the form of ordination for a deaconess as prescribed by Bartholomew.

What is different is that deaconesses were required to work with and organise the work of women. In particular this role concerned those areas of church life that would have brought male bishops or deacons into intimate contact with women. In baptism, the deaconesses would prepare women for the baptism and accompany them into the water. Part of the ceremony would have included a clean robe and it was the deaconesses' function to take the women into the water from behind screens and then out into a robing area, but they would not pronounce the words of blessing. Pastoral visiting of the sick was also seen to be an area in which it was more appropriate for women to act as the bishop's emissary than it would be for a man to do so. The application of the oil of unction was again an intimate act, depending on the area of illness. In a letter to Olympiada (a deaconess in Byzantium around AD 405), John Chrysostom describes her work as: "To feed the hungry Christ, to give to drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to give hospitality to the stranger, to visit the sick, to come to the captive" (Posternak, 2000). There is some suggestion that deaconesses in the second century administered

sacraments to women and burned incense at the altar since Pope Soter forbade these practices, but this may have been only in the Syriac churches (Posternak, 2000).

It is possible, but by no means clear, that the deaconess possessed a different status to the deacon, but both in the Apostolic Constitution and the Council in Trullo (Percival, 1899) they are listed with and counted amongst the clergy. It seems likely that the early acceptance of deaconesses foundered as status became an issue in the church and a hierarchical structure was imposed on the church. Women's status in society generally would have made it impossible for the deaconesses to have positions of authority within a church becoming concerned with power and clerical rights.

By the end of the sixth century, the order seemed to have begun to disappear in most of the western church, although there continued to be mentions in some parts of the west until the beginning of the eleventh century. An interesting relic of the ordination of deaconesses in the west lies in the profession ceremony of Carthusian nuns, in which the bishop delivers to them a stole and maniple. This link with the past seems to indicate that a real liturgical role was included in the functions of the deaconesses within that tradition.

It is not at all clear as to exactly when deaconesses ceased to be considered necessary. Quite possibly the change happened in different ways in different places and could have depended on the way in which the church developed in the countries concerned. There does seem to be a connection with liturgical process. As the church became more westernised, certain changes began to take place. Priests and bishops ceased to involve themselves in the form of pastoral healing that had been a feature of the early church. What was done would be in public and without the need for women to bare themselves. By the end of the sixth century in the area in which the church in the west was represented, Christianity was the only religion and adult baptism was no longer the norm. These changes would have taken away much of the necessity for deaconesses and, in a society in which women were not accepted in positions of power, this offered the church hierarchy an opportunity to cease ordaining women to the only office open to them.

For women there was soon no way to offer service in the church other than through entering a religious order. In the eastern churches, deaconesses continued to be a

recognised ministry for some centuries after it was discontinued in the west. It was not until the eighth century that it slid into disuse, though the rite of ordination of deaconesses continued to appear in the Byzantine service books until the twelfth century (Pinnock, 1992: 20).

2.5 SOCIAL ASPECTS

The Christian understanding of *diakonia* as a necessary response to Christ's sacrifice involved a way of life in which all of the 'brethren' (ie believers) were cared for by the whole church. This was such a central aspect of Christianity that it became an identifying mark of the Christian community. The emperor Julian was so taken up by it that he attempted to involve the priests of the Hellenistic religion he was promoting in a similar welfare project. The work must have been a major part of the church's effort. By the middle of the third century, the church in Rome was feeding a thousand widows and other persons in need. This had grown so much that by the end of the fourth century the church in Syrian Antioch was feeding 3,000 people. Alongside this, some church funds were spent on buying the freedom of converted slaves.

By the time the emperor Constantine had made the Empire into a Christian society, almsgiving was a factor of Christian life that became integrated into his civil government. The integration of church and secular government had some advantages for the church, but it also had many disadvantages. Not least amongst these was the problem of whom the bishops served, God or the emperor? Within this new relationship, the deacons were seen more as welfare officers than spiritual leaders.

It seems to have been during this period that *diakonia* as an act of service to the needy began to be seen as a spiritual duty benefiting the giver by "recompensing Christ for his self-denying love" (Lampe, 1966: 53).

2.6 A VANISHING OFFICE

Prior to the fifth century, the Diaconate flourished in the western Church. After this period, however, (and for various reasons) it experienced a slow decline that ended in its survival only as "an intermediate stage for candidates preparing for priestly ordination" (Catholic Truth Society, 1998: 14). Other writers on the subject (Gibaut: 1997: 36)

would place the decline of the diaconate as a separate order from somewhere in the fourth century. Certainly, by the latter part of the fourth century, the idea of *cursus honorum* (the grading of orders) had come into being and a clear hierarchical structure of church orders was in formation. Barnett has found several, differing instances of hierarchical ordination and patterns of office in various parts of the church at about this time (1995: 105). Equally clearly is that it was not a change that of equal proportions in all places. We need to recognise that the Church at this time was one of different traditions and cultures.

Despite acknowledging the evidence for a pluralistic church, many writers have worked from the premise that the Church grew as a single organism, branching out as it developed and spread over an ever greater area. A more helpful model might be to understand the church as a group of families growing from a common ancestor, but separated by time and location. As the family grows it meets other families and together they tend to consolidate into a clan structure. Eventually several clans combine into one greater tribe and a new central set of rules predominate. A précis of this pattern of development is given in *The New Jerome Bible Commentary* and suggests that there was a universal pattern by the second century. However, the quotation from the Canons of the Council of Nicæa mentioned earlier seems to indicate that there were different patterns still in place at this time. The varying strands can be seen in the writings of several of the church fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch, Hippolytus, Jerome the Presbyter, and others.

As the Church in a given place developed the liturgical role of the presbyterate, and presbyters were changed from being councils of elders to undertaking some of the liturgical functions of the bishop, so the role of the deacon also changed. These changes indicate an internal power struggle in the life of the church. The change of attitude towards deacons is perhaps best illustrated by two quotations:

The deacons who are most dear to me, have been entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ who was with the Father before the world began.

(Ignatius of Antioch, 1985a.)

Some 230 years after these positive words were originally uttered, Jerome was able to say:

I am told that someone has been mad enough to put deacons before presbyters, that is, before bishops. For when the apostle clearly teaches that presbyters are the same as bishops, must not a mere server of tables and widows be insane to set himself up arrogantly over men through whose prayers the body and blood of Christ are produced?

(Jerome, 1893.)

This power struggle ran over several centuries of change and can be seen in many aspects in the life of the Church. Before things began to change, the deacon was an honoured assistant to the bishop, often engaged in work on his behalf, even in Councils. Eusebius represented Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, at the Council of Antioch in AD 264. Athanasius played a leading part in the Council of Nicæa in 325 while still a deacon, before succeeding Alexander as bishop. Throughout the third and fourth centuries there were still important roles for deacons to play, although the comments of Jerome written circa 340 suggest this was not a universal situation.

2.7 THE TRANSITIONAL DEACON

By the end of the fifth century, the hierarchical system had become so clearly codified that there can be little doubt that deacons had ceased to have a separate identity in most parts of the church. In the western church in particular the position and role of the deacon changed and was gradually subsumed into that of the presbyter (Gibaut, 1997: 36). By the tenth century, the diaconate was almost solely a probationary step for those intending for the priesthood. This had real consequences for the deacon's role and, in fact, had in practice removed the third order from the ministry. If all those who were ordained deacon had no intention of serving as deacon, had no call to this particular ministry, but were intended for the priesthood, then "the sacrament exists only as a sham". Gibaut continues:

What does the transitional diaconate mean? At best it is a polite fiction, at worst pious fraud. In almost every ordination of a person in transit, there exists a defect of intention. Transitional deacons don't intend to be deacons. They intend to be priests. Nor does the church intend them to be deacons... one must intend the order, and the church must intend it. Not for convenience. Not as a rite of passage into a new status in the church. But as a lifelong commitment to an order which finds its meaning in the imaging of service, the diaconate of Christ.

(1997: 40.)

The consequence of this for the church was the loss of the symbol and the representation that the deacon had provided. The gradual assumption by the presbyters of some of the traditional functions of the deacon and the assumption by the presbyterate of the title 'archdeacon' demonstrate the absorption of this once distinctive ministry. Kevin Flynn describes how the symbolic role of the deacon in the liturgy has been lost (1997: 45) and its effect on the representative *diakonia*.

In my view, this claim to hold all the offices and ministry of the church within one person seems to offend against the Pauline view of the Church as the body of Christ. The idea that all the *charisms* were to be valued and that each in his/her place made up the whole body had been replaced by a view in which all ministry was contained in one person.

2.8 FUNCTION AND ROLE IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

We will now consider the functions of the deacon as they have developed in the wider ministry of the church.

The administrative and charitable functions of the diaconate had included acting as the bishop's go-between, or ambassador, in administering the charity of the church. Jill Pinnock (1992: 20) lists the following liturgical functions for the deacon; to lead prayers at the Eucharist, convey the people's offerings to the priest, distribute Communion to the people, reading the gospel, and occasionally preach. The charitable functions remaining to the diaconate by the end of the fourth century were much reduced, but there were still deacons who administered church properties and some archdeacons (in deacon's orders) who were engaged as assistants to the bishop. There were rare and exceptional deacons who remained faithful to their vocation. Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century is the most obvious example, who remained a deacon throughout his life (Barnett, 1995: 84). In the fifteenth century, Cardinal Piccolomini administered the diocese of Siena as a deacon for forty years until his election to the papacy in 1503 (Barnett, 1995: 85). Some fifty years later Cardinal Reginald Pole, one of the three presidents of the Council of Trent, was still in deacon's orders at that time and remained so until being made bishop (Barnett, 1995: 85).

These exceptions notwithstanding, the norm during this period was of a short transitory period as deacon (usually twelve months, though occasionally less), and then equally swift ordination as a presbyter.

So what had happened to those functions that were still considered diaconal? In the absence of a deacon, and this was in most cases, all of the liturgical functions were carried out by a presbyter acting as deacon. The practical situation was often such that in a large church, there would be several presbyters available, perhaps even a bishop also. They would divide the roles amongst themselves, some performing the roles of deacons and some of presbyters, while at Easter, with large numbers to be confirmed, it would not be unusual to find bishops fulfilling all three roles. I have been present at a cathedral at Auray in France, when for the great festival of Our Lady, several Archbishops and perhaps a dozen bishops grace the cathedral. In a vast outdoor mass, the archbishops take the presidency and the bishops take the deacon's role in distributing the communion to the people in the crowds.

2.9 A THEOLOGICAL SHIFT

The first function of the deacon lay in a concern with charitable works. However, it was not the deacon's responsibility to *do* the charitable work of the church, rather to act as a focus for that of the whole people of God. Within that function were many minor roles, such as the administration of charitable trusts, church properties, and the distribution of alms. Central to the role was the function of 'being accessible'. Although most current research claims that the origins of the diaconate are not to be found in the text of Acts, the model presented by Luke is clearly part of the early church's understanding of the deacon's role.

The description of the deacon's role in the Apostolic Constitutions tell us: "The deacons are to act as intermediaries for the bishop, and the people are to have very free access to the deacons, and let them not be troubling the head at all times." The deacon had to be available to the congregation and to respond to needs through the agency of the congregation rather than through the bishop: "They are to learn of the sick and 'bring them to the notice of the multitude,' not the bishop, so that the people of the Church may visit them and supply their needs as the bishop thinks necessary." Their role was to

receive appeals from the congregation on behalf of individuals and to enable the congregation to make their own response.

During the Middle Ages, the office of deacon had become the third order in the threefold order of ministry and was seen as the stepping stone to the priesthood. By the twelfth century, the diaconate had little to call its own and its charitable role had ceased to have significance as part of the office. This was largely due to a theological shift:

Mediæval theologians appraised the spiritual works of mercy higher than the corporeal, seeing that the spirit is more noble than the flesh.

(Barrois, 1966: 78.)

This view changed the focus of the church's charity, which was seen in terms of absolution. Priests were attached to the hospitals and offered to hear confessions and give communion to those in need.

2.10 THE REFORMATION

By the middle of the sixteenth century, Calvin was complaining about the deacons of his day who, he said, had become purely minor functionaries at the liturgy (Reid, 1966: 107). But his criticism does suggest that there were some who remained in deacons' orders at this time.

For Martin Luther and some of his fellow Reformers there was only one ministerial office: the ministry of the Word and Sacrament. For Luther in particular, there was no higher calling than that of preaching the Word. Bishops and presbyters were all representatives of one ministry with differing commissions. From this perspective, pastoral work could be left to others such as the diaconate, which was a lower order of ministry not entrusted with preaching the Word. He had come to the view that the church had lost its focus and had slid into a practice of good works to the detriment of its primary purpose of teaching salvation through Christ alone. The sale of indulgences, the encouragement of beggary, were all seen as an aberration encouraged by a priesthood that had become detached from its primary function of preaching the Word. Luther's difficulty with deacons stems from what they had become, not what he understood them to be. It was the liturgical role into which the deacon of his day had slipped that Luther despised. He called those who carried it out a plague on the church,

and claimed that: "The diaconate... is a ministry for distributing the Church's bounty to the poor, in order that priests may be relieved of pastoral concerns" (Atkinson, 1966: 81).

This was a time when the idea of poverty as a Christian perfection had become a powerful force, particularly within the church in Germany. It was this situation that caused Luther to advocate the establishment of the parish chest. He was particularly incensed by the sight of a bishop sitting outside his palace begging and felt that the proliferation of mendicant friars and monks did harm to the truly poor.

Luther's deacons were lay people with an understanding of their role based on Acts 6, with the distribution of alms. Calvin, Bucer and most of the Reformers were very concerned with social works and the diaconal community, which for them was the church. All were influenced, however, by their need to give pre-eminence to the Word. This seemed to compel them to place diaconal ministry entirely in the realm of the laity. This system, and what they asked of it, was not a problem as long as they were able to operate effective systems of social care; but when the economy of the area took a downturn, the systems failed to operate and there was no representative ministry to provide a focus that could respond to the changed circumstance. The deacon had become an administrator with no ministerial role or vision (Atkinson, 1966: 82).

For Calvin there were four *orders* of ministry (pastor, teacher, elder and deacon); but only two *forms* of ministry (presbyteral and diaconal). The first three of these orders were ordained presbyters carrying out a number of different functions. The deacon, however, was a lay minister for whom Calvin suggested two functions, administration and the distribution of charity, the latter being a spiritual office since alms are sacrifices offered to God and consecrated by him. In general all the Reformed churches upheld this division. The hierarchical concept of ministry with its threefold order is the only other model that has held any real sway in the church. This model has dominated the behaviour of the episcopal churches since the eighth century (Pinnock, 1992: 20), although it first developed in the fourth century (Gibaut, 1997: 36). Calvin seems to have appointed his five Geneva deacons as administrators of the secular relief agencies already operating in the city with the intention of bringing these agencies under religious authority (McGrath, 1990: 80).

From its foundation, the Church has found it necessary to continually refocus its ministerial response to the two great commandments (Mk 12:30, 31), according to the circumstance in which it has found itself. The events of Acts 6 can be seen as one of the first such circumstances. Calvin places the beginning of the diaconate with this event (Calvin, 1956), in which he sees the apostles as struggling to respond to the Great Commission (Mt 28:11-20) in a situation where the Christian community is failing in its response to the second of Jesus' commandments (Mk 12:31).

For the next few centuries there would be little change in the place of deacons within the churches. In the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England the office was used as the first step towards priestly status. In both churches, however, there were those who remained deacons even if their motives had little to do with valuing the office itself. Deacons were clergy who had no ecclesiastical responsibilities. It was an office used by university professors and church administrators who required a clerical status, but did not desire the responsibilities of priesthood.

2.11 SUMMARY

Despite being rooted in the earliest traditions of the church, diaconal ministry is not a clearly understood concept. There are almost as many definitions of this term as there are denominations. This is not simply a modern phenomenon, but would seem to have been true throughout most of the history of the Christian church. Within the biblical sources available, there are obvious variations in usage and understanding of the term and, as the church spread, these increased. There has probably been no time in history when the concept was generally agreed and understood. Calvin's definition is one of the few that has a real claim to be theology. He characterised presbyteral ministry as being the fulfilment of the commandment of Jesus in Mark 12:30, which he sees as relating to worship (Calvin, 1956: 324-326), with diaconal ministry as the fulfilment of the second commandment (Mk 12:31), an expression of love or charity. It forms a neat, if debatable, line between presbyteral and diaconal ministry.

Diakonia is used in the gospels to speak of service to others in relation to Christ's service to the world and, while this is sometimes exemplified by foot washing, Jesus speaks of it in the context of his sacrificial giving on the cross. The office of deacon can be seen to have two points of origin. In the Pauline writings the idea of an agent or

representative acting on behalf of the sender is encountered. In the primitive church, we find the deacon engaged as the representative of the bishop or the go-between for bishop and community. The function of this intermediary is always related to the seven in Acts chapter six. Although deacons are not specifically mentioned in Acts, the early church clearly began to use the relationship of servants of the word and servants of the church as their model for ministry.

3.0 NINETEENTH CENTURY EXPERIMENTS AND THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

3.1 INTRODUCTION

After the Reformation, the situation of the deacons in the Roman Catholic Church did not develop or change in any significant way. They remained the lowest rung on the ladder of the threefold orders. A similar pattern continued within the Church of England, although there was a greater use of the order by those not intending to be priests. James Atkinson feels that “by the end of the sixteenth century Reformation *diakonia* had lost its soul.” (1966: 88) Nonetheless, the Reformation did give the church a view of the care of the poor as a properly Christian responsibility, but it was that of the community as a whole rather than any specific concern of the ordained ministry.

During the nineteenth century, “Many Christians believed that they must take responsibility for social welfare in a Europe suffering from war and urbanisation” (Diakonhjemmet Hospital and College: 1998). Throughout Europe there were a variety of responses to the problems that the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars brought to the continent, and there was a great upsurge in the activity of the religious orders. The women’s orders in particular made great changes, becoming less enclosed and entering the work of nursing and teaching with great enthusiasm (Padberg, 1990: 14). The following are some of the exciting experiments in diaconal ministry during this time, even if diaconal terminology was not always employed.

3.2 THE BRUDERHAUS

In 1833, Johann Hinrich Wichern founded a home for vagrant boys in Hamburg. This was part of a Sunday School enterprise, intended to educate and safeguard children. He gathered the children into groups of a dozen or so under the care of a ‘*Bruder*’ and they received basic education and practical help, as well as training in simple trades, such as tailoring and shoemaking. By 1839, Wichern had founded a *Bruderhaus* to educate and train the Brothers who were to go out into the slums and jails. The *Bruderhaus* was patterned on a religious community without the vows or church magisterium normally

associated with formal 'orders'. Wichern did not use the term deacon for the members of his new order, however, opting instead to continue with the term 'Brother'.

3.3 THE LUTHERAN CHURCH

3.3.1 Deaconesses at Kaiserwerth

An order of deaconesses was founded in 1836 at Kaiserwerth by Pastor Fliedner of the German Evangelical Church. It was initially comprised of single women, who were involved in nursing and pastoral work, and has been recognised as "the most significant establishment of a trained and maintained diaconal order" (Pinnock, 1992: 22). Fliedner had first become involved with social and charitable work as a young pastor. He began visiting prisons and, through his work, regular prison chaplaincy began in Germany. Fliedner moved on to the provision of a half-way house for released women prisoners, an extension of which was the founding of a nursery school that eventually became a school for future teachers.

Shortly after starting this work, Fliedner encountered deaconesses amongst the Moravians, a small denomination that was very active in the mission field. The Moravian Church was refounded in 1772 under the guidance of Count von Zinzendorf, though it can rightfully claim descent from the Hussites through the United Brethren Church founded by Peter Chelcic in 1467. As Wichern became increasingly involved in social and community work, he came to believe that the order of deaconesses should be revived within the Lutheran Church, and so he opened a hospital and deaconess training centre. By 1838, he was already able to send deaconesses to another hospital and the order continued to flourish. There were deacon houses established at this time also, although they were often not as successful. Some of the deacons of the Fliedner orders were principally administrators for the houses and the hospitals. It was often necessary to appoint men to such tasks, because society would not generally accept women in positions of authority.

In 1849, Dr William Passavant of the Lutheran Church in America met Fliedner and persuaded him to send four deaconesses to Pittsburgh to work in the Infirmary there. A member of Passavant's congregation offered her services to the deaconesses and in 1850 Sister Louisa Martens was consecrated as the first American deaconess. Sister

Louisa worked as a deaconess for fifty years, establishing hospitals and homes for orphans from Philadelphia in the east to Chicago in the west. She also founded the Silver-Springs-Martin Luther School in Pennsylvania, which is still in operation today.

Fliedner was busy opening deaconess houses in many other centres, such as Jerusalem in 1851 and Paris and Berlin shortly after. By the time of his death in 1864, there were 1,600 deaconesses worldwide operating from thirty motherhouses. These were both training centres and homes from which the deaconesses operated within the community.

From the beginning, the Kaiserwerth deaconesses were not a church based order and, initially at least, the institutional church played no part in their work. There might even be a sense in which it could be said that all of this took place despite the churches with which it was associated. After a few years, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church in Germany consecrated the deaconesses and owned them in an institutional manner, but did not take administrative ownership. Support from the church was most often from individual church persons, rather than from the congregations as a whole.

There was never any attempt to provide a liturgical role for the deaconesses of the Lutheran Church in Germany or in America. Neither would Fliedner or Passavant have considered this as a necessary or desirable part of the role of the deaconess. The work was always regarded as of a charitable and social nature. While the work with prisoners and the nursery schools continued, leading to the training of chaplains and nursery school teachers, Kaiserwerth quickly became a training school for nurses. It would seem that this was the first organised training scheme for nurses, becoming the pattern for Lutheran deaconess work throughout the world.

3.3.2 The Lutheran Church in Sweden

When the religious orders were dissolved at the end of the sixteenth century, Sweden had developed the Reformation pattern of a parish that combined both religious and socio-political responsibilities. The charitable work of the churches fell upon the parishes as a form of social welfare. Within this Lutheran/Melanchthonian framework, charity was seen as a basic component of Christian virtue and, therefore, but a natural expression of personal piety. As in other parts of Reformation Europe, when the church

became disestablished and the state more secularised, this was shown to be an unwarranted view of the reality.

The first deaconess house in Sweden was founded at Ersta in 1851 under the influence of the German Lutheran Church (Bishops Conference, 1990). Such diaconal institutions were founded by individual parish-based societies and were seen principally as part of the charitable work of the church. At this time, the diaconal role was understood to be part of the responsibility of the priest. "One of the vows for the ordination of priests had a clear charitable (sic!) character until 1987" (Bishops Conference, 1990). This change in the ordination rite came about because of the importance attached to the diaconate as a permanent order.

Uniquely within the Lutheran tradition, the churches in Sweden and Denmark continued with a hierarchical pattern of ministry with Bishops and Priests, with the Swedish Church maintaining a liturgical/pastoral role for the deacon into the seventeenth century (Brodd, 1999: 101). Although the diaconal order disappeared at this time, the terms 'deaconess' and 'deacon' were used two hundred years later for the new orders, first at Ersta and then later in other 'houses' throughout the country. These deacons and deaconesses acted as the local churches' arm for social activity. In Sweden, the deaconess houses became the responsibility of the local church, but the Mother House concept of diaconal work was neither legally, nor canonically integrated into the Church and this has remained a feature of the Scandinavian style since its beginning.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Swedish government wanted to integrate all the social welfare work done through these church institutions into the public welfare system. The government at the time saw this *diakonia* as 'charity', while society saw welfare as 'human rights'. The emphasis on rights has tended to create a negative view of charity during much of the latter half of the twentieth century throughout Western Europe. Those in receipt of such charity, in any form, have been stigmatised as feckless rather than viewed with compassion by much of the community to which they belong.

3.3.3 The Lutheran Church in Norway

The first deaconesses came to Norway in 1868 with the foundation of the House of Deaconesses. This was joined shortly after by *Diakonhjemmet*, The Deacons' Home,

which was founded to train men for works of love and charity in areas where women were not deemed able to participate (eg the care of alcoholics, prisoners and the mentally ill). The *Diakonjhemmet* College was founded in 1890 and the hospital was opened three years later.

The deaconesses in Norway provided largely nursing care and were employed within the parishes, offering home nursing. This form of care continued until the 1970s, at which time there were as many as 250 parish nurses employed by the local parish boards. These deaconesses were consecrated by the mother houses, but this consecration was not given status or recognition by the church (Meland, 1999: 68). The use of the title 'deacon'/'deaconess' for those engaged in nursing has created a difficulty for the Church of Norway in that *diakonia* has lost its wider meaning and attempts are currently under way to return it to its original usage.

Since around 1999, there have been parish deacons in all larger parishes, the role of whom is much wider than that of nurses and includes a liturgical element. Deacons preach, prepare the intercessions and offer communion at home for those unable to come to church. Over seventy per cent of these parish deacons are women. Interestingly, there is a pattern of losing the term 'deaconess' when the diaconal role regains its liturgical component; both male and female members of such orders tend to be called deacons.

One researcher (Roed, 1993) has begun to question the way deacons' function. He suggests that parish deacons are more likely to give priority to what he refers to as middle class problems such as bereavement, loneliness and the care of the elderly in the congregation. The categories that he feels are less likely to be given priority are drug abusers, the homeless and the mentally ill. Such a concern has been expressed by a few deacons in several denominations, as well as by a number of presbyters. It is an understandable concern, but there are reasons why the focus is where it is. Primary amongst these is that the church is at a numerically low point at present and many of its members are elderly. This change in the profile of congregations leaves them without the resources of personnel or funds to undertake some of the larger works of the past. When this is placed alongside the huge changes in social provision by the state, one can readily see the situation described by Vanstone (1977). His struggles on a vast modern housing estate where the church no longer seemed to have relevance in the way it had to

his father brought him important insights, not least of which was that the church *needed* to be present whatever works might or might not be *needed*. With the demographic profile of many of today's churches, it may be necessary to minister to the church so that its presence will be seen. There are a number of worrying signs that Christians are forgetting to love one another while striving to love their neighbour.

3.4 METHODIST DEACONESSES

3.4.1 The United Methodist Church

The Methodist Episcopal Church in America had established itself in Germany in the 1850s, and in 1874 founded a deaconess order after the Kaiserwerth pattern. This idea was quickly exported back to North America where, under the influence of Lucy Rider Meyer, it began to spread rapidly. One change that took place in America was that many of the individual deaconesses went out into the communities and developed their work in this way.

While the Lutheran church developed an institutionally based model of diaconal care, the Methodist church began by reaching out into the community to care for people where they were. Kenneth Rowe (1999: 348) credits the introduction of the deaconess office in the United States to Jane Bancroft Robinson, though it was Lucy Rider Meyer who set up the Chicago School in 1885, which trained the first deaconesses to be consecrated by the Methodist Episcopal Church some three years later.

When Jane Bancroft Robinson wrote about the deaconesses that she had encountered in Europe, she was considering the Kaiserwerth model, which was hospital and institution based. Rider Meyer's inspiration may have been sparked by that work, but she had a different vision. She had contact with the British ministers who were thinking about deaconess work, having visited Thomas Bowman Stephenson and communicated with Hugh Price Hughes. To suggest that these two gave her a different vision would be unfair. It would be more accurate to say that they inspired each other and each seems to owe something to the other's thinking. The Chicago deaconesses were community based, going out to work and live where they saw their ministry to be. Warner (2002: 7) considers them to have demonstrated an evangelistic ministry. Deaconesses in this mode seem to have worked from a view of practical service as a means of saving souls.

Much of the work done by these early deaconesses was amongst the fast expanding immigrant population and many of the deaconesses undertook the study of languages to facilitate this ministry (Warner, 2001). Continuing to work on the margins, the Deaconess Order remained a lay order and became part of the official ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church. At its inception in 1939, the United Methodist Church had a total of 1,026 deaconesses from the three constituent denominations. At this time, deacons were probationary ministers (elders) waiting to be ordained to Word and Sacrament.

From the 1940s onwards, there have been a number of discussions and papers about the diaconate within the Methodist Church in America, resulting in some new developments. As in other places, the discussions were about diaconal ministry *per se*, not the ministry of the deaconesses, and it often seemed that the deaconesses were sidelined. In 1976, the church created a new grouping in lay ministry called diaconal ministers, who were set aside by consecration for a ministry of love, justice and service. This new grouping was separate from the deaconesses and principally a male 'diaconate'. In 1996, the Conference agreed on a new order of ministry called 'deacons', who would be ordained to a lifetime ministry of Word and Service; this order was open to both men and women. The previous transitional deacons were discontinued and the church adopted direct ordination to the eldership (presbyterate). All serving diaconal ministers were offered transfer into the new permanent diaconate. The deaconesses, now only 71 in number, decided to remain a lay order and to work towards a programme of revitalising the deaconess Order.

3.4.2 The British Methodist Church

The advent of deaconess work within the British Methodist Church was gradual and not the result of any one person's endeavour, although Thomas Bowman Stephenson is often credited with the introduction of deaconess work into the Methodist Church in Great Britain. In 1867, Stephenson was serving at Bolton, where he started work among children and women. He did this by way of employing a Mrs Entwistle, whom he called deaconess. This was a completely personal arrangement and had no formal church recognition. Two years later, Stephenson was sent to Lambeth (London), where, with the aid of two generous supporters (Alfred Mager and Francis Horner), he set up a

home for orphaned and homeless children. In 1873, Stephenson was appointed Principal of the Children's Home, a post which he held for the next 27 years until a bout of ill health compelled him to give up this work for a time.

During that period, Methodism was still a fractured Church. In the Primitive Methodist Church, the Rev TJ Flanagan founded a sisterhood. These women were never called deaconesses, but were part of the Home Mission Department of the Church. In 1891, the Rev TJ Cope of the United Methodist Free Church opened a Training House for deaconesses, which he called Bowron House in honour of its benefactors. Cope had struggled with the hope of instituting women's evangelical work for some years and his opportunity came when he approached the Bowron brothers seeking funds for this purpose. They were anxious to help in his work and funded the training house. It did not prove easy to find a suitable Superintendent for the new home, but Cope borrowed first from the Tottenham Deaconess Institute and then a deaconess from Stephenson's Wesley Deaconess Institute to help establish the work. The stated objects of the new Institute were to train Christian women as evangelists, Bible women (home visitors) and missionaries (Smith, 1912: 49). This was clearly a different pattern of ministry to that of the Kaiserwerth deaconesses. It should be noted that there was some resistance to the introduction of women in this work. This difficulty prompted Cope to seek urgent recognition from the Connexion, the granting of which relieved some of the problems with the circuit.

Quite early in the life of the Children's Home, Stephenson encouraged the older girls to remain at the home and undertake training. These he called Sisters of the Children, who were to become the first of the National Children's Home Sisters. (The work continues today, but the last of the NCH sisters retired in 1997.) Stephenson continued with work in the community through the employment of women in other ways, but the Children's Home occupied most of his spare energies for a number of years.

In 1886, the Rev Peter Thompson (the founder of the East London Mission) formed a sisterhood, whilst the Rev Hugh Price Hughes did the same in West London. Neither of these groups' members were called 'deaconess', although the term 'Sister' was used, not only by these two, but also by others. The Revs George Clegg and SF Collier and Miss Mary Champness all had groups of women called sisters working in a variety of social ministries within the church in their own areas. There was no co-ordinated effort

to establish any official organisation to cover all this work, which almost brought about a clash between two of the main proponents at the time.

Through the columns of the *Methodist Times*, the Rev Hugh Price Hughes indicated that he was thinking of starting a training project for his own Sisters of the Poor. This surprised Dr Stephenson, because he knew that Hughes was aware of his own intentions along these lines for the whole Church. In the same year, Dr Stephenson wrote a little book, *Concerning Sisterhoods*, in which he laid down three principles: there must be vocation, but no vow; there must be discipline, but no servility; there must be association, not excluding freedom (Garlick, 1990: 14).

Stephenson must have been a very persuasive man, for in that year he received a donation of £500 from a friend, William Mewburn, which he used to open the first training home. Mewburn House opened in 1890, and the first services for the 'setting aside' of the Sisters of the Children and the Sisters of the Poor took place the following year. At first, the Wesleyan Methodist Church left the whole project in private hands while giving it support, and by 1894 there were 44 deaconesses in the circuits. Hugh Price Hughes' project is never heard of again, and in 1895 the Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Church gave recognition to what was to be called the Wesley Deaconess Institute. In 1901 it became a department of the Church.

Stephenson's first intention seemed to have been to employ the deaconesses in much the same way as he had previously used his less formal women assistants. They received training in medical care and home economics. He had been impressed by the work of the Kaiserwerth deaconesses when he had gone to visit Fliedner, but he had also had some communication, as noted earlier, with Lucy Rider Meyer, founder of the Methodist Episcopal deaconesses in America. He seems to have been greatly influenced by her different approach. The training offered at Mewburn House included not only basic medical care and child care, but also theology and hermeneutics. The description of the work to be undertaken by deaconesses in *General Regulations of the Wesley Deaconess Institute (Flying Leaves, 09/1901: 6)* shows how Stephenson had expanded the curriculum and work beyond that which Fliedner had initiated. The regulations tell us that deaconesses are "tested, trained and separated for the service of Christ's Church", firstly in mission work in circuits and congregations, in mission centres and in Foreign Missions; secondly in care of the sick; and finally "as Providence may open the

way". The Wesley Deaconesses were clearly intended to be a mobile mission force that could be sent wherever they were needed.

The young women who came to Mewburn were from good homes and had to bear part of the cost of their own training. They were thrown into the deep end from the beginning, as they were expected to go out in pairs to work in the East End of London.

The first Wesley deaconess left the country for work abroad as early as 1894. Sister Evelyn Oates sailed out to Durban in March of that year. She was soon followed by deaconesses who set up work in New Zealand, Australia and West Africa. In 1897, the unusual step of setting up a Deaconess mission in Ceylon was taken at the urging of a Mrs Trimmer, the wife of a Methodist missionary. The Ceylon mission was the only one undertaken by the Order on its own behalf, but overseas missions became a major part of their work, as agents of the Church and Women's auxiliary.

3.5 PATTERNS AND STYLES

While all the records suggest that Fliedner's movement had a huge influence in the growth of the deaconess orders, it was more inspirational than formative. Although the deaconesses of the United Methodist Church first appeared in Germany, neither they nor the British deaconess orders seem to have closely followed the style of these Lutheran deaconesses.

What seems to have happened during this revival of diaconal ministry is that two different church backgrounds, with two separate theologies and with differing roots, set out from a shared vision. In the Lutheran case, the diaconal model was shaped by a tight theology of ministry, whilst its Methodist counterpart was somewhat more relaxed, which allowed a freedom to do whatever they could imagine, as long as they could fund it. *The Methodist Recorder* (25 March 1897) commented: "It is of importance that [the deaconesses] should be trained to do the utmost that is possible at the smallest imaginable cost."

All of this revived diaconal ministry may have had the same spiritual launching pad, but it developed in a variety of directions. The tightly restricted vision of the German Lutheran church moved out through the Scandinavian Lutheran churches, with a

doctrine of ministry somewhere between the German churches (one ministry, several roles) and the Church of England's episcopal threefold ministry. The movement spread rapidly through the energy of the United Methodists in Germany and America and a wide variety of traditions was rediscovered, with perhaps the greatest freedom in the Methodist Church in Britain, where experiment and initiative were allowed free rein. All of this has meant that the twentieth century developments have had a diverse set of parameters from which to choose when trying to establish (or indeed re-establish) their diaconal personæ.

If the seven individuals mentioned in Acts chapter 6 were deacons, then they were probably in the Fliedner model of charitable care. British Methodism had moved on to embrace the wider role as epitomised by Philip: "But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women" (Acts 8:12).

3.6 SUMMARY

There were, and remain, two major differences that brought about the varying development of the work of the deaconess. The first is a practical one: the Lutheran churches were established churches and understood all persons in the parish to be their responsibility. In most of these countries, the state funded the work of the church to some degree through the taxation system. Both in Britain and America, the Methodist churches were free churches without an explicit responsibility to a parish. For the Lutherans, the parish was their community and they were looking to meet needs within it. The Methodists, on the other hand, were congregations who were sending out evangelists to work with the needy beyond their community.

The second difference lay in the theological stance taken by the churches. Luther had offered an understanding of *diakonia* as the care of the poor and the sick alone. Since his view of the world was from within a parish based church, he was normally dealing exclusively with believers and, given that faith alone was all that was required for salvation and preaching/teaching was the prerogative of the minister, all that was required of the deaconess/deacon was to supply the physical needs. Methodists had a view of the world about them in which they saw many who had no faith. The deaconesses sought to bring them to salvation through supplying their physical needs

and bringing them to an awareness of God's love. In short, the Lutheran deaconesses were acting in response to God's love, whilst the Methodists saw themselves as servants of God demonstrating his love. If we were to compare them to the monastic orders the Methodists would be Franciscans and the Lutherans Benedictines.

It was from within this background, historical and theological, that the Wesley Deaconess Order began its overseas missions.

4.0 AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND: DIVERSE BEGINNINGS & THE WESLEY DEACONESS LEGACY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will adopt the methodology described in Chapter One to achieve the aim of discerning the theology in praxis and formulation. In order to accomplish this, it is first of all necessary to collate and examine the historical record of the work of the Wesley Deaconess Order within this particular region, before identifying any other influences operating upon the sisters in the particular context and finally, to consider the legacy in each field of mission up to the point of a clear replacement Order being in place or the loss of this form of ministry.

Australia and New Zealand shared a great deal in the nineteenth century and there was considerable interchange of ideas and personnel throughout that time and into the twentieth century. One of the factors that influenced the development of deaconess work in this region was that Methodism, in both Australia and New Zealand, was established as a single denomination without the separation characteristic of the home churches. This meant that the differing traditions influenced the thinking and behaviour of the local Connexions, offering some diversity in theology. As we shall see later, the different balance of denominational strengths from that in Britain may have brought about more varied growth patterns.

4.2 AUSTRALIAN BEGINNINGS – SISTERHOODS

Although the Methodist Church of Australasia was a single denomination, there was a certain level of autonomy. Each state had its own Conference initially and new ventures could grow up in any one of these without recourse to any other or the whole church. Attitudes to women in ministry were sometimes even more conservative than in the Methodist Church in Great Britain, though South Australia was an exception. There was a strong Bible Christian tradition in South Australia and the Bible Christians had always accepted and encouraged women preachers in their home area in Cornwall. This openness to women as preachers had been brought with them to Australia and, as early as 1819, there were fifteen women preachers at the South Australian Conference.

The first recorded example of 'deaconess work' in Australia was in Sydney in 1890 (Chambers, 1987: 14). Not uniquely, this was instigated at the urging of a young woman. Laura Francis came from Grafton in the North of New South Wales, but it was in Sydney that she sought an opportunity to offer her services to the Methodist church. She approached the superintendent of the Sydney Mission and urged him to find her some suitable opening in the Mission, indicating her intention to go to the Salvation Army if she was refused. The Superintendent took this offer very seriously and in the August of 1890 the first Sisters' Home in Australia opened with three young women coming for training (Laura Francis, Emily Gannon and Ada Atkins). A Sister Mary Bibby was Sister in Charge. Training was to be for six months and was intended to be for young women of independent means who felt a call to Christian work. They would then be employed without salary. This sisterhood had much in common with the first Mission Hall Sisters in Great Britain, akin to those organised by Hugh Price Hughes.

The idea spread to the state of Victoria and on 9th December 1893, a Sisters' home was opened in Melbourne. This was a much more organised and recognised Sisterhood in that the General Secretary of Home Missions for the Victoria Conference, Revd ES Bickford, drew up its constitution. A standard uniform was approved, complete with a silver badge with 'Central Mission' engraved upon it. The speaker at its opening was a Sister Bryden from the Sydney Mission, showing the source of inspiration for the new sisterhood. The greater formality extended to training with the Melbourne sisters undertaking a two-year training course, after which they were dedicated to their new life at a public service.

As with the Primitive Methodist and United Methodist Sisters in England, these sisters were known as the '*Sisters of the Poor*' and the principle focus of their activity was amongst the unemployed and those who were affected by alcohol abuse. Most of this work was done with the women of the poorest households, but they also did work with orphans. The sisters were frequent speakers on the platform at the Mission Hall, not only to women's groups but also to general congregations. They showed a real evangelical zeal and in 1913, Laura Francis found herself deputising for the Superintendent of the Mission at evangelical missions for six months.

By 1900 there was a sisterhood in Adelaide in South Australia, who were seen as "an integral part of the Central Mission concept" (Hancock, 1995: 4). The early Adelaide sisters were trained at Melbourne and Sydney, and with their strong Bible Christian background they were among the most ardent evangelists.

A pattern had started to emerge in the Mission halls of sisterhoods brought into being for work amongst women that rapidly grew and developed a wider role than the founding fathers had envisaged. The sisters never deviated from the servant ministry to which they were dedicated, but seemed to set out with the primary purpose of saving souls. John Wesley told his preachers: "You have nothing to do but to save souls" (in *Twelve Rules of*

a Helper, 1753), and that would seem to be the rule to which these women worked. (It may not have been the purpose that had led the male ministers of the church to bring these sisterhoods into being, however.) Despite all this success and growth, it was to be many years before the Methodist Church in Australia would authorise an official deaconess order.

4.3 NEW ZEALAND AND THE WESLEY DEACONESS ORDER

In 1897, a group of Christian women and laymen met with the ministers in Christchurch with a view to finding a woman to take up work at Durham and St Asaph's Street churches. Advice was sought from England, where such work was already established, and Thomas Bowman Stephenson sent Sister Christian Hughes, a Wesley Deaconess, to establish the work. The organisers rented a house for the deaconess and the sponsors funded a second deaconess. Here, as in Australia, there was only one Methodist church. A feature of this can be seen in the fact that one of the principal sponsors for the Christchurch Deaconess work was a Mr George Bowron, a relative of the Bowrons who funded the setting up of the United Methodist Deaconess Houses in England.

Christian Hughes served in New Zealand for six years and during that time made considerable progress with the work in Christchurch. In 1901, she wrote home to the Warden of the Wesley Deaconess Order to describe her work and progress (*Flying Leaves*, January 1902). In this letter she tells of a new deaconess house established in Barbadoes Street, Christchurch and how she has acquired a new worker, Elsie Lilly. Sister Elsie had undergone a course of training at Dunedin that allowed her to enter the work of the Christchurch mission immediately, although this was only to be for a year as her time at Christchurch was to be training for mission in India. Christian tells of "work in three of our large centres" and in the report of her letter in *Flying Leaves* her use of the term 'Sisters' is given in quotation marks. One of the purposes for which Christian had been sent to New Zealand was to establish a branch of the Wesley Deaconess Order in New Zealand. The several 'Sisters' of whom she speaks throughout her report are not Wesley Deaconesses. The Methodist Church in New Zealand resisted the foundation of a deaconess order for a decade, during which time the consensus of opinion moved from a branch to an independent order.

The letters Christian sent to the Warden throughout 1901 and 1902 seem to indicate that her own thinking was about the establishment of a deaconess order within the New Zealand Church. One of her hopes was for the establishment of a training centre for deaconesses so that they would not need to send to England or Australia for trained workers. There were 'Sisters' working in a number of towns in New Zealand and the deaconess concept seemed to have taken a firm hold in the ideas of many church people. Sister Elsie was working in two suburban churches in early 1902 and the deaconess committee had appointed another 'Sister' to work from Barbadoes Street with Christian, whilst another six young women had volunteered for the work.

The work in Christchurch was varied, though largely pastoral in content. Sister Christian offered friendship and help to the many prostitutes who worked in the town and undertook work with families who were suffering from unemployment or ill health. She speaks of tending to the dying and supporting, at the graveside, the child of a man who had died destitute (she had raised the money to give him a proper burial). Perhaps the story that sheds most light on the contemporary perception of the deaconess is the one that follows:

Only last Sunday four stalwart blue-jackets from HMS Royal Arthur waited for 'Sister' outside the church. The bright, captivating young spokesman knew what he was saying when he ventured to add: "'Sisters' know how to deal with the blue-jackets better than anybody else." Are you surprised that after that I took them all home with me and treated them well?

(Flying Leaves, June/July 1902)

The complete naiveté shown in this story and the protection provided by the title and uniform of the Sister is remarkable to modern readers. There is a general sense in the stories told by these early deaconesses of a shield of innocence, which protected them from contamination by the often degrading conditions into which they ventured.

Christian's influence was not only in the work of the mission itself. In 1900, Isabel Sinclair left New Zealand to train at The Deaconess House at Ilkley in Yorkshire and a year later she was joined by Frances Cannon, both of whom returned to New Zealand to start work there in 1904. A friend of Christian's, Annie Anderson, arrived at Ilkley in March 1905 to start training as a Wesley Deaconess. Annie returned to New Zealand in 1908 to work in Dunedin and remained there until 1910 when she resigned to marry Revd EO Blamires, but her influence on deaconess and women's work in New Zealand continued until she died in 1953.

Francis Cannon returned to work in Christchurch, but the New Zealand records of the time do not mention when. There is a suggestion of a hiatus in the work after Christian Hughes returned to England, yet the deaconess committee was still active in 1908. Isabel Sinclair began work in the Tory Street Mission in Wellington, where she established an effective mission and ministry. Isabel remained at Tory Street until 1910 when she left for Australia.

The work these deaconesses undertook was varied, but there was a common thread running through it. Isabel tells of her little wooden Mission Hall where much of her work involved visitation (*Flying Leaves*, October 1906), and yet she was responsible for twelve meetings each week and took a full part in worship. She was proud of the six new

converts made at the time of writing. These converts were all men and from some of the worst situations, even if several seem to have had a somewhat better background back in England. By 1909, she is able to talk of seventy names on the roll for the women's meeting and an established savings club and clothing bank. Throughout the story runs the thread of women struggling to make better lives and men the worse for drink.

Drink was a problem in Dunedin too. Annie Anderson tells of the 'election' (a local vote on licensing of public houses), which would close nine of the public houses and her hopes that in the next years they would be able to sweep them all away and bring the problem of drink to an end (*Flying Leaves*, January 1909). The biographical notes in *Not Self, But Others* (Chambers, 1987: 57) claim that Annie Anderson was relieved of all other work in 1908 to take up the temperance issue. If this was so, it could only have been for a short time as her 1909 letter describes a full ministry with considerable youth work (she had started a boys' club), a Bible class for women, a prayer meeting for the men and chaplaincy work at the local biscuit factory, where she also taught the girls elementary nursing. Since the same biographical note contains an error on her wedding date, I must assume that it has relied on an erroneous primary date, which has had a similar result on the dates calculated from it.

What can be learned of their theological motivation? Again there is a constant thread running through all of their writings. It can be seen in Christian Hughes when she wrote "Men and women can be saved, and will be, if our consecration is deep enough" (*Flying Leaves*, March 1902) and Isabel Sinclair's vision of the mission as the source of the "power of God transforming men and women into followers and ambassadors for Jesus Christ." It would seem that their prime objective was the salvation of souls and that they understood their role to be very much part of the Great Commission (**Mt 28:18-20**).

The other theme that is common to all their work is response to need. The deaconesses never seem to have had a job description; they were *sent* to situations of need where it was their task to discern that need and answer it. As Isabel Sinclair puts it: "To solace the poor in their poverty, the sick in their suffering and the dying in their last experience". If the deaconesses can be said to have had a representative ministry, then it was best seen through this activity. Wesley, in imitation of the primitive church, instituted the practice of collections for the benevolent fund being taken up by the communion/poor stewards. The deaconesses took both this financial assistance (charity) and the loving presence of Christ ('*caritas*') out from the church to the place of need.

4.4 CROSS FERTILISATION

The beginnings of deaconess ministry in New Zealand and Australia are not clear-cut, though there are the well-recorded accounts in the magazines of the Wesley Deaconess Order contemporary to the events they record. Alongside these are the accounts gathered in both countries that are often less clearly dated and sometimes fragmentary. It can be difficult to establish what influence the Wesley Deaconess Order or the other British orders might have had on some of the 'sisterhoods' found in the early church records. It would seem that many of them were patterned on the *Sisters of the Poor* established in the Mission Halls in England in the 1890s. There were several attempts to set up properly constituted deaconess orders in both New Zealand and Australia, but these took some time to come into being – several decades in the case of the latter.

There was a diversity of beginnings and several different ventures, but the Wesley Deaconess Order was still the goal to which many strove. Their influence and the quality

of the training provided at Ilkley seem to have given them a higher profile and acceptance in the churches. Isabel Sinclair returned to New Zealand from Ilkley and built up the extensive work done at Tory Street, Wellington. Nina Anderson, who was to be such a pioneer in the beginnings of the New Zealand Order, was herself influenced by Christian Hughes and trained at Ilkley. English or New Zealander, these were Wesley Deaconesses and remained so. At much the same time, and often working from the same centres, were the *Sisters of the Poor* who came in from Australia. Ruth Nesbitt and others were trained in Melbourne and brought with them a powerful preaching influence. Laura Francis from Sydney served in Auckland with the *Helping Hand Mission* and assisted in setting up the institutional work connected with that mission; she too was an ardent evangelist and led missions in several New Zealand centres.

4.5 DIVERSITY OF UNDERSTANDINGS

These different roots are useful examples of the way deaconess ministry developed. Within New Zealand there were two different stages of development running in parallel and offering different understandings of this form of ministry. First of all, there was the Wesley Deaconess model. This was brought to New Zealand out of an established Order that had grown over a number of years before being brought into the formal ministry of the Wesleyan Methodist Church. It came to New Zealand in response to a cry for help, rather in the manner of the early church's problems in Acts chapter 6. The Wesley Deaconess Order had already established a pattern of a ministry of response to need in the community. The deaconesses had a broad training that included nursing, home making, Bible study and homiletics, and were accustomed to responding to the situation in which they found themselves. They generally had a degree of freedom to do what was required.

Most of the sisterhoods that originated in Australia seem to have comprised of women who experienced a sense of vocation to serve the church. The traditions of the Bible Christians were extremely important in this respect. William O'Bryan and James Thorne, a Methodist preacher and an Anglican respectively, founded the Bible Christians in 1815 in Cornwall (Davies, 1985: 118). Not strictly a secession from the Wesleyan Methodist Church of the day, it was certainly a new Methodist Connexion. The Bible Christians established themselves in Cornwall and Devon and were powerfully evangelical. One of the more remarkable aspects of this small church was the acceptance and encouragement of women as preachers. In 1819 over forty per cent of the itinerant (full time) preachers were women (Townsend *et al*, 1909: 508) and there were many women amongst the local preachers. The zeal of this small denomination led to considerable evangelistic work in both Canada and Australasia and, despite the fact that they joined with several others in forming the United Methodist Church (British) in 1907, the tradition of female ministry was still strong in those areas influenced by them. From within this tradition sprang the evangelical missions of the South Australian sisters.

In New Zealand, the influence of George Bowron, who was one of the brothers so instrumental in the funding of the Deaconesses of the United Methodist Free Church

organised by Rev TJ Cope, helped to set up deaconess committees with the aim of introducing a properly trained and established deaconess order to the Methodist Church in New Zealand. Christchurch was the centre for this endeavour and seems to have been the reason for the continuing links with the Wesley Deaconess Order, which the mission in Christchurch maintained.

Despite the obvious enthusiasm for the ministry of the 'sisterhoods' in the several centres in which it became established, there seems to have been a core of resistance within the institution of the church to the formalising of the work in deaconess orders. This resistance was overcome in New Zealand much earlier than in Australia.

4.6 A DEACONESS ORDER FOR NEW ZEALAND

Prior to 1904, the only trained sisters were those from Australia and the deaconesses from Ilkley. The Australians came with evangelical zeal to work for a period in areas of great need. Sometimes they left a project behind them when they returned home, but untrained sisters staffed such projects. The two New Zealand deaconesses that were trained at Ilkley returned home with specific work in mind, though they were not yet sufficiently experienced to offer training to others. Christian Hughes, who worked in Christchurch until 1903, undertook the training of several women as sisters, but it could not be to the standard required by a formal diaconate. There was a recognised need for this type of training but, while the Connexion was sympathetic, there was no money available to establish this work. In 1904 the Dunedin Central Mission, which had experience of several sisters, was asked to investigate the possibility of establishing a training house. After two years of research, they reported that the time was not ripe (Chambers, 1987: 24).

With the assistance of the Bowrons, Christchurch responded to an appeal by Sister Olive (Mrs WJ Williams) at a missionary breakfast at Durham Street Church. She described her own work in Dunedin and the need for trained women to run the orphanages and to work amongst the Maori. The response was almost immediate and the end of 1907 saw the establishment of the first training house for deaconesses in St Asaph Street. This training house opened on 6th January 1908 with Sister Mabel Morley as its Lady Superintendent. In 1909, Sister Mabel visited Ilkley and brought back new ideas for training (Fry, 1987: 103). The following year she reported the progress of the training house in a letter to the college at Ilkley (*Flying Leaves*, October 1910): she had two probationers and one deaconess who had gone out after training. The training house at St Asaph's could only support three trainees so progress was still slow.

Sadly, finances dictated that Sister Mabel was also required to serve as deaconess at the Durham Street Church, which made this a taxing appointment. After six years she resigned as superintendent and, after a break to recover her health, she took up a post as Sister in charge of the newly established Orphanage and Children's Home at Papanui (Chambers, 1987: 24).

The Deaconess Board made several temporary appointments to the Superintendent's post with little success. The work had not been established for long and there were so few trained women available that they again had to request help from Ilkley. Sister Grace Crump was chosen to take on this post at Christchurch. She was a fortunate choice. In her short time in New Zealand, she brought a renewed vision and revitalised the work of the Deaconess House and, despite the small numbers, she introduced the annual Convocation to the New Zealand sisters. However, the onset of the Great War and the return to England of Sister Grace put further developments on hold. The committee, led by Mr and Mrs George Bowron, never lost sight of the original vision. In 1923, a much larger Training House was opened in Latimer Square. These new premises were able to facilitate Sister Grace's desire to both expand the training and serve the city as a women's hostel for the students at the University and the Teacher's College.

From 1925-1932 Sister Olive, now married to Rev WJ Williams, came as Lady Superintendent to the Training House, the setting up of which she had inspired, living in the Deaconess House with her husband (Fry, 1987: 104). During their time in office, the premises were enlarged so that they were able to accommodate twenty university students as well as the deaconess trainees. Latimer Square served the Church as the training house for Deaconesses until 1968. The curriculum underwent many changes, but centred on Bible study, youth work and home nursing, and from 1924 included elocution and public speaking. An unusual feature was the inclusion of car maintenance, which reflects the predominantly rural work the deaconesses undertook.

From the early 1920s onwards, the deaconesses became heavily involved in work amongst the Maori peoples. This began with Sister Margaret Nicholls, who devoted most of her life to the work. The work these women involved themselves with was among scattered communities in the wildest part of the country and they travelled great distances in difficult conditions. Sister Margaret travelled all over her area on horseback, carrying a rolled up blanket behind her saddle so that she could sleep wherever she found herself at night (Fry, 1987: 106). Another Sister, Eleanor Dobby, recorded 1,527 miles of travel on horseback in

her first year of work. In time, money was raised to buy cars for the sisters, which allowed them to extend their work by carrying more equipment and covering more territory. Many of the rural sisters graduated not to cars, but to motorbikes, which could take them into the rougher territory with ease. By 1928, the deaconesses' willingness to take on whatever was needed brought a fresh challenge.

Sister Rita Snowden, later to become famous for her writing, was stationed as a Home Mission Supply at Raetihi (Chambers, 1987: 52). Here she was substituting for a male minister, part of whose ministry involved preaching. Although the church acknowledged the deaconess' ministry, the term 'minister' applied only to presbyters (as it still does in the British Methodist Church). Although many of the early sisters were evangelists, especially those from Australia, preaching had not been seen as part of the calling of the deaconesses at that time. At her welcome meeting, the chairman said: "I suppose if we can't have a whole loaf, we can make the best of half a loaf" (Fry, 1987: 108). The work Sister Rita was required to do in this situation was everything that a presbyteral minister would do, other than the sacrament of Holy Communion.

The position of the deaconesses within the church was ambiguous at first and became part of a slow process of recognition and integration. As early as 1912, a scheme for providing for deaconesses in retirement came into place, but their appointments were still controlled by the Deaconess Board, as was the responsibility for their stipend. By 1926, the training and stationing of the deaconesses had been brought into line with the stationing of presbyters and they were operating within the same connexional year timetable. Deaconesses filling Home Mission supply stations had become sufficiently numerous by 1932 that the Deaconess Board pressed for the recognition of deaconesses as officiating ministers under the marriage Act.

After the Second World War, the deaconesses continued to work amongst the Maori, gaining an unusual degree of acceptance in their communities. The work in other areas, however, was changing. There was a growing resentment of the deaconesses amongst their presbyteral colleagues as the church increasingly drew them into ministerial appointments. The appropriateness of their training began to be questioned. There had been deaconesses who had wanted a more thorough theological training from the earliest days, but the church had continued with a two-year training period followed by a year's probation. Despite this lack, many of the women were to apply their own intelligence in the service of the church beyond

their training. Rita Snowden, for example, became a renowned writer of devotional books that were published all over the world. Others became pioneers in child welfare legislation and translation work.

From the mid 1950s, deaconesses were more often being asked to take posts as substitutes for probationer ministers and were soon being given dispensations to preside at Holy Communion. Such a shift in their work pattern began to call into question the validity of this separate ministry. The church continued to write reports on the ministry of the deaconess and to make changes to their situation. In 1959, the Rev Wesley Chambers was appointed Warden of the order and the days of the Lady Superintendent drew to a close.

The year 1965 brought with it the first of two major changes. The church decided to recognise the deaconesses as an order of ministry and to ordain them (previously they had been consecrated using an adaptation of an Order from Kaiserwerth). In 1968, the Deaconess House in Christchurch was closed and the deaconesses were sent to Trinity College to be trained alongside the presbyteral students, and the church decided to offer ordination to all the serving deaconesses (Mullan, 1984: 15). The changes, along with the demand that women should be admitted to the ministry, seem to have brought about a major reduction in the number of candidates. When the church decided to offer the deaconesses ordination to the presbyteral order in 1976, most of those serving were already acting as substitute presbyters and, with one notable exception, the active deaconesses accepted the offer.

From 1976, the diaconate has been open to both men and women. It has, however, been engaged in a struggle to define its ministry, not only for the Methodist Church, but also for its own understanding. This struggle continues to the present day.

There are some points to be made here. This new diaconate has been required to operate as a ministry to those outside the church rather than those who are part of the church. David Mullan's book on ministry in the New Zealand Methodist Church gives considerable space to consider the deacon's ministry. He concludes:

The ministry of the deacon lies more in the direction of the congregation-in-the-community than the congregation-gathered-for-worship. Leadership of the congregation in its gathered mode is in word, sacrament and pastoral care and belongs clearly to the presbyter.

(Mullan, 1984: 58.)

There is a hint of defensiveness in this statement and in much of Mullan's insistence that the deacon's largest contribution belongs outside the church. This desire for ownership by the ministry of the congregation colours much of his otherwise thoughtful examination of the place of the diaconate in his church's ministry. He questions whether deacons should be concerned about status or whether they are seen as "proper ministers" (Mullan, 1984: 45) and suggests that deacons who "aspire to function at the ceremonial centres of the church's liturgical life" (1984: 49) have lost the spirit of true *diakonia*. Mullan goes on to suggest some of the things deacons ought to be involved in, such as working with voluntary groups, post-natal drop-in centres, camps for the elderly and working drug abusers. All of these may be seen as a real part of the *diakonia* of the church, but this is to confuse *diakonia* and the ministry of the deacon. It should not be the role of the deacon to do the charitable works of the church; rather, their role is to present an image of Christ the Servant as an example to the church. The deaconesses had no trouble in distinguishing the two roles and many led projects, set up work and inspired the church in acts of charity, not doing what the laity could not do, but doing in their name what all could do in principle. What is different from Mullan's description is that the deaconesses always seem to have presented themselves as an image of Christ, not as Christian social workers. Herzog (1966: 148) makes this distinction about the deacon's role when he writes: "Separated from *leitourgia*, *diakonia* would be the same as secular welfare work." Mullan inadvertently makes my point on when he describes how at the great occasions of the Maori community the deaconesses were always present, "seen to be where the work has to be done" (1984: 27). They were offering a ministry of response to need. He seems to miss the point when he goes on to tell us that only a deaconess dared to relieve a family member in rubbing the feet of a dying princess. For Mullan it is symbolic of her servanthood. I would suggest that it was more a sign of the honour accorded her ministry, that it was the Christ in her that was honoured.

The deacon in the New Zealand Methodist Church today is ordained by the church connexionally, but negotiates her/his position with an individual parish with which they enter into a covenant relationship. This covenant involves the parish in its responsibility for the deacon's stipend and pension contributions and the deacon in carrying out the negotiated role. The role is primarily service to the community, but may also involve leading worship and pastoral care. The Church has appointed (2000) a Deacon for Diaconal Development and is engaged in clarifying the role of ordained deacons.

4.7 NEW ORDERS IN AUSTRALIA

4.7.1 Faltering Beginnings

The last contact the Wesley Deaconess Order seems to have had with the growth of deaconess work in Australia was with Isabel Sinclair, who was stationed in Brisbane under the discipline of the Australian Conference until 1913. In a letter to Ikley (*Flying Leaves*, October 1912) she tells of her work at the Central Mission along with a Sister Lily and an unnamed Sister. One of Isabel's responsibilities was to collect the Daily Bread Mission Boxes throughout the countryside each quarter. This task took six weeks at a time and Sister Isabel tells of how she conducted services wherever she went, travelling mostly on horseback. This collection was the main source of income the Central Mission

Hall had for the work among the poor of the City. Sister Isabel Sinclair left this work in 1913 to take up a year's training at the College in Chicago and filled a variety of appointments in the United States, back home in New Zealand, and finally again in Brisbane. She died in 1922 and the Wesley Deaconess Order paid tribute to her dedication (*The Agenda*, October 1920). Isabel remained a serving Wesley Deaconess throughout her life.

It was in 1922 that the Revd John Pearce, superintendent of the Home Mission department, raised the idea of establishing a Deaconess Order in South Australia, but nothing came of it at that time. In fact, it was not until 1935 that the decision was taken by the General Conference to establish an order of deaconesses. One advocate of this concept was Miss Kate Cocks, who had founded the Women's Welfare League, and she travelled to New Zealand to study the work of the deaconesses. She returned to Australia to make an enthusiastic report to the president of the South Australia Conference (Hancock, 1995: 5). One of the ironies of this situation is that Australia was turning to New Zealand for guidance when thirty years before they had been providing trained sisters to New Zealand.

A committee was appointed to investigate the proposal but, despite the endorsement of the 1937 Conference, it failed to report. Another committee was appointed and its report recommended the establishment of an Order, urging each state to set up a training institution. Hancock attributes the genesis of the Deaconess Order to the vision of Pearce and Cook, but Feith (1990: 9) offers a quite different explanation. The question of the ordination of women had been under discussion in the Australian Conference since 1922 and had been accepted in principle, but in 1935 the Conference could not see its way clear to accept women and suggested an Order of Deaconesses instead. This view is supported by extracts from the Minutes of Conference quoted by Champness (1996: 258, 259).

My own reading of the events suggests that both of these explanations need to be taken into account. There was clearly a drive in some quarters to establish an Order of Deaconesses and this idea was being mooted at the same time that the Methodist Church in Australia was struggling with the issue of the ordination of women to the ministry. Sadly, this solution would be seen as a fudge by those striving towards the acceptance of women in ministry and would affect the development of the Order in various subtle ways.

It was not until the 1941 Conference that the Order of Deaconesses was officially established and the committee acknowledged the presence of the training institution in Victoria, suggesting that all the States use it as a starting point. The following year, the first Deaconesses started training at the deaconess house in Victoria. Most of these were Sisters

from the Missions. By this time the *Sisters of the Poor* had been working in the Central Missions and the Victoria training house had been established for 45 years. Some had served in New Zealand, in foreign mission and in the training houses.

The 1935 constitution for the Methodist Deaconess Order opens with the paragraph:

A Methodist Order of Deaconesses shall be established for women who feel themselves called of God to devote their lives to the service of Jesus Christ in the spheres of work open for them in the Methodist Church of Australasia.

This statement was to create problems for the church from the very beginning. What were these “spheres of work” that were open to women in 1935? Identifying the work was to be an ongoing difficulty, with deaconesses continuing to respond to their calling to a ministry of answering needs while questions were raised whenever that response involved encroaching on the traditional presbyteral fields of work. Their probationary appointments had certain duties attached, which could range from chaplaincy to acting as secretary to their Superintendent minister, but all seem to have involved preaching, teaching and pastoral work in varying degrees.

The original draft of the constitution had included ordination for deaconesses according to the order in the Book of Offices. This was not ratified in the final draft and it was later decided that deaconesses would be dedicated rather than ordained. This led to an anomaly that could not be resolved. One member of the first group of deaconesses to come into service, Dorothy Clark, was transferred to South Australia and was ordained there. Shortly after, the other three were dedicated under the revised ruling. South Australia was reprimanded by the General Committee for their action, but it could not be reversed and Dorothy remained as an ordained deaconess. It was not until 1963 that the church changed its mind again and offered ordination to all the deaconesses.

This ‘ministry of service’ has been called a ‘costly ministry’ in the New Zealand Methodist Church. In practical terms, it most certainly was that in Australia. Beryl Champness (1996: 87) tells how she entered her probationary appointment without sufficient money to buy the uniform or the autobike that would be necessary for her work, and had to take up employment in the local cannery to pay for these items. At this time deaconesses were subject to a five-year bond. This meant that if they left before completing five years service they would have to repay a part of the cost of their training. While this was not uncommon

in some professions such as teaching where students were given accommodation during training, deaconesses were also subject to the rule that they would have to leave the Order upon marriage. Since these were young women in their early twenties and the whole period of this contract would be seven years, marriage was the most common cause of leaving the Order. One young woman had to accept the repayment money as a wedding gift from her parents (Feith 1990: 13). Many of these first deaconesses were former City Mission Sisters who had come from a tradition that said they had to “give and give again, nor count the cost” (1990: 19).

4.7.2 A Loss of Diaconal Identity

In 1966, the Methodist Church in Australia voted overwhelmingly to accept women into the ministry (Ministry of the Word) and the first woman was ordained three years later. Several senior deaconesses were soon to follow. What was clear was that many of the women who had served as deaconesses had done so solely because this was the only way in which they could offer full time ministry at that time. Although most of the serving deaconesses remained in the Order, recruitment fell and the gradual slide towards an end for the Deaconess Order was begun.

There had been a growing tendency to use the deaconesses as substitutes for Ministers of the Word, particularly in posts that were difficult to fill and this was to become more marked in the years leading up to the church union. By 1972, there were only forty active deaconesses and six trainees in Australia (Hancock 1995: 24). The previous year's Convocation requested that the Order be open to men and women and this went through a series of discussions until the Faith and Order Committee rejected the proposal. This was partly on the grounds that it seemed to be a duplication of the ordained ministry and partly because the committee felt that the Order's status continued to place women in a subordinate position within the ministry of the church. Despite these strong reservations, the Basis of Union proposed the continuance of a Deaconess Order. By 1977, when the Methodist Church in Australasia united with the Congregational Union of Australia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia to form the Uniting Church, there were only three deaconesses still in service. Hancock (1995: 25) comments: “The church never really knew what to do with the deaconesses and in the end didn't want them”.

The *City Mission Sisters* and the *Sisters of the Poor* do not seem to have posed the same problem for the Church. The problem arose at the point when the Church recognised an Order and in particular when it considered ordination. Diaconal ministry is generally

called 'the servant ministry' and in this lies part of the problem. Understandings of the word 'servant' are no longer what they were around a hundred years ago, nor are most people willing to pick up that role. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the term 'servant' could be used by a person of importance to indicate a relationship of duty to a superior, or even to one of lower rank. This usage would have been most common in interchanges between men. For women, this usage would normally be reserved for her relationship to her husband. At that time, the phrase 'to go into service' was connected with becoming a household servant and there was no honour in that position. Even women of a good family background could find themselves without means of support and would offer themselves as companions to older women, or as governess to the children of the wealthy. This form of work still placed them within the domain of 'servanthood' and they were often treated very badly by today's standards. From the descriptions of their conditions of work and the way in which the church behaved towards them, the deaconesses were clearly in this latter area of perception. They were perceived as 'servants'. It was not what they did that was a problem, but how they were perceived.

Much is made of the understanding of *diakonos* as a table waiter, but the biblical usage does not seem to support this use to any real extent. Jesus seems to use *diakonos* in the same sense that *ebed* was used in the Old Testament. When Moses is referred to as the 'servant of the Lord' (**Jos 12:6**), he is not being put into a subservient position, but reference is made to his relationship to God. Moses was always understood as being in a position of honour with the people of Israel and with God.

There is also a considerable weight given to the passage in **John** chapter 13, which describes Jesus washing the disciples feet. This is usually taken to imply the most humble of service. Less weight is given, however, to the opening of that chapter in which we are told that Jesus "showed them the full extent of his love". Jesus offers an example to his disciples of love without conditions rather than servility. The deaconesses were prepared to follow that example. The Church understood them as servants and used them as such and, when this was no longer possible, found no use for them.

There is a certain irony in this story. The non-episcopal churches view the episcopate as a symbol of grandeur and power. Certainly, the practice of episcopal authority tends to be exercised within a power structure, but there is a distinct place for other orders. In theory, the bishop is first amongst equals and the deacon has a particular place. This hierarchical system does present problems as an example of service, whereas the monarchical model prevalent in non-episcopal churches offers an understanding of the minister of Word and Sacrament having all authority. This creates the problem that any other order of ministry must be understood as lesser. In the monarchical system there is no place for power sharing or the delegation of authority.

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) included within its Basis of Union a commitment to the possibility of a renewed diaconate. All three churches had deaconess orders and in 1978 they met together to form the National Deaconess Fellowship, which passed a resolution calling on the Assembly Standing Committee to consider this question. So began a long and

sometimes acrimonious period of debate within the Church. Bev Fabb, originally a Presbyterian Deaconess, gives a blow by blow account of this struggle (Ritchie, 1998: 235-253), which came to an end in 1992 with the recognition of deacons in a new diaconate that was no longer an 'Order' in the old sense but an order of ministry. The question of ordination took a further two years, but in 1992 the church agreed one ordination to one ministry with accreditation to two different forms. An amendment, which was carried in 1994, reversed that decision and the church reverted to two separate ordinations.

During this period, anomalies arose and harsh words were spoken. Decisions were taken with large majorities and reversed at subsequent Assemblies. The first two men entered the Ministry of the Deaconess in 1982, one transferring from the Ministry of the Word and another candidating directly to the Order. These two were to remain 'deaconesses' until 1992. By 2002, there were ninety serving deacons and twenty-five in training in the UCA (McRae 2002: 5).

An emphasis that appears in the 1979 Assembly Minutes (Ritchie, 1998: 237) tends to evince the exclusiveness coming to the fore at that time. The ministry of the presbyter is defined as that of "Word, sacrament and pastoral care". Prior to this time, their ministry was always spoken of as Word and Sacrament and, in fact, the ministry of the early deaconesses was described as one of Word and pastoral care during the 1960s. Strangely, this change in emphasis is paralleled in that of the Methodist Church in Great Britain when it began to change its statements to include the renewed diaconate. Pastoral care has always been implicitly part of the work of ministry, but it was seen as an emphasis of the ministry of the deaconess. From the point at which the church recognises two equal ministries it seems to be necessary for the presbyterate (ie Ministers of the Word) to claim pastoral care as functionally specific to themselves.

4.8 SUMMARY

It is necessary to take the pragmatic view that the origins of the deaconess work in New Zealand and Australia lie, to at least some degree, in the fact that women were considered unsuitable for the presbyterate. This view seems to have had a practical basis, rather than a theological one. The societal perception of a woman's role was that she had a primary vocation as a wife and mother, which would override any vocation to the ministry. The effect of such thinking meant that the practical outworking of women's ministry in sisterhoods and deaconess orders could not do so from an overtly theological viewpoint. There is an empirical theology evident in the praxis of the many separate strands of this work. At the core of the work was a commitment to *diakonia*, not only in a self-giving service to others, but also through a leadership role. It is clear from the history of the subject that many of the sisters and deaconesses gave of themselves sacrificially, thus responding to Jesus' injunction (cf Mt 20:26-28). What is equally clear is that wherever they worked they initiated this service amongst the laity and enabled many others to offer

their *diakonia* to the community. It is in this exemplary role that the ministry of the deacon is most demonstrable. The United Methodist Church expresses this concept thus: "It is the deacons, in both persona and function, whose distinctive ministry it is to embody, articulate and lead the whole people of God in their servant ministry" (1996).

It would be easy to assume that this style of ministry was essentially feminine and that it only came into being because of the ban on women in the Ministry of the Word. Looked at in isolation, the witness of the deaconess movement prior to the acceptance of women into the ministry of Word and Sacrament seems to offer this conclusion. The movement did not die. Although the deaconess orders were left in disarray, they battled to survive. The battle was not for the survival of a women's ministry, but for the continuance of a type of ministry. There has continued to be a struggle, yet the call to the ministry of service has grown among both women and men. Indeed, there are many more serving in this order in Australia than ever before.

The root theological stance of a ministry of 'response to need' remains in Australasia. In New Zealand, this can be seen in the way the deacons take up their ministry. They are only present where a parish has shown a need. In Australia, on the other hand, the response to need can be seen in the authorisation to the sacraments. Australian deacons preside at Holy Communion by means of the authorisation granted at ordination, but only practice this in situations of need as expressed in the context of their own ministry (for example, with people who are house bound or in chaplaincy roles). In both countries, what has been retained is the focus on a ministry beyond the congregation and a freedom to answer the need for ministry of either community or congregation.

5.0 CEYLON: A DEACONESS VENTURE

5.1 INTRODUCTION

According to tradition, Christianity has had a presence in Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) since the first century when it was brought to the island by the apostle Thomas. Christian communities have been present in the coastal regions since that time. The Portuguese missionaries of the fifteenth century brought Catholicism to the low country. The Dutch took control of Ceylon during the seventeenth century, bringing missionaries from the Dutch Reformed Church and by 1722 it was reckoned that almost a quarter of the population of the low country was officially Christian. The British expelled the Dutch in 1796 and gradually brought English-speaking missionaries to the island.

The Methodist Church had been well established in Ceylon for over eighty years when, in 1896, the Rev Trimmer and his wife left Jaffna for a period of leave in England. They took with them a request for two women to work in the area. The people of Puttur and the Tamil minister in Jaffna felt that there was work that could be done by women workers, which could not be done by the men. Back home in England, Mrs Trimmer unsuccessfully approached the Women's Auxiliary for help in this matter. There were no workers available and no money to undertake the work should any be found. The Trimmers looked for help wherever they could, but to no avail.

Unexpectedly, a letter came to Mrs Trimmer from the Rev Thomas Bowman Stephenson, Warden of the Wesley Deaconess Order, asking her to come to the Deaconess Convocation to speak about the work in Ceylon. Mrs Trimmer not only spoke of the situation in Ceylon, but also made an appeal for a deaconess to help with the work there and for the Sisters to fund her. She asked "that some present would respond to the call for workers" (*Flying Leaves*, January 1903) The response to her appeal was enthusiastic and the deaconesses promised to find the money to pay for this missionary undertaking from their personal resources.

Stephenson felt that one sister on her own in such a situation would be at risk and so he asked Mrs Trimmer if she would not prefer to have two deaconesses. Mrs Trimmer went off rejoicing. Convocation agreed to find two Sisters to send to work in Puttur and to fund these themselves. The courage of this decision is only understood when it is realised that there were only fifty deaconesses and their allowance for every aspect of life was only one pound five shillings per week (ie £1.20 in today's currency) at that time (*The Wesley Deaconess Magazine*, December 1960). The cost for the two deaconesses would have been £150 per year. Help for the venture came from the Sisters of the Children's Homes who promised to raise funds for the project and did so for several years. Even this would not have been sufficient had the Women's Auxiliary not agreed to pay the sea fare.

Sister Gertrude Nettleship completed her medical training and set sail for Colombo in July 1897. Somewhere was needed to house the work and it had been agreed locally that the house intended for a Tamil minister should be converted for this purpose. Gertrude arrived to find a place available for her. Perhaps the most difficult part of this whole project was the fact that there were practically no English-speaking people in the area. For Gertrude (and her colleague Faith Hunter, who followed on a year later), this meant a crash course in Tamil. The core of their role was to offer a ministry to the local women which, without a sufficient understanding of the language, would have been impossible. Right from the start, Rev Trimmer tells that their work was principally evangelistic (*Flying Leaves*, February 1903).

Puttur, where the deaconesses were to be based, was part of a large circuit with four-day schools providing an education for approximately a thousand children. The area covered by this circuit had a population of about 10,000 people and it was in this population that the Sisters were to work as evangelists. Their connection with the schools was purely one of offering religious education, a function that would possibly be frowned on in the present age as these were mainly Hindu children. There was a strange cross-fertilisation of work. Faith Hunter started work in a neighbouring village offering Christian teaching to the children and young people in Evenay, about two miles from Puttur. This work was so successful that the parents began to ask for a day school for the girls as well. The

village people gave land, money was raised from a charity in Ireland and soon the schoolhouse was set up. Faith had been working with a young woman who had been educated at the boarding school in Jaffna and she became the teacher for her village.

Gertrude Nettleship was a trained nurse with midwifery qualifications and she had started offering simple medical help to the people of the area quite early on. At first this work had to be undertaken in the tiny bungalow, mostly on the veranda, which was very basic and offered no privacy for those being treated. Around 1900, Mrs Trimmer returned to England for her health's sake, but whilst there she raised £100 to build a better equipped dispensary and in October 1901, with great celebration, the Jevons Dispensary was opened. It was so named after a Mr Jevons who had contributed £25 for the building. In the first three months, Gertrude treated 600 cases and, as will be seen, this side of the work was to expand enormously.

The visiting continued and both Sisters offered a weekly Wesley Guild with magic lantern shows and Christian Teaching. There does not seem to have been a large number of Christians in the villages or even in the Wesley Guild, but the women and children were hearing the gospel and receiving biblical teaching. The visiting was one of the most effective tools for evangelism and in 1902 three girls asked for baptism. They had been away at boarding school and the Sisters had kept in touch with both them and their parents and were able to persuade the parents to accept the girls' decision. The deaconess mission in Puttur had established a real presence, with success in the evangelistic field, a growing acceptance of their teaching and Sunday School work, and the new dispensary beginning to bring people to them.

This whole project had been a leap of faith. There was little in the way of planning; simply a village, a dilapidated house and an idea. The Trimmers and some of those in Puttur had some hope of having British women to work in the area, though they had neither the money to fund this work, nor is there any evidence that they knew precisely what these women were to do. Perhaps it should be underlined that there are links here with the way many diaconal posts come into being today. They begin with a hope, a request for a deacon and then an application for a grant to pay for the deacon offered. On the part of the deaconesses, they were operating out of the principle of **Isaiah**: "Here am I. Send me!" (6:8), without the faintest idea of what that might actually involve. The

work they did in this first period began with doing what they could and then, as they grew into the situation, responding to the needs of those to whom they ministered. The day school in Evenay and the dispensary at Puttur were direct responses to a declared need.

5.3 A DEVELOPING MISSION

One of the things that is revealed by reading the letters of the deaconesses, and indeed those of the Rev and Mrs Trimmer, is that deaconess' ministry was seen as a separate entity. The original insistence on two deaconesses seemed to suggest that whoever was sent would be entirely alone, but this was not so. Mr and Mrs Trimmer were in close proximity and there was a church with a visiting Tamil minister, as well as several Tamil Biblewomen. There is no direct mention of who taught in the schools, but it seems reasonable to assume that there were European teachers amongst them. Stephenson, however, saw the deaconess' work as distinct from this. The deaconesses would work independently of the education system, but feed into it. They would work with and through the local church, though it would be thought inappropriate for them to be dependent on a male minister as companion – particularly a 'native' minister.

The Tamil Biblewomen were basically trained and remained within their own cultural context. Within the mission work being undertaken, there were two sides to the cultural coin. The Biblewomen were not drawn too much out of their own social and cultural setting as this would have created a perception among their family and neighbours that they had become 'Europeanised'.

At the same time, part of the deaconess' work did involve a process of enculturation. There is a considerable amount of detail given about sewing classes and the inability of the local women to use a needle. Correcting this perceived deficiency was an important aim of the two deaconesses in Puttur. Educating the girls was also fairly high on the agenda, despite the subtle changes this made in the relationships they enjoyed within their own communities. These aims could only be carried out by exemplars and the status of the deaconess made her a powerful role model in the situation in which Gertrude and Faith were to work.

In 1903, Gertrude Nettleship returned to England for a period of leave and was replaced by Annie Capper, who quickly learned the language and established herself. The long sea journeys involved in these changeovers meant that there were periods when one sister was left alone at Puttur for a while, but the deaconesses seemed to cope well with this. After a twelve-month furlough, Sister Gertrude prepared to return to Ceylon to relieve Faith Hunter, who by then had completed five years in station there. She spent time at Convocation appealing for funding for drugs for the dispensary, something that she and Faith had previously funded through their own circle of friends. Support for the two ill deaconesses had had to come from the Sisters themselves for the last two years, as the help from the Children's Homes had ceased (they had decided to support direct mission work with children.). This had put a considerable strain on the resources available, and sending the third sister had placed the Institute in debt. Stephenson made a plea for further help beyond the resources of the Sisters themselves (*Flying Leaves*, October 1904). He considered it would be a terrible waste to lose the services of any one of the deaconesses who had learned the language and become experienced in dealing with the local situation. Faith Hunter was anxious to return to Puttur when she completed her furlough. Whilst on leave, Sister Faith went to medical College to gain a qualification that would make her of more use to the women in Ceylon – again at her own expense.

The reports she published in *Flying Leaves* (November 1904 and March 1905) during her furlough illustrate the breadth of the work now being undertaken and the way in which the work changed in response to demand. The two deaconesses were now deeply involved with a new school for boys in Puttur. This catered mainly for the higher caste children. Such caste division was not the wish of the deaconesses, but a feature of the social structure. Faith complained about the attitude that suggested that lower caste boys did not need education because they would never be permitted to do anything but menial work. She struggled constantly, and with some measure of success, to encourage some families to educate the girls also. A photograph from this time shows the two deaconesses surrounded by the children and staff. There are between eighty and a hundred children, only a handful of whom are girls, and ten local staff. The problems they face are shown clearly by the story of one boy who makes good progress in school and also in acceptance of the biblical teaching. He decided to ask for baptism, but his parents had to be consulted. He was never seen again, the parents had sent him to south

Ceylon to live with relatives. The education may have been most welcome; the evangelism was not.

The deaconesses attempted to introduce the girls (and a few older women) to some basic education. In these meetings, they taught the girls handicrafts, particularly needlework. Sewing was an unknown skill and the girls took to it slowly. The time was also used to introduce Bible study and the girls were taught to memorise biblical texts. These meetings started with simple songs on a Christian theme and ended with the recitation of memorised texts. During the course of the four years Faith was involved in this endeavour, the group grew from two or three to sixteen.

There was a real motivation to improve the lives of the local Tamil women by offering them new skills and teaching about hygiene, but it is clear that that was not the primary aim of the deaconesses. They were even more concerned with the salvation of souls than they were with the repair of bodies and the education of the mind. For Faith Hunter, the crowning achievement of her first period in Puttur was the conversion of a young woman called Ponnau who, despite parental opposition, was baptised and joined the mission:

To us, she is the first step towards the realisation of a cherished dream – a 'class' of young, educated, capable and devoted women, trained and qualified as Biblewomen to carry the Gospel story to their fellow women.

(Flying Leaves, April 1905.)

This success must have been particularly rewarding for Faith, who had written an article for the Jaffna District Report in 1903 pointing out the difficulty of making any impression on the higher caste Tamil women. In this she had promulgated the idea of well-educated Biblewomen, who could be seen as occupying a desirable position in the local society. She was greatly concerned that the Biblewomen should not be seen as charity cases, but as those with status. Without the status of a good education and a decent income, they simply would not reflect an example to which the higher caste Tamil women would give credence. In time this dream and its evolution was to become the core of the deaconess mission at Puttur.

In 1905, Annie Capper did some relief work at Batticaloa, over 290 kilometres from Puttur, in a completely different community. The work there was part of the Wesleyan Mission Society effort and Annie intended to stay for no more than a few weeks; however, it was three months before she could return to Puttur. Her relief, when she did come, was to be Faith Hunter. Stephenson had been reluctant to waste all the experience Sister Faith had acquired in her time at Puttur, but had not been able to see a way to finance a third deaconess. The mission at Puttur was "an altogether exceptional thing" (*Flying Leaves*, October 1905) and, while this was to be cherished work for many years to come, he recognised that the purpose of the Deaconess Institute was not to finance mission, but to train deaconesses. Batticaloa was to be a joint effort with the Women's Auxiliary. Sister Faith would work under the direction of the Women's Auxiliary, who would be responsible for the mission there. The Wesley Deaconess Order were asked to supply half the cost (£35), however, as the Women's Auxiliary was short of funds at that time. Stephenson's daughter (Sister Dora) undertook to raise this sum. This was to be the first of many co-operative ventures with the Women's Auxiliary in the Foreign Missions.

The mission at Batticaloa served a totally different social group to that at Puttur. Although still within a Tamil area of the country, it was largely inhabited by the people called Moors, who are the descendants of Arab traders who settled there. These people speak a form of Tamil mixed with some Arabic and remain Muslim in religion. Anne Capper described the work she did during that three months in a letter to the Order (*Flying Leaves*, December 1905). It was almost entirely medical work, which was of particular value. The 'Doctor Ammah' was seen as a special help to the Moor women as they would often refuse any medical help offered by a man; the advent of a woman in this role offered great relief.

Annie had a large area to cover from Batticaloa to Kattankuddy, where there was a government dispensary. She was often stopped on the roads between and asked for help. Annie had trained at the Salvation Army maternity hospital in Hackney as preparation for her time in Ceylon, so she probably did not have a particularly broad medical education. However, she seems to have been called upon to treat almost everything from fever and typhoid to abscesses and skin disease. At the end of her time, she was

obviously reluctant to leave and would have happily exchanged places with Faith Hunter, but her deaconess discipline made her return to Puttur expressing sorrow for Faith rather than herself.

5.5 GROWTH IN PUTTUR

Annie Capper returned to Puttur from Batticaloa to a quite different style of mission. Puttur was founded as an evangelical mission and the medical services provided were offered in response to the needs they encountered. The two deaconesses were involved in missions to the surrounding villages with the intent to proselytise. The response to these missions depended to a great extent on the social setting in which they were attempted. Sirraputty was two miles from their base and was a community of high caste, well-educated Hindu families. Missions work to this village had not been successful over many years and the deaconesses reported that the Biblewomen asked not to be sent there on their own (*Flying Leaves*, September 1906). Since the Biblewomen that were available at this time were all from the low castes, they would have met with rejection on that ground alone. In the knowledge of this past failure and after praying themselves and asking for prayer from the Order at home, the deaconesses set out for Sirraputty again. To call the resulting mission a success might be something of an overstatement, but it was not rejected this time and there was interest in further classes shown amongst some of the young men of the village.

A more positive result was achieved in Vatharavattai. The deaconesses describe a poverty stricken village with no education and “ignorance and superstition” as the normal state of the people. After this visit, enquirers’ classes were initiated and the intention was to convert the whole village. Although a work was started in Vatharavattai, however, it is not mentioned again.

Eevenai was different in that there was a ready starting point. The village was home to a man who had been baptised many years before but had returned to his Hindu roots, as well as a young woman called Ponnu who was in training at Puttur as a Biblewoman. Sister Faith Hunter had brought Ponnu to baptism after entering the village school that she had started in Eevenai in 1900. The mission here was rated a success with the setting up of a well-attended Enquirers’ class and several women actively interested in hearing about Jesus, despite the disapproval of their husbands.

The two deaconesses laboured on in this manner until 1907. At the end of that year, Gertrude wrote home to tell of their work and included the statistics for the Jevons Dispensary for the year: 1477 patients seen in the dispensary, 83 visited at home and ten in-patients. Gertrude felt that this work allowed them to reach and influence many women with whom they would not otherwise have been able to have any contact.

The Methodist Church today would probably consider such overt evangelism through medical mission as improper. The Deaconesses in the early twentieth century obviously did not have this problem. Although they made every use they could of this contact to teach the Christian message, the offer of healing was not conditional. People came as they were and whether they were Hindu, Moslem or Christian, it made no difference to the way they were received in the dispensary. Some high caste Hindus were reluctant to visit the dispensary because of the Christian message being offered and this meant that some lost out on the opportunity to receive quality medical help. While the deaconesses were more than willing to respond to the needs of the community, they did so as part of their Christian mission operating out of a Matthean understanding. When Jesus sent out the twelve (**Mt 10:7**), the first instruction was to preach the gospel and then heal the sick and the Great Commission was to make disciples of all nations (**28:16-20**).

The next two years (ie 1909-1911) were to be difficult times for Puttur. Annie Capper had been sent to Jaffna as cover for the head teacher, who was away on furlough, and followed this with a return to England herself for the same reason. She was not to return to Puttur. She had met a missionary, the Rev Bird, in Ceylon and during her furlough they were married. Marriage ended her membership of the Deaconess Order and, although she returned to Ceylon with her husband, it was not to work at Puttur but to join him at Mannar (Small, 1970: 426). Annie retained contact with the work in the mission and sometimes visited, but it had lost a valuable worker. Her replacement was Sister Elizabeth Spence, who came to Puttur without any knowledge of the language. She very soon found herself on her own, as Gertrude Nettleship was afflicted with a serious case of Enteric fever, which was to put her out of commission for over a year. Gertrude was sent to hospital in Colombo and subsequently home to England on furlough.

Sister Elizabeth was a trained nurse and continued to work in the dispensary. The work that had been started in training Biblewomen had to be left in abeyance, as she knew little of the Tamil language. The same applied to the work of evangelism. The two Biblewomen continued to hold classes and to help with the women and the school continued under its Tamil staff. During this period, the building that had been in use as a training school for Biblewomen was severely damaged by the monsoon and became unusable. Despite the linguistic hurdle and being effectively on her own, Sister Elizabeth worked hard and was commended by Gertrude before she set off home for convalescence in England. Mrs Bird (ie Sister Annie Capper) suggested in a letter to the warden that while her husband was absent from their station she would spend some time with Elizabeth (*Flying Leaves*, January 1910).

5.6 THE WOMEN'S MEDICAL MISSION

From shortly after Faith Hunter arrived in Batticaloa in early 1906, the reports were headed 'From the Women's Medical Mission' and she continued to send them annually to the Order. Despite this emphasis, her first letter demonstrates the difference in intent from that of Annie Capper. Perhaps because she was temporary, Annie confined herself to the medical work she had been sent to take up. Faith was pleased and amused to be called 'Doctor' by the local people, but very quickly started planning to run children's meetings in connection with the village dispensaries; the saving of souls seemed still to be her primary focus. Interestingly, she writes her first letter from the 'Jevons Dispensary', presumably her way of making herself at home, as that was the name of the dispensary she and Gertrude Nettleship had founded in Puttur some years before.

The Batticaloa dispensary, one of four that Faith had under her charge, acted as a hospital and there were three nurses in training there. The Government Dispensary to which Faith went as 'the visiting doctor' was four miles away. Two others, seven miles and nine miles from Batticaloa, were visited on alternate weeks. These distant dispensaries were little more than a thatched hut in the village and Faith had to take a supply of drugs, dressings and other medical equipment with her on her visits.

She describes the range of medical conditions she was called upon to treat (*Flying Leaves*, June 1906). Many of these seem to have been the result of neglect or

mistreatment of fairly minor injuries which, by the time the patient came to the dispensary, were in quite an horrific state. Some were serious injuries, such as the small boy who had had a pot of boiling water spilled over him. Faith regarded his 'cure' as unexceptional other than for his bravery during the lengthy period of treatment. Her midwifery skills were called upon regularly, particularly when there were complications. As Annie Capper had discovered, the value of a woman 'Doctor' in these Moslem villages was incalculable. Most of these women would not have been able to receive any treatment other than that offered by the local 'wise woman'.

The 1908 report from Faith tells of a quiet year at Batticaloa, but a real expansion in the two villages. At Kattankuddy, there had been an increased attendance at the Dispensary and many more calls to attend patients in their homes. As this was a Moslem area, home visiting encouraged Faith greatly as it demonstrated a much greater acceptance of her work by the men. Nine miles from Batticaloa, Eraur had a visiting clinic, but by the time of this visit a three-roomed dispensary had been built on a piece of land donated by a leading Moslem. Faith describes these rooms as a drug and dispensing room, where most patients would be seen, an inner room for operations and a meeting room. Sixty to seventy patients a week were seen at this dispensary alone. Although this was clearly a medical mission, the meeting room was important in Faith's eyes and she held a children's and an adults' meeting each week at which Bible teaching was offered. The children were taught verses from the Bible and songs, a prize-giving being held annually. For Faith, this evangelical work was at least as important as the medical work that occupied most of her energies.

In 1909, Faith became ill for some time and was taken to the mission house to convalesce. While she was there, her house/dispensary had an upper floor added to give her some privacy. Upon her return she was faced with an unusually busy period, upon which she commented: "It is not quite easy to follow the good advice that everyone gives me to be careful. I do not seek work, but it is impossible to refuse to do what I can for those who come asking... there is but one worker, there is no one who can give relief" (*Flying Leaves*, October 1909) This was to be the last report from Faith Hunter as she was to leave the Order in 1910 for a short leave and then to marry the Rev Edgar Selby, who was stationed at Batticaloa at the same time as Faith. Selby and Faith served

in the North Ceylon District until 1934, when they returned to England (Small, 1970: 639).

Sister Elizabeth Spence moved from Puttur to Batticaloa in July 1910, writing of her pleasure in taking up this post just a short time later. In her first report in 1911, Elizabeth tells of the sudden ill-health of most of the European ladies in the area and how she has had to add this care to her normal workload. She had accompanied ladies into the hills three times during this period and had travelled an extra eight hundred miles on top of the usual weekly total of thirty-four around the dispensaries. Although some of this travel into the hills would be by boat, much of it would be by ox cart. The Bible classes at Kattankuddy and Eraur continued under her care, though she struggled to teach Christmas songs to the boys at Eraur, as she found they had no ear for music. Elizabeth had also started sewing classes for the Moslem girls at Eraur, which gave her an opportunity to evangelise amongst them also.

As *Flying Leaves* ceased to be produced during the Great War, there is little information available after Elizabeth's 1912 report. There were some setbacks; Thalenkudah and Arrapatai, villages that had been visited for six years, had suddenly started to offer opposition to the teaching of Scriptures to the children and the Hindu priest chased Elizabeth and her Biblewoman out of the village. Eraur was still strong, however, and Elizabeth remained hopeful of producing some converts. In 1916, she returned to England and was replaced by Sister Annie Hood who was killed in a road accident at Passar in 1919. Annie Hood is commemorated by a tablet at the mission in Batticaloa.

5.7 A DEACONESS TRAINING CENTRE

When Gertrude Nettleship returned from England in May 1910 after her convalescence, she found the ruined training house and determined to put in place something more comfortable that might offer greater training possibilities. The following January, she wrote to the Warden of the Order (the Rev William Bradfield) to inform him that she had asked a lady in Sheffield if she would donate £150 to build the new training house. Her reason for writing was to ask for further help from the Order, as she had received £50 from the Sheffield patron and hoped that an appeal in *Flying Leaves* might find the rest of the money.

By the time she wrote this letter, she was again working alone at Puttur. Elizabeth Spence had taken to the hills for a period of rest before going to Batticaloa to replace Faith Hunter. It was to be November before another deaconess could be sent out to Puttur, but Gertrude was to find her longest serving partner in this work in Easter Hayden. Easter was a trained nurse and put a great deal of energy into the work of the Jevons Dispensary while supporting Gertrude in the project for a Training House at Puttur.

There was a core of trained workers already in place at Puttur. Sister Gertrude's letter to the Warden had included a photograph of the three Tamil staff: Mary, who was a Biblewoman and had spent a little time at Ilkley; Chellam, who was named as a nurse, although she had been trained locally by Faith Hunter; and Chinnarchi, a locally trained Biblewoman. The vision was to go the step beyond this and train Tamil deaconesses at Puttur. This was to be a slow maturing project, though ultimately successful. The two deaconesses made a start on the building as soon as possible, but lack of experience in such matters brought their own difficulties. The first start they made led to the excavations for the foundations being washed away by the rains. Puttur was ten miles from the larger town of Jaffna and there was no one to offer guidance in such matters. Gertrude writes in June 1912 about starting 'a new apprenticeship' with a building contractor as she acquired the necessary knowledge to supervise the new building work. The first building was to be a single storey affair, but with foundations capable of supporting a second floor when this became possible.

For the next eighteen months, letters home contain snippets of information about the trials of building along with requests for funding for the building work and furnishings necessary to make it a real home. By March 1913 a visitor, Lucy Broad, was describing the new building as awaiting its roof. In October, Easter Hayden was finally able to write that the Tamil Deaconess Hostel was open. It was opened on the 6th October by a Mrs Jordan, the wife of the Acting-Governor of Jaffna, with all due ceremony. The building consisted of a large front room suitable for study groups or meetings and two large living rooms, completed by the provision of verandas on three sides. The first occupant of their new Hostel was Sister Ethel Westlake, who spent a long visit at Puttur to learn Tamil before taking up her station at the Friend's Mission at Clodagh, Matale.

Candidates for training were not going to be found easily. In a letter to the Order Gertrude explained some of the difficulties (*Flying Leaves*, June 1912). Educated women were few in number, so limiting the pool of possible candidates, and there were racial tensions that created problems as to how some women might be put to work. As Gertrude explained, the greatest problem was that “the country’s standards of life and morals make it most unwise to take unmarried women for this work”. Married women and/or widows would bring their own difficulties, but these were more easily overcome. This problem for unmarried women was to persist into the latter part of the twentieth century. Conversations with Jill Newsham, who served as a missionary for thirty years from 1964, reveal that Tamil and Singhalese deaconesses were still unable to work or travel on their own well into the 1990s.

The Great War disrupted communications and *Flying Leaves* ceased to be produced, so there is a gap in the information around this period. Gertrude Nettleship was due for furlough and left Puttur in March 1915, but seems to have been able to return at the normal time, which would have been during 1916. It needs to be borne in mind that all of this work – the evangelistic mission, the Jevons Dispensary, the building of the Tamil Deaconess Hostel and its equipping with furniture and training materials – was undertaken by the Wesley Deaconesses themselves. They raised money from friends and gave unstintingly themselves.

In May 1922, the Woman’s Local Committee of the North Ceylon District wrote to the Wesley Deaconess Order to thank them for the work the deaconesses had done (*The Agenda*, May 1922). The letter also gives details of the training that was taking place at the Hostel. Clearly, the first intake of six young women, most of whom were already working in a variety of posts around the District, had completed residential training. The curriculum included Bible study, Hygiene, Home Nursing, Domestic Science and Infant and Maternal Welfare. One of the trainees had gone on to Colombo to train in midwifery. The letter also supports a request from Sister Easter Hayden for a third deaconess to cover furlough periods as the work had grown too much for one person.

Although the new Deaconess magazine (now called *The Agenda*), was launched at the beginning of 1922, it included far less information about the deaconess’ work than had

its predecessor. Its first edition did include a letter from a Tamil deaconess, one of the first to complete training at Puttur. This deaconess, Emily, left Puttur to teach at Vembadi Girls' High School. Emily was engaged as a teacher of Nursing and Domestic Science, but she also undertook some Scripture classes. The December issue of *The Agenda* notes the return to Puttur of Gertrude Nettleship from her regular furlough and includes a letter from a Tamil teacher who had been working at Puttur while Gertrude was away. This change was to become a permanent feature of the new Training Centre. The work there was far too much to be sustained by only two deaconesses, especially when periods of leave were to be taken. For the work to continue and grow, much more use would need to be made of lay teachers.

Sister Easter Hayden introduced an interesting variation on mission work, using the students from the Training House. She took the students out to one or other of the villages to do what they called a 'lyrical address'. The Hindu villagers would not have accepted preaching by the young women, though they seem to have gathered in numbers for these visits. The format appears to have been to offer a musical event based on passages from the Bible. This was not hymn singing as such, but telling Bible stories through songs. Easter extended these events to include magic lantern shows once the students had become more confident. This style of presentation was practised in the Training House, with each of the students taking turns to present one of the stories of Jesus with lanternslides. Easter quotes a Hindu man as saying after one of these presentations using Pilgrim's Progress: "The Brahmins read to us in April, but why don't they teach us that life is a battle between good and evil and how to meet it – and *women* can tell us!" (*The Agenda*, December 1923). Perhaps what was especially notable is that these were not European women, but Tamil women who were offering this teaching. That year also brought new opportunities to widen the sphere of work undertaken at the Training House. During the summer, courses were run for women leaders from all over the North Ceylon District, offering instruction in the leading of Bible study and mission and evangelism. The latter course was particularly aimed at teachers in the Methodist Schools.

In 1925, Gertrude became ill and had to go into hospital for the removal of her appendix, but she looked forward to a good recovery and was soon back in harness. Her stay in hospital meant that she was not at Puttur for the only visit of the Warden of the

Order to the Mission. The Rev Maltby visited Puttur as part of a tour of the work in India and Ceylon. Gertrude carried on with her work at Puttur, alternating furloughs with Easter Hayden. Gertrude had her last home furlough in 1927 after thirty years of mission in Ceylon. She was not to return home again. In 1930, the Governor travelled north to Puttur to invest Gertrude Nettleship with membership of the Order of the British Empire (OBE). The Governor spoke of the work done by Gertrude and her colleagues in the mission and remarked on the advances made since his last visit. The Training House had a second storey added in 1929 and more students were in residence. Sister Gertrude Nettleship retired in 1930, but continued in Puttur on a pension of £100 a year until late in 1931 when she became ill and went to India to live with her sister, Mrs Ross. Sister Gladys Stephenson, returning from China, saw Gertrude there in 1932 and reported that she had been able to attend church for the first time in eighteen months. Gertrude died at LMS Hospital Travancore in 1933.

Easter Hayden seems to have ceased going home on furlough quite early in her time in Ceylon, being inclined to take these rest periods in the hills of Ceylon instead. This must have been a considerable help to the Order, as the cost of travel home was one of the financial burdens they carried directly. She had a twenty-year partnership with Gertrude in the work at Puttur and was to become the driving force in this work until she retired in 1941.

Sister Easter had come to Ceylon as a trained nurse and had taken considerable responsibility for the work in the Jevons Dispensary. Gertrude Stephenson's account of her visit to Puttur gives an interesting account of the life and work there (*The Agenda*, December 1932). Puttur itself was now a wholly Christian village, and there were two Tamil deaconesses working at the centre and in the village. The students who lived in the Training Home spent the morning conducting child welfare classes with local children and mothers and the afternoon in instruction. The teacher at this time was Miss Jean Sharp, who served at Puttur from 1925 until 1933.

From 1922, there had been a lay teacher working at the Training Home to supplement the work of the deaconesses. This seems to have been the contribution of the North Ceylon District women's Work Committee to the training Centre. During Gladys Stephenson's visit, she was taken to Point Pedro to see the medical work that was being

done by a Tamil deaconess from the Training Home. Easter Hayden spoke of this as branch work, but there had been a Wesley Deaconess there from 1924 to 1927 (ie May Morrow). May left the Order to marry a minister and the work at Point Pedro thereafter came under the care of Puttur until Easter retired.

The last thing Gladys mentions in her letter from Ceylon is that the Tamil deaconesses were now preaching at the general service, which must have been a huge leap forward in the mindset of the local people and the ministers. The introduction of Lyrical Preaching, which had first been mentioned by the deaconesses in 1923, was a means to allow women to speak to gatherings that included men without appearing to actually address them. That the deaconesses were now allowed to preach in public worship, rather than just address women in fellowships, was an enormous change in their terms of acceptance. It was a change that bridged barriers of custom and culture that at one time must have seemed insurmountable.

There were now questions being asked at home about the appropriateness of continuing to fund a Wesley Deaconess Mission in Ceylon. When the Order had committed themselves to this, no one could have foreseen the length of time this commitment would involve, and by 1930 there were 34 deaconesses serving in foreign missions as compared to the three in 1897. Even allowing for the growth of the Order, proportionally this was a far greater involvement of deaconesses in overseas work than when they made their original arrangement. Gladys Stephenson's description of Puttur as "Ikley's own daughter" may have swayed the thinking, because Sister Easter was given further support. First of all, Sister Beth Beaumont was sent to Puttur in 1934 and served for four years, and then Sister Elizabeth Baker, who had been in Ceylon since 1931 at Kalmunai and Batticaloa.

In her role as deaconess, Sister Easter had maintained, added to and kept faith with Gertrude Nettleship's vision for a Training Home for deaconesses at Puttur. As a nurse, she retained a vision of extending and renewing the dispensary and had been saving for a number of years towards this end. In 1939 the new dispensary was opened, giving fresh impetus to the medical work there. The deaconesses, both missionary and local, kept the work at the hospital going until Easter retired in 1941. Although retired, Sister Easter Hayden seems to have remained at the mission after this time and did not return

home to Dublin until 1944. Medical missionaries and visiting doctors continued the work for a few years until in 1950 the hospital (as it was now called) was in the charge of a lady doctor, Dr Retnanandan, under whom it continued to thrive and expand.

The Training Home continued under the tutelage of Miss MP Dore, who carried on with this work for ten years. During her time in charge, several Singhalese deaconesses from South Ceylon came to Puttur for training. After she retired, there were no more deaconesses trained at Puttur and the Training Home closed. In 1952, Sister Elizabeth Baker was appointed to Puttur, though under the aegis of the Women's Auxiliary. The following year, the Wesley Deaconess Order took the decision to close the Ceylon Fund and to divert this funding effort to the work in the West Indies.

5.8 FIFTY-FIVE YEARS OF SERVICE

The mission work at Puttur was only a small part of the overall mission of the Methodist church in Ceylon during the fifty-five years of its presence. There were deaconesses in other posts for periods throughout most of that time, but it was at Puttur that the Order did something exceptional, in two ways. First of all, it was maintained by the Wesley Deaconess Order as a 'deaconess' mission working with the local Methodist Church, though largely independent of it. Secondly, it seems to have created a model for mission work for the Wesley Deaconess Order in much of their overseas work.

The first aspect came about without deliberate intention; in fact, several Wardens raised the question of the appropriateness of this direct action over the years. The genesis of the Puttur mission lay in a response to a call. The Rev Trimmer and his wife had initially seen a need for women's work in this area of the North Ceylon District, but it was an invitation to speak at the Convocation of the Order that prompted Mrs Trimmer to suggest that this work might be undertaken by a deaconess. There seems little in the letters of the Trimmers to suggest that it had been their intention to ask for a deaconess. There was no obvious source of funding for a new worker in this District. Both the Methodist Missionary Society and the Women's Auxiliary, whose particular task it was to provide funds for missionaries, were overstretched and would not have been able to offer funding, and there were no funds available in the North Ceylon District. Nevertheless, the deaconesses responded as if this were a direct appeal to them. A

volunteer was forthcoming and the deaconesses made their financial commitment for the support of this worker. Had this been a contribution to the mission work in the North Ceylon District, it would have been an act of generosity, but from the beginning it seemed to be viewed as a challenge to the Order. Recognising this, the Warden sought funding for a second deaconess. His actions demonstrate an understanding that what was being undertaken was an independent action. By 1929, with the establishment of a school for deaconesses, it was clear that this was a deaconess mission rather than a Methodist mission.

The Wesley Deaconess Order never slipped into funding mission again, but the model created in Ceylon was used and adapted in many other mission fields. They came not as missionaries but as deaconesses and what they offered in foreign parts was what they had offered in the home work. Indeed, the work of a deaconess in England was as much mission as was their work abroad. At home, the Wesley Deaconesses were under the control of the Institute and were on loan to circuits, to which they were sent to work among the poor, to teach the women and to nurse the sick. In Ceylon, this was what they continued to do, and its success made it a pattern for their work in many other countries. Their independence allowed them to act with greater authority than was usual for women of their time. They were far from being the first missionaries in Ceylon, nor were they the first women to work there, but it might reasonably be argued that they were the first women to 'minister' to the people of Ceylon. It seems that what the deaconesses were doing fitted Schleiermacher's description of "a public Ministry of the Word" (1928: 615) both in action and in teaching, despite his caveat about women.

For fifty-five years, the Wesley Deaconesses maintained and staffed an outpost in Ceylon that enabled women, changed a culture without destroying it, and brought healing to a people who would not accept it from others. In so doing they Christianised a whole community and brought into being a trained group of successors.

5.9 AN ENDURING MISSION

Sister Elizabeth Baker was the last deaconess to be stationed in Puttur. In 1931, she arrived in Ceylon to work at Kalumnai for two years before moving on to Puttur. She is listed alongside Easter Hayden until the latter's retirement in 1944 and the lists in *The*

Agenda show her as stationed at Puttur until 1960. None of the several sources I have available agree on Elizabeth's career from 1944 until 1960, when she officially retired. Although she is always listed by the Order as stationed at Puttur, and there is good reason to believe that she was working there as an evangelist through some of this period, she also wrote from Batticaloa in 1942 to let the Order know she was safe. It seems that in 1952 she came under the responsibility of the Women's Auxiliary Fund, which coincided with the withdrawal of the Wesley Deaconess Mission in Puttur. The mission work continued with Tamil deaconesses and input from Elizabeth, though she appears to have preferred to work directly as an evangelist rather than a trainer. A first-hand account in the Golden Jubilee Booklet tells of her extensive work in Batticaloa as an evangelist. This account offers no dates but, since it describes her struggle to learn Tamil, it must be early in her time in Ceylon. She preached in the church at Batticaloa and helped to run Sunday Schools, besides teaching young lay people to take on this task. She also seems to have been heavily involved in bringing indigenous styles into the worship. Sister Elizabeth was also responsible for the training of deaconesses stationed at Batticaloa. After the Wesley Deaconess Order withdrew from Puttur and it ceased to be a training centre the emphasis was moved to medical work, with the Jevons Dispensary being expanded and renewed with several new wards and the installation of electric light. Sister Elizabeth was in charge of this work from 1951-1957 (Small, 1970: 564).

On retiring in 1960, Sister Elizabeth moved to a project at Navajeevanam that she had helped to set up. Again, there seems to be an anomaly here in that the booklet celebrating her 1981 Golden Jubilee in Sri Lanka suggests that Elizabeth started with the Navajeevanam work in 1956. Since Elizabeth was still engaged in mission projects in various parts of Northern Sri Lanka until her death in 1987, it seems likely that she had slipped into a freelance situation sometime in the early 1950s. The Women's Auxiliary Fund continued to pay her stipend until she retired, but seems to have had little control of her actual day-to-day work.

This remarkable woman appears to have become the embodiment of the independent Wesley Deaconess Mission and gone on to mission in whatever situation seemed right to her. Throughout her time in Ceylon (later Sri Lanka), she is acknowledged by the Wesley Deaconess Order and included in the list of overseas workers.

“Navajeevanam is a residential rehabilitation centre for boys in rural Ceylon. It is international, interdenominational and independent.” That is the description Sister Elizabeth gives in *Doers of the Word* in 1970. The centre was started by Sister Elizabeth, along with the Rev and Mrs AC Thambirajah, in 1956. It was to become part of a wide-ranging relief work in an area of deprivation. The centre included not only the boys’ home, but also schools, clinics and a chapel. At Murassumodai, she was the inspiration for the building of a hospital to serve all the people of the area. Elizabeth travelled about the villages by bicycle bringing in young boys to the Sunday School and the training centre, at the same time offering help to those in need. Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, Sister Elizabeth’s work expanded. The Centre expanded and the Chapel grew into an overcrowded 300-seater church. The 1960s brought the beginning of the racial unrest in the North of Ceylon and Sister Elizabeth and the Thambirajahs were faced with growing numbers of refugees. Again she responded to the challenge and set up a care centre for the children visiting the refugees in their squats. By 1981, Navajeevanam was a community of 300 people with hostels for boys under ten and playgrounds for little children, as well as vocational courses. Many of the boys who came to Navajeevanam were sent by the courts as an alternative to prison. Sister Elizabeth was awarded the MBE for her work in this field.

The Golden Jubilee booklet closes with a description of the three new projects that she was undertaking. By this time she must have been at least seventy years old, but continued in the work until her death in 1987.

5.10 SUCCESSOR ORDERS

In 1939, the North Ceylon District proposed a scheme for an All-Island Deaconess Order. The Provincial Synod decided that: “... it would serve no purpose to discuss this question any further” (Small, 1970: 565). Prior to this, there had been a considerable amount of training undertaken at Puttur in the North, with a few deaconesses having been trained (alongside male evangelists) at Peradeniya for the South. One of the Sinhalese deaconesses consecrated in 1939 in Jaffna was Kate Chelliah, who had been trained at Puttur and then spent a year at Ilkley. This separated training and consecration continued for most deaconesses until 1951. The Northern District held Convocations

from 1938, at which deaconesses were consecrated and to which deaconesses from the South were invited. In the 1940s, there was a recommendation in the South Ceylon District for an Order of Women Workers that would gather together all the work of deaconesses, evangelists and women lay workers. Madeleine Silva, who was an English trained teacher, offered service in this way and was consecrated 'Sister' in 1948.

Over the course of the following ten years, three more Sisters were consecrated and four Sinhalese students were sent to Puttur to train as deaconesses. Training became erratic and for a period deaconesses were trained 'in circuit'. The two Districts were now united into one Synod and the women's work was seen as equal, whatever form it took. In 1964, there were 28 members of the Order of Women Workers, sixteen of whom were deaconesses and three sisters, the others being female missionaries. There were still candidates for the deaconess order, and four were being considered for training, but it was not until 1967 that formal training restarted, with three Sinhalese deaconesses in training at the Colombo City Mission and five Tamil deaconesses at Puttur under the tutelage of Miss Dore.

There were clear divisions by both race and status. The church in Ceylon may have become one and there may have been a nominal unity in the Order of Women Workers, but there were distinctions made between the Tamil deaconesses and the Sinhalese deaconesses. The Sisters were fewer in number but received a more extensive training and, according to Jill Newsham (2003), were considered a superior Order to the deaconesses. Miss Newsham remembers there being in the region of twenty deaconesses when she started her time as a lay evangelist in the late 1960s, with only three in service when she retired. The deaconesses were often treated as the servants of ministers and used for menial tasks. The Sisters were few in number but had greater status and often did most of the work a minister might do, though they were not given charge of a church. By the 1960s, however, both Sisters and deaconesses were preachers and took services wherever they were needed.

A particular difficulty for deaconesses was a cultural one. Whilst it had been acceptable for the European deaconesses to work on their own, this was not possible in the case of the Tamil and Sinhalese deaconesses. Especially in the case of the younger women, it was regarded by their communities as improper for them to travel about or to visit

people on their own, and so they had to work in pairs. In the same way, their work was confined to caring for women unless it was in a hospital context.

In 1983, the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka approved the ordination of women to the ministry and recruitment to the Orders was discontinued.

5.11 WAS THERE A THEOLOGICAL PREMISE?

The initial motivation for setting up a Deaconess Mission in Ceylon was a response to a call. This was not peculiar to the deaconesses, as some mission workers would have used the same explanation for their own situation. It was, however, typical of the premise from which Stephenson had initiated each stage of his use of women workers.

I would suggest that neither Stephenson nor the Wesley Deaconesses worked in terms of a considered theology. This does not necessarily mean that there was no discernible theological basis for their work. Stephenson himself was working from a Wesleyan theology that was at the root of all he did. Meeks describes Wesley's ministry with the poor as: "not simply *service* of the poor, but more importantly *life with* the poor" (1995: 10). In his sermon *The Way to the Kingdom*, Wesley himself emphasises the necessity to do good to everyone (in Holway, 1987: 73). Many Methodist ministers of the late nineteenth century emphasised a social ministry as practised and propounded by John Wesley. Stephenson had also been influenced by the Lutheran deaconesses at Kaiserwerth and the understanding of *diakonia* as a function of the whole church in which they were rooted. (This understanding of Christian Service as a continuance of *diakoneo* is elaborated in Aitchison, 2003: 91.) It was the service of God through the serving of others that activated the response to need in the deaconesses. They did not find it necessary to seek out those in need; sufficient causes were brought to them. The situation in Ceylon was seen as a service to Christ in the biblical tradition (see Mt 25:34-36).

The term 'enculturation' was unknown at the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, it was not until its use by liberation theologians such as Boff (1992) that it came into common theological currency. It is more commonly a sociological concept originally under the term 'cultural dependency' (Haralambos, 1985). Whether the

language was available or not, however, it was through a process of enculturation that the deaconesses set out to Christianise the Tamil village women with whom they worked.

The enculturation process offered the women a number of advantages – practical, social and economic. Practical advantages began with the acquisition of simple skills like sewing, which the poorer classes and lower castes did not normally acquire (Newsham, 2003), leading on to learning to read, write and other academic subjects. The acquisition of these skills offered opportunities for a better life and they came with an encouragement to raise themselves out of their subordinate social position in the Tamil household/community.

Economic advantages included access to work with a better income possibility and, for the younger generation, training for nursing, teaching and evangelistic roles within the church, which later spread to government controlled posts. A recent item on the web page of the Theological College of Lanka speaks of attempts to enculturate the church to remove the western influence. This is something that has been advocated by liberation theologians for some time, and has had an influence in South American Catholic thinking. A similar movement in the Catholic Church in India provides reason for some disquiet about this process. Tamara D'Mello (2001) describes an enculturated Mass in which the priest is dressed as would be a Hindu priest and his actions are changed to more culturally Indian styles of veneration. This would not, in itself, be a cause for concern, but the article goes on to describe the priest lighting a lamp to invoke 'the eight names of God'. Part of the sermon included questioning the peculiarity of the eucharist and the suggestion that all food should be seen as holy. The aim seems to be to make the Christian message more identifiable with Hindu understandings of God. The general aim is laudable, but this particular movement seems to desire to 'Hinduise' rather than 'Indianise' the Christianity being offered.

The Western Church has, of course, been enculturated on more than one occasion (this has already been referred to in 2.3). Paul was the great advocate of enculturation (see 1 Cor 9:19-22), but it is well to note his caveats. It is Paul's understanding that it is necessary to hold to the central truths, which points to the concerns in D'Mello's description.

5.12 SUMMARY

From quite early in the mission, the deaconesses came to the conclusion that the Biblewomen who were in place were less effective than they should have been. This was because they were seen to be little better educated than the average village woman and were often widows or women without family support. They were perceived as recipients of charity, in a weak position and as unacceptable low caste servants. This was not the image of 'servant ministry' that the deaconesses presented, nor was it what they wanted for the Biblewomen. The deaconesses had a position to be aspired to. They were well-educated, well-dressed, provided health care and projected an image of authority. The deaconesses were giving sacrificially, not in the sense of demeaning or abusing themselves, but by creating an image that others could aspire to. As with the Beguines of the Middle Ages (Bowie, 1989: 24) they did not consider poverty a virtue but understood servants as those who had something to give, and so they gave willingly. In the deaconesses' understanding, you could not offer something of value if you had nothing of value to give. Their exemplary ministry was to create an image to which the Tamil women would aspire, while at the same time offering them a way to achieve that aspiration.

6.0 WEST AFRICA: A NEW START

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The Wesley Deaconess Order was drawn into West Africa by the need of the Methodist Missionary Society for women to teach in the schools that were already in existence. By 1901, there were several schools, most of which addressed a particularly urgent need. The male missionaries usually ran schools for boys, while their wives and/or female missionaries had started schools for girls. The climate of the West African coast was especially difficult and the handful of women rapidly succumbed to ill health. An appeal to the Wesley Deaconess Order to undertake this work was made in 1903 and the first deaconesses were appointed in the following year.

Dr Stephenson made this matter the subject of his editorial in the May 1904 issue of *Flying Leaves*. His particular interest was to answer concerns about the wisdom of sending young women into such a dangerous work. His response to this fear was that "The world cannot be saved without sacrifice". Stephenson was not inclined to be foolhardy and a system of rotation had been agreed with the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society whereby two deaconesses would be sent out to serve on the West Coast and one would be held in reserve. Each would serve a maximum of eighteen months and then have a six-month furlough. Another important proviso was that all should be volunteers. The record of this work indicates that Stephenson's statement that "the call to duty will be cheerfully answered" would be vindicated repeatedly.

6.2 GOLD COAST (GHANA)

In June 1904, the Secretary of the Wesleyan Missionary Society, the Rev William Findlay, spoke to Convocation about the situation in West Africa. He was concerned that there were no women missionaries in the area and that it had proved difficult to recruit any, which was in turn having a detrimental effect on the Christian witness to the people of West Africa. One of his most serious concerns was that there was a growing movement amongst the local people to discard European ways and return to what he saw as "primitive savagery" (*Flying Leaves*, June 1904). Polygamy was a problem for the missionaries, as it was a central part of the culture of the local peoples. Mr Findlay felt that educating women would make a significant difference.

6.2.1 The Gold Coast Schools

The Cape Coast School was started in 1901 by a Mrs Ellis, the widow of the Chairman of the District. Mrs Ellis returned to West Africa after her husband's death to establish a school for the daughters of Christian men. She ran this project with only the help of some local African teachers for twelve months before becoming ill. After she returned to England, the Women's Auxiliary tried to find English staff for the school but were unable to do so and for two years it was staffed by the local teachers alone.

After Mr Findlay's appeal to Convocation there were ten volunteers to take up the posts in Cape Coast. The Wesleyan Methodist Conference noted the appointment of Sister Ethel Worthington and Sister Annie M^cVicker to commence from September 1904. According to Dr. Stephenson, the purpose of this work was: "To lead them into a higher-toned and more cultivated life, and especially to bring them into the personal possession of an intelligent faith" (*Flying Leaves*, October 1904). This is not a statement that could be made today; both the language and tone jar the senses somewhat. It did not offer that

difficulty in 1904, and some translation of the intent helps us to understand what their purpose was.

Undoubtedly, there is a degree of colonial superiority in the first part of the above statement, but Stephenson might well have said much the same of the work of the deaconesses amongst the poor in Britain. His aim, as well as that of the deaconesses, was to teach hygiene, household skills, and 'modern' childcare to the women with whom they were to work. Many of the skills, such as sewing, which the deaconesses took for granted, were not part of the experience of women in West Africa. As for a "cultivated life and intelligent faith", as Protestant evangelists they saw reading and writing as basic building blocks for coming to personal faith. Without these skills people would not be able to use the Bible themselves. The Cape Coast School was for the education of the daughters of Christians and so there was not a converting purpose in their work, but it was based around reinforcing faith and making better educated Christians. The influence on the culture of the local women is demonstrated by a comment by Annie M^cVicker in her first letter to the Order when she informs us that: "The native women, when educated, usually dress in European style" (*Flying Leaves*, December 1904).

The two deaconesses arrived in Cape Coast by ship at the beginning of October, transferring to shore by surf boat into which they and their luggage were lowered down the side of the steamer. They were welcomed by the superintendent minister Mr Bartrop and Mr Graves, a black teacher from the school. The High School Girls were amongst those who lined the streets as they were taken from the landing to the Mission House. There were twenty-four pupils in the school when the deaconesses arrived, all from a large Christian community in the area. The school had a staff of three local teachers, all of whom Sister Annie believed to be in need of training. She and Sister Ethel set to work immediately to reorganise the school ready for the arrival of boarders after Christmas. Clearly, all teaching would be in a European pattern and in English as a primary language. A description of a Sunday Service taken by Mr Bartrop tells of its translation into Fanti by a local interpreter. Unlike in Ceylon, there seems to have been little attempt to learn the local language.

The first rotation took place in September 1905 when Sister Mabel Robinson sailed to Cape Coast to replace Annie M^cVicker, who was to return home for six months. Annie duly returned after her furlough to relieve Ethel Worthington, but Ethel herself was never to return to this work. Before she would have been due to return by rotation it is noted that she had retired for personal reasons (*Flying Leaves*, September 1906). A later report in *Flying Leaves* tells that Sister Ethel had lost her mother shortly after her return to England and that she had gone home to care for her father. Other than this, despite a short spell of illness suffered by Mabel Robinson and later Annie M^cVicker, the rotation system seems to have been working well. The deaconesses were able to maintain their work in this way, while individual posts such as that of Mr Bartrop suffered when he fell ill and had to return to England without a replacement available. By the time Sister Mabel was due to come home on furlough her alternate, Sister Beatrice Sheard, was prepared to substitute for her. This was the strength of the Order: what was being offered was 'deaconess work' and the task was, therefore, considered more important than the individual.

By the end of 1907, there were three deaconesses working at Cape Coast Castle and two in Freetown, with two at home on furlough. These posts were very isolated, with only a handful of white people in the towns at any one time. Sister Winifred Haigh tells in one letter of the excitement of seeing a white face. Despite the few Europeans, both countries had a considerable Christian presence and at Cape Coast Castle there was a regular worshipping congregation of around eight hundred people. The Methodist District

extended well up country and there were also many smaller chapels. The District Chairman was British and there were a few British ministers, but 'native' ministers served most of the chapels. One of the Sisters wrote home to describe a missionary meeting in Cape Coast where most of the speakers were African ministers. At this meeting, a lay preacher (man of parables) told of his efforts in the country where there were no other ministers or missionaries and where he had baptised one hundred and seventy people in one day (*Flying Leaves*, June 1910).

To summarise, the main work of the deaconesses in Gold Coast (Ghana) was not about conversion, but much more about edifying a people of faith. While the tendency today is to criticise the aims and means of the missionary work done during this period, it is difficult to see how they could have behaved differently. These missionaries and the deaconesses were people of their time and rooted in a culture quite different to that of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The deaconesses especially brought to their work the experience and style of working that they had developed at home. They were accustomed to working with the very poor, often amongst women who were terribly abused and downtrodden. At home, the ministry of a deaconess was to present a model of practical loving care while offering teaching in the faith that they themselves valued. In this respect, what they brought to their work in Africa was no different.

6.3 SIERRA LEONE

In August 1905, the Missionary Society asked the Wesley Deaconess Order for another two deaconesses, who were to serve in Sierra Leone. Sister Helen McLean and Sister Minnie Maude, whose father was General Superintendent in Sierra Leone, were sent out to Freetown a month later. The school had been run for the previous eighteen months by Mrs Balmer, the wife of the Principal of the Richmond College of West Africa.

The Wesleyan School for Girls had been founded sometime in the 1880s by local people, largely funded by a Mr James Taylor, but it had gone into steady decline. When Mr Balmer first visited it in 1901, prior to taking it over on behalf of the Missionary Society, he described the building as decrepit and the teaching in the following terms:

The teaching was given in a lean-to shed in the yard. A native man seemed to be the chief instructor and he was engaged in descanting on the Dukes of Edom and such like worthies of the first chapter of 1 Chronicles. A big girl was standing in the middle of the floor with a sullen, defiant look on her face, and a large wooden board about twenty inches long and four broad suspended from her neck.

(*Flying Leaves*, January 1910.)

Shortly after this visit, Balmer agreed that the Missionary Society should take over the school and it was moved into the mission house in Freetown, until then the home of Mr Maude the Chairman of the District. Mr Balmer brought his wife over from England to run the school with the aid of two local women, but she became ill after about twelve months and eventually had to return to England. It was during this time that Mr Balmer negotiated for the supply of two deaconesses for the school.

Sister Helen's first letter describes the situation at the school when the two deaconesses arrived (*Flying Leaves*, February 1906). Mrs Balmer had been on leave for six months and during that time the school had moved into the Mission House building where there had been considerable alterations to make it fit for its new purpose. Her description of the

teaching methods of the native teachers is scathing and she and Sister Minnie set about reorganising the school.

Freetown was the centre of an extensive Methodist District and there was good support for the work at the school. A bungalow had been built for the two deaconesses and they had many visitors during the two weeks when the District Synod was in Freetown. Several of the school pupils were received into membership at a 'Service of Recognition' during Synod. Sister Minnie makes special mention of it as a new innovation (*Flying Leaves*, May 1906), but what she describes is substantially the same service that would take place in a British Methodist Church today.

Not all the risks faced by these deaconesses lay in African diseases. Sister Helen was returning from Sierra Leone on her first furlough aboard the *SS Jebba*, which ran ashore in dense fog below the village of Whitchurch. Although the waves were breaking over the ship, the passengers and crew behaved with admirable calm and, with the aid of two brave men ashore, all 155 aboard were saved. Sister Helen's account of the wreck is graphic and ends with discomfiture at arriving back at the London House out of uniform.

An indication of the extent of Christian witness already present in Sierra Leone is a letter from a new Lady Associate of the Wesley Deaconess Order. The Lady Associates were women who took on the task of fund-raising and offering other support for the Deaconess Order. This letter came from a Mary Kude, described as a "native lady" (*Flying Leaves*, September 1905), who seems to have been an elderly woman of Freetown that knew of the deaconesses. Mary taught her own Bible study class, which later had to come to her bedside as she could not get out owing to her infirmity. She raised £4 4s (£4.20 in modern currency) in her first year.

6.3.1 Ebb and Flow

A constant rotation of the deaconesses between the two schools demonstrated the value of the involvement of the Order. When Sister Mabel Robinson was adjudged too ill to return at the appointed time, Sister Annie M^cVicker offered to cut short her furlough so that there should not be a depleted number of experienced Sisters in the school.

Sister Annie M^cVicker was a remarkable pioneer who started another school in Accra entirely on her own. Shortly after this, two deaconesses were sent to take up the work, but had to be redirected up country to Aburi for a time as there was plague in Accra. Their holiday was short, however, and they were soon back in Accra picking up the work at the new school. By 1908, the Sisters were very much at home and Sister Winifred Haig writes several times of trips into the deeper country to experience the worship there or simply to have a Bank Holiday picnic.

6.3.2 Understandings

The following excerpt from a short article offers some insight into the thinking of the Mission Society at this time:

Christian education may, therefore, be said to be the chief hope of Western Africa. And women's education can only be conducted by women, and for many years it must be by women from countries already Christianised.

We do not disparage the work of Roman Catholic Sisters; and we pay tribute to their devotion. But no Protestant and no Methodist will say that the entire education of the women of the West Coast should be handed over to them.

(Flying Leaves, April 1907.)

Clearly there was a belief that not just education, but Christian education was an essential civilising influence on the peoples of Africa. The schools at Freetown and Cape Coast were offering education to the daughters of local people who were already influential in their country, being businessmen or politically important persons.

The deaconesses worked within the prevailing ethos, arriving in West Africa with an agenda formed by these understandings. That they should be capable teachers was an obligatory requirement, as was their ability to organise and run the establishments given over to them, but their primary purpose was to produce Christian young ladies. It was accepted wisdom that 'Christian' and 'civilised' were synonymous terms and that the end result would produce women in the European mould. The language of sacrifice and service employed by the deaconesses and the Warden of the Order when writing about this work suggests that they would not have understood what they were doing as in any way improper. This is a view of such 'paternalistic' mission work that came into being in the latter half of the twentieth century, but would have been a foreign concept to the missionaries of the early part of that century. As Bultmann has said "no one can adopt a world view by his own volition – it is already determined for him by his place in history" (Johnson, 1987: 35).

There was a simple understanding that what the Europeans had was better than that of the people of West Africa in all aspects. Working sacrificially, serving at great personal cost, the missionaries and the deaconesses strove to give the West Africans every advantage they themselves possessed. From that starting point, the greatest gift the deaconesses saw themselves having to offer was a relationship with Jesus Christ, and so they sought to bring all those with whom they worked into a similar relationship. It might reasonably be argued that one of the major differences in thinking between these early twentieth century missionaries and post-modern thought is this certainty about what actually is most valuable.

6.4 GROWING MISSION

By 1910, there were five deaconesses serving in the Gold Coast and three in Freetown. A call was put out for further volunteers, both for Freetown and to staff a new school at Lagos, in Nigeria. The Lagos school would not be opened until the beginning of 1912 when two deaconesses were found to staff it. One of these, Sister Kate Lennard, had already served for some time in Accra and so brought experience to the new venture.

The numbers at the schools were increasing all the time until in 1911 Freetown had one hundred and sixty pupils, Cape Coast Castle sixty, and Accra one hundred. Each of the latter schools concentrated on work with a particular tribe, Fanti at Cape Coast and Ga in Accra. It seems that the tribes were unable to work together as there was considerable enmity between them. As has been noted earlier, the girls were mostly from Christian homes and often left the school to marry African ministers or government officials, where they were most influential. Comments were regularly made by visitors to the area who had met ex pupils and been impressed by their obvious education and skills in running their family homes and Sunday Schools in remote parts of the West Coast. Charlotte

Acquah, who had been trained at Accra, left the school after five years as a boarder and went on to become the first missionary in the Northern territories of the Gold Coast. A visiting Secretary of the Mission Society commented to Sister Ethel Fellows at Freetown how he had been impressed by the “native minister’s wives” he had met who had been trained at the Wesley Girl’s High School (*Flying Leaves*, February 1915).

6.4.1 Health Problems

In July 1910, Sister Flora Harris had to turn away the relief deaconesses, sending them on to Accra without landing. An outbreak of yellow fever in Freetown made her uncertain of the safety of the new deaconesses. There seems to have been no serious difficulty on this occasion, but when yellow fever broke out at Accra in 1913 things took a different turn. The outbreak coincided with the arrival of Sister Agnes Reed, who had been working for some years to prepare herself for this work, gaining a BSc degree and teaching qualifications. She had just arrived at the school when the fever broke out and she and Sister Nellie Hopewell carried on there, nursing the pupils until both Sisters came down with the fever themselves. Sister Nellie nursed Agnes as long as she could, but eventually they were both taken into the hospital. Agnes did not recover and died from the fever barely a month after her arrival. She is buried in the Wesleyan cemetery at Accra. The funeral service was taken by the Rev WR Griffin and was attended by the whole European population of Accra. Over a thousand Africans came to mourn.

Sister Nellie Hopewell was so ill that she could not be told of Agnes’ death for two weeks, but she recovered and returned home shortly afterwards on health grounds. The school at Accra was not reopened and a decision was taken to move the school to Aburi, twenty-five miles further inland. This decision was brought about by the departure of the pupils because of the outbreak of yellow fever. Sister Jane Theopold expressed some doubt about retaining the pupils so far out of Accra. Even as a boarding school, this was not as convenient as it would have been in the main city. By June 1914, the school had 38 boarders and sixty day girls from the surrounding area.

6.4.2 New Growth

This new work brought secondary education to an area that had not been reached before. It also encompassed a new group of people. The local villages were Twi and their language was not that which the Sisters had been used to in Accra among the Ga tribe. Sister Jane Theopold described some of the difficulties they faced and how wearying they were in her first letter to the Order (*Flying Leaves*, September 1914). The new premises were not yet large enough for school and boarders, and there was some compromising of the government rules about staff and pupils living together until things could be improved.

Education for girls must have won considerable approval, as Sister Jane recounted that: “many of them were engaged to be married and are being paid for by their fiancés”. This seems a remarkable cultural leap forward so early in the twentieth century. Certainly, these were mostly the daughters of wealthy and influential Africans, but that the men should pay for their wives to be to be educated suggests a high value placed on educated women. The work of the deaconesses brought a remarkable return in its effect upon the society of the Gold Coast. These few girls, well educated and also trained to teach others, went out all over the country as the wives of ministers, teachers and government officials, putting their skills to good use. They started Sunday Schools in distant villages, set up

primary schools and encouraged their own children to seek the best education to available.

The final Christmas party at the Accra Girl's School is well described by Sister Marianne Malings in a letter to the Order. She mentions heaped plates of strange delicacies – palm oil puddings, hard native biscuits, “dark brown and black concoctions something like greasy doughnuts”, fried plantains and bread and butter, all with a choice of tea or coffee. Each plate included a Christmas card and a cracker. The afternoon was spent playing games and after tea there was a bran tub with presents for all the girls. It was obviously a happy occasion. Marianne was at home in England when the yellow fever struck, having just been relieved by Agnes Reed. She was to return to help at the new school at Aburi, and spent six years in the Accra school before moving to Lagos in 1916, where she served as one of the team until 1927.

After the Accra school moved to Aburi, the deaconesses were faced with quite a different set of circumstances to those they had been accustomed to at Accra. Accra was a large town with an established commercial sector and government offices. The church there was comparatively well served with ministers and preachers and was long established. At Aburi, on the other hand, the conditions were still somewhat primitive and the church was much younger. There were fewer Europeans and experienced African ministers. Sister Jane Theopold describes the chaotic but well attended Sunday School at which she assisted: “... there are about eighty pupils, of all ages, in one room.” She goes on:

Sometimes the heathen women come to such a school to hear the Bible stories, and let us hope the little ones often re-tell them at home. The people here are having to face all the difficulties of sudden prosperity and the loss of faith in their fetish worship, and are in danger of becoming entirely materialistic.

(Flying Leaves, March 1915.)

A similar situation has been faced by many cultures at different times. Such a major situational change can shake a culture and remove all norms and traditions.

The outbreak of the Great War brought about some changes. Sister Winifred Haigh returned home in 1916 with the longest service on the West Coast, having recently completed her fifth tour of duty since 1907. She was not to return until 1919 when she was stationed in Nigeria. *Flying Leaves* ceased production in 1915 owing to war-time shortages and the picture is not as clear as might be hoped. The war created travel problems and it seems that women were forbidden to sail for some years. The 1919 Minutes of Conference mention a ban on the sailing of women missionaries from as early as 1916. Sister Jessie Holloway, who was one of the last of the deaconesses to sail, was delayed on her voyage to Lagos aboard the *SS Dakar* and she reported that although the weather was bad, the ship had also had to sail over one hundred miles off its usual course to avoid contact with enemy vessels (*Flying Leaves*, February 1915).

6.4.3 After the First World War

The schools were all still providing education at the end of the war, and must be presumed to have carried on throughout. Those deaconesses who served throughout the war period would not have had the advantage of the regular home leave that had been the practice until then. As at home, the lengthy school holidays left them with plenty of time to fill. A clue to the work the deaconesses were called on to help with outside normal duties comes in an account by Sister Elsie Dukes of a trip up river in April 1918. Sister

Elsie had served in Sierra Leone since 1910, and was to continue to do so until 1924 when she moved to the school at Lagos in the Nigeria District. She was a seasoned West Africa hand and her letter describes an eventful journey by boat and then on foot to Kambia in the north of the country.

The journey began with a trip up the coast to Kychom in the mouth of the River Scarcies, a distance of around 55 kilometres. This was undertaken in an open boat, propelled by the paddles of the crew of four through what was evidently a very rough sea indeed. The boat took them on up river to Kambia with a number of stops in accommodation, which Sister Elsie described as rat-infested and filthy. This journey seems to have been a tour of inspection by Mr Balmer (General Superintendent) and two colleagues, Mr Walton and Mr Williams. Sister Elsie does not identify them as such, but a Rev Solomon Williams (an African minister) was a Circuit Superintendent in Freetown about this time and Rev James Walton was a missionary who had served in Sierra Leone since 1907.

These four and Sister May Hatchard travelled through this northern territory conducting services in a number of different languages in the places where they stopped. At each stop the people came out to welcome them and offer gifts and hospitality to what was obviously a group of important travellers. At Racoupra, where there was no mission work being carried out, Sister Elsie reports "They said they would be willing to have a teacher there, but they wanted us to supply them then and there with cutlasses" (Dukes, 1910). Obviously, this journey was anything but a pleasure trip for the deaconesses and may have been part of an investigation of the possibilities of mission in the area. It is interesting to note that Elsie Dukes makes no differentiation in her references to the ministers with whom she works. All receive the same mode of address yet a check in the records indicates that many of these were African Ministers. It would seem that the church in West Africa was managing to avoid racial distinctions at this early stage.

6.4.4 New Ventures

Throughout the 1920s the work continued to grow, so much so that on a visit to the West Coast in 1925, the Warden, Mr Maltby, reported that the Girls' High School at Cape Coast Castle was "smaller than our other schools at Accra and Lagos" (*The Agenda*, July 1923), yet it had around one hundred pupils. It was at this time that the deaconesses started to branch out into nursing. Sister Jessie Rapson, who had served in the schools from 1913 until 1918, returned to the Sierra Leone in 1923 to work at Segbwema in the Mendi Country, which lies in the southern half of the country. Her work there was principally nursing, though the aim was to build a new school. Sister Jessie tells of her pleasure in doing "the real thing at last" (*The Agenda*, December 1923). Segbwema was not a settled town with an established school and a solid Christian population. It would take a long time for the Girls' School to be established, but for the next year or so Sister Jessie was able to work in the varied roles of nurse, evangelist, and evangelist trainer for the older boys from the small Boys' School. It was this evangelistic opportunity that so enthused her. It was certainly not a clean slate as mission work had been going on there for many years, but there was much new work to be done.

Another deaconess arrived in Segbwema towards the end of 1924. Sister Gertrude Joy was sent out to help as the school was slowly coming into being. There were only seventeen girls in September 1924 and no desks or chairs were yet ready. The boarding school building had been erected, but had not dried out sufficiently to be fit for occupation by girls. Sister Gertrude's brief 1925 report describes both dispensary and

school as being within the responsibility of the deaconesses, although Sister Jessie had obtained the services of the government doctor for one day a week.

Further south in Ilesha, Nigeria, new work was being started and a deaconess, Sister Winifred Shovelton, was beginning to visit amongst the local villages. She wrote about her work in enthusiastic terms in 1924, describing a visit to an outlying village where she says: "With the help of a Yoruba picture roll, we 'preached unto them Jesus'" (*The Agenda*, May 1924). There are few reports from this station, but it is listed as hospital work from 1934.

The early 1920s was also a time of struggle for the Order as the work was growing faster than they could easily provide trained deaconesses to go West Africa. In 1923, a tutor from the college at Ilkley, Sister Persis Beer, went out to Freetown to relieve the Sisters there. This was to be only the start of a long career in Africa as she was to return often and for longer appointments until 1945. On her first visit to Freetown she was invited to preach at a Kru service. She enjoyed the experience despite the fact that she found herself "speaking to an audience until the interpreter translated for them" (*The Agenda*, January 1924). The language difficulty was something that was noticed by Sister Minnie Burns, also an Ilkley tutor who replaced Sister Persis in 1924. She commented that: "Broken English is an excellent way for conveying religious truth" (*The Agenda*, March 1924).

The Methodist Church in West Africa was already a wide-spread body by this time and most of the ministers were African, as were all the lay preachers. Education was central to the work of the church and English was a pivotal part of that education, but as Minnie Burns and Persis Beer found, much of the teaching was in 'broken English' (Creole) and the preaching was interpreted. Even those missionaries who had been in West Africa for many years needed interpreters much of the time, as there was a confusing number of dialects to deal with. A description of a trip through Freetown to a Watchnight Service contains an illuminating detail. A dancing and chanting group, carrying a model of a church, passed Sister Minnie and her companions repeatedly chanting "I am the Way" (*The Agenda*, March 1924). One of the oldest concepts in Christianity seems to have overcome the language barrier once again.

6.4.5 Women's Work

In 1928, the Missionary Society of the Wesleyan Methodist Church and the Women's Auxiliary amalgamated and the responsibility for the supply of all women workers was given to the Women's Department of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (ie WMMS). This was to be known thereafter as Women's Work. The WMMS took over responsibility for supplying deaconesses for the West Coast and also accepted some financial responsibility. Deaconesses working for the WMMS were included in their pension arrangements, who also contributed £125 towards the training costs of the deaconesses. For some time, women offering for work overseas through Women's Work were sent to Ilkley to train, as a consequence of which there were several candidates for the Order. For example, Minnie Burns had been a lay teacher at Ilkley, but offered herself as a deaconess for work overseas.

The deaconesses had always had African teachers working with them in the schools, and in the early years these were poorly trained women – and some men – who needed as much of the deaconesses' time as the pupils. This situation had gradually changed so that by the end of the 1920s the teaching in general subjects was most often provided by local teachers or by lay teachers from England. The deaconesses were often running the

schools, combining the positions of Head and Home Sister for the boarding establishment. These roles were often interchangeable as the deaconesses rotated their furlough and station time. It seems that the deaconesses made it their particular task to teach the girls home-making skills such as cooking, sewing and home nursing. The training of the teachers was their other principal responsibility, most schools having some teachers in training under the wing of the deaconesses. At Cape Coast Castle, the girls were also taught to be Sunday School teachers and Class leaders (Methodist Class leaders are responsible for groups of about twelve church members whom they lead in Bible study and to whom they offer moral guidance).

6.4.6 Handing On

Sister Persis Beer wrote a series of letters in which she reported on the progress of schools throughout West Africa (*The Agenda*, April 1929). She comments on the proposal to appoint a Missionary Supervisor for schools who would be appointed by the Methodist District but paid for by the government of the Gold Coast. The aim of the post would be to determine the value of a school to the mission work as distinct from its purely educational function. The question she seems have raised relates to the purpose of the schools – evangelism or education. Sister Persis was loath to set the two aims against each other, but seems to have felt that the limited energies of the District should be put into those schools that offered an evangelical opportunity. Schools that were financially sound and receiving a good report could have been handed over to the civil authorities. From this point onwards, the deaconesses slowly moved their focus to new schools in other areas or into fresh work in nursing and evangelical projects. This gradual change was to take many years, for nothing was dropped but control was surrendered to Women's Work (ie the Methodist Missionaries Society's women's organisation) as this became possible.

In 1927, Sisters Winifred Drakes and Constance Layzell were stationed at Freetown, the last of the deaconesses to serve in the school in Sierra Leone. The school continued in the care of the Methodist Missionary Society into the 1960s, though the connection with the Order was broken. At Cape Coast Castle, Sister Evelyn Bellamy remained as the sole deaconess throughout the second half of the 1930s and started her final tour in 1940. She was invested with the MBE at Buckingham Palace in 1944 to mark 30 years of service in West Africa. The work continued in Gold Coast at Kumasi, where there was a teacher training college for women (Wesley College), set up in 1927. The leading worker there for many years was Sister Persis Beer, who continued in this work until she returned home at the end of the Second World War. Part of the new enterprise at Kumasi was the Mmofraturu Children's School, which was linked with the training College. Many of the pupils went on to train as teachers and the school itself provided a training venue for the student teachers at Wesley College.

A letter from Sister Elsie Walter in Mbofraturu (sic), Kumasi describes a day's work for the deaconess in this station (*The Agenda*, March 1938). Very little of it is classroom work, leaping instead from a spell in the kindergarten straight to work with student teachers. The bulk of the day is spent in dealing with the administration of the school, leading prayers and Bible study and assisting in a clinic run by the students, at a local village. While the students were at breakfast, Sister Elsie made herself available for anyone who wanted to see her. One of the problems she faced came from a student:

Her uncle, who had been paying her fees, had just seized her mother's cocoa farm in repayment, and had also sent word to A_ that he would help her no more.

She does not tell us how she dealt with this sad situation.

A further indication of the change of focus began in 1932. Sister Frances Green started a Women's Fellowship at Cape Coast Castle, which spread to Accra. Here, it was led by a Mrs Armstrong and then was taken up at Kumasi by Sister Persis and her colleagues. An article in the summer edition of the Wesley Deaconess Magazine in 1952 tells how this was to become one of the most influential movements in church life with hundreds of branches and its own training centre at Kwadaso near Kumasi.

6.5 AFTER THE WAR

6.5.1 Gold Coast/Ghana

The only deaconess still stationed in Accra at the end of the Second World War was Sister Rose Little. She had served in a number of positions in the Gold Coast since 1915. From 1931 to 1937, she ran the school at Bathurst in the Gambia, but returned to Accra in September 1937, where she remained until 1952. She died at home in England on furlough. Sister Persis Beer in her obituary of Rose said: "She had hoped to end her days out there" (*Wesley Deaconess Magazine*, July 1952). Sister Rose ended that era of Wesley Deaconess work in West Africa. The Methodist Missionary Society no longer sought to station deaconesses in the schools as this work had been passed on to lay missionary teachers.

Sister Irene Morrow had felt a call to overseas work from her early days in college. She was at Ilkley from 1950 to 1952, but the Mission Society suggested that she wait until she was ordained before making a formal offer. A deaconess served two years probation before ordination and it was in March 1954 that Irene was accepted for work overseas. Her next eighteen months were spent in training, first at Kingsmead for mission work, followed by a time at the School of African Languages to learn Twi. This language training was a new departure as deaconesses had previously been expected to learn 'on the job'.

Sister Irene was stationed at Kwadaso Women's Training Centre from 1955-56. In conversation, she told me that the Centre had been opened in 1948 by a Miss Kathleen White. Sister Irene remembers the purpose of the Centre as being twofold: "to provide two-week courses for village women wanting to learn to read, and to provide a Homecraft Course for girls – six months but later became 3 terms" (letter from Sister Irene Morrow, March 2002). During her time at Kwadaso, Sister Irene taught Bible classes and hymn singing, reading, cooking and sewing. She preached in the Ashanti circuits each Sunday. The work is listed as 'Evangelism' in the stations of the Wesley Deaconess Order of the day as evidenced by the type of work undertaken.

In 1957, at the time when the Gold Coast gained its independence and became Ghana, Sister Irene moved to Takoradi where she remained for ten years. Here, too, her description of her work is within the church, principally the leading and encouragement of women's work of every kind. Sister Irene had responsibilities at all three levels of the church organisation. In her circuit she led class meetings (see previous comment under 6.4.5) and worked with the Women's Fellowship and the Youth Fellowship. At District level, her role was principally in guidance of Women's Fellowship and for this she would travel out to the various circuits and spend between three and five days with local groups. At Connexional level (national church) she was Secretary of the Women's Fellowship,

responsible for their annual conference and preparing the weekly programme of work, which was to become their Handbook.

In 1964, a Girls' Fellowship was founded in the Ghanaian Methodist Church, which has been of vital importance in the work of the church since. Sister Irene was also involved in the initial stages of developing a Deaconess Order of Ghana, which came into being in 1966 with the acceptance of the first Ghanaian Deaconess for training. Although the deaconess movement in Ghana took time to grow and there were still only two Ghanaian deaconesses in 1971, it has continued to follow in the steps pioneered by the post-war Wesley Deaconesses. The training of women, which enabled them to enter more fully into society, has continued and today's deaconesses train women in health and nutrition and small business skills. Sadly, Ghana is so impoverished today that education for girls is very limited and the deaconesses train women to run their own small businesses so that they will be able to pay for their daughters to go to school; yet another example of cultural adaptation.

Kwadaso Training Centre was the focus for several different areas of women's training: the Women's Fellowship, the Methodist Girls' Fellowship and early deaconess training. It was never a deaconess institute, but for over a decade its principal was a deaconess, Sister Betty Vaughan taking on that role in 1962. She was followed by Sister Irene, who returned from Takoradi in 1967 to take up that post. An article by Mrs Jill Stedman, a Methodist Missionary, describes the work being undertaken at that time (*The Kingdom Overseas*, May 1967). She had joined Sister Betty and two Ghanaian teachers at the Centre where the most important work seems to have been the teaching of reading. They taught not only in English, but also in Twi, Fante (sic) and Ga with what seems remarkable results: "One girl of sixteen learnt to read in a day and a half." Much of the work at Kwadaso was focused on the short training courses in church leadership and the twelve-month home craft course, which taught the three Rs, cookery, needlework, laundry, housewifery and baby care, alongside Bible study. This programme demonstrates that deaconesses were offering very similar help for women in Ghana in the 1960s to that which they had been offering women in England at the end of the nineteenth century.

When Sister Irene was appointed Principal at Kwadaso in 1967, she brought several other roles with her. The focus was on women's work and Sister Irene was an enabler with a broad sweep of responsibility. Kwadaso's link with the Women's Fellowship continued and was strengthened, as she was the Connexional Secretary for the Fellowship. Her other roles included Methodist Girls' Fellowship Secretary, Deaconess Order Secretary and Women's Committee Secretary, thus bringing the administration for all the organised work amongst women under the aegis of Kwadaso and encouraging its use for the training of the officers of each of these women's organisations. During the five years Sister Irene was Principal at Kwadaso, she nurtured the fledgling Deaconess Order of the Methodist Church in Ghana. Not only were the deaconesses trained there, but she also organised an annual meeting to which she invited deaconesses from the surrounding area and from other churches.

This movement beyond education to the general empowering of women not only became the model for the Ghanaian Deaconess Order, but has also continued to be a powerful tool in aid work and in regeneration in areas of disaster, whether natural or civil. In 1997, I became involved in some fund raising for Sierra Leone, which was using the empowering of women displaced by civil war as its model of help. Although this was no longer connected with deaconess work in any direct way, it was clearly a continuation of the ethos that had informed their work for much of their time in West Africa.

6.5.2 Nigeria

The Nigeria station was very much part of the general West African work in origin. As can be seen in the previous section, the group of deaconesses who had volunteered to work on the West Coast staffed the school at Lagos interchangeably. By 1924, Sister Winifred Shovelton, stationed at Ilesha some 230 kilometres travel inland from Lagos, was involved directly in evangelical work. Here she worked alongside an African agent and interpreter to preach the gospel to those they could gather. There was an established church membership in which Sister Winifred was working to set up a Sunday School. By 1930, there was a clinic at Ilesha and Sister Elsie Moody (a nurse) had replaced Sister Winifred, who was now at Shagamu in company with Sister Mary Robson. Here she continued in evangelical work.

The first Girls' Boarding School in Nigeria was established at Shagamu, which was eventually to replace the Lagos school. There were two Wesley Deaconesses on the staff along with four teachers and an African matron. The school had eighty pupils in 1937 and seven others doing a two-year teacher training course (*The Agenda*, Christmas 1937). In Sister Florence Cutler's report, she lays out her day and it is clear that neither she nor her colleague, Sister Constance Layzell, are directly involved in teaching. Constance is responsible for the dispensary and the physical well being of the girls and staff, while Florence is responsible for all the administration and oversight of the teaching of those being trained.

In many ways, they were continuing the practice that had been established in the West Coast schools where the deaconesses were enablers, establishing schools, training teachers and administering the schools until the local staff were able undertake this work themselves. In this they were behaving much like the disciples, or perhaps most like Paul's helpers/deacons whom he urged to find people worthy to prepare for and ordain to the task of leadership.

Earlier in 1937, Sister Winifred had held a major event at the school, bringing the wives of the ministers, catechists and teachers together for a two-day Bible study on "What it means to be a Christian". The women came from Ibadan, Ijebu, Shagamu and the surrounding area, much of the presentation being given through drama. This manner of work continued at Shagamu, working with and through the school until each of the deaconesses retired; Winifred in 1951, Constance in 1955 and Florence in 1957. From 1958 to 1961 there was only one deaconess, Joan Ryeland, stationed in Shagamu at what was by then a training college.

The church, through the Order, seems to have felt that it had a responsibility for the women of Nigeria that was somehow being fulfilled by the presence of one deaconess. Perhaps it was this that prompted the decision to send a deaconess into Nigeria at the beginning of the Biafran war. Sister Helen Davie, who was serving in Gambia, was pulled out in 1968 and sent into eastern Nigeria "To work in rehabilitation, especially amongst the women". As Sister Helen says: "How the church knew when rehabilitation would be possible when the war was just started she did not know" (2003). Throughout the war, Sister Helen was based at Oturkpo on the border between eastern and northern Nigeria, whilst travelling as widely as the circumstances would permit. Her role was intended to be to work with women in rehabilitation. Since most of the Methodist ministers in the area had been Ibos who had to flee at the outbreak of war, Sister Helen found herself

doing the work of the minister during this time. As the war drew to a close Helen was able to travel more widely, moving throughout the country. She gathered together large groups of women who had been in refugee camps. These women had usually lost their husbands in the war and Sister Helen helped them to establish villages as an organisational tool for survival. To some extent, this work was done in partnership with the Women's Fellowship, with whom she had continued to hold Bible studies and meetings.

After the war, Helen Davie went to Lagos where she was to be responsible for women's work throughout the country, something she describes "as an impossible task" (2003). In the early 1970s, Sister Helen started to raise interest in training deaconesses for the Nigerian Methodist Church, though she met considerable resistance to this project. After two visits to Conference and two refusals on the grounds that this was not appropriate work for women, Sister Helen travelled the country, finally persuading three Methodist bishops to support her at the third Conference. When speakers suggested to Conference that she would not be able to get women to do this work, Helen brought in twelve women ready to offer themselves for training. Combined with the bishops' support, this swayed the vote and she was given permission to go to Shagamu to set up training there. The one proviso was that she should take on twelve men at the same time. These men had not had sufficient education for theological college, but it was hoped that Shagamu would prepare them for that. Two of the twelve are bishops today. In 1978, Sister Helen Davie was brought home on medical grounds. She left before she could see any of her new deaconesses ordained, but there has been a Deaconess Order in Nigeria since that time. For several years, it has struggled to survive under difficult political and economic conditions, and the Methodist Diaconal Order in Britain and Diakonia International has lost contact.

In Nigeria, the Wesley Deaconess Order was most clearly doing what the church felt was their purpose – they were working with women. By the second half of the twentieth century Africa was one of the places where the original understanding of the church about women could appear still to be valid. When the Deaconess Orders came into being, society's general view was that women should not be in positions of authority, nor was it appropriate for them to minister to men. The 'servant' theology often applied to the deaconess orders is highly influenced by this mindset. The women were supposed to be humble servants of the Lord and of those in authority over them. In practice, however, what the deaconesses did was to empower women. This was not a feminist initiative, but was rooted in the understanding of the family of God and the awareness that it is mothers who nurture families. This issue is at the root of the first part of the problem statement: "There is a mis-match between the deaconesses' praxis of *diakonia* and the official Methodist view." I would argue that, although deaconesses were taught to go where sent without question, the assumption that what they then did was 'humble' service (defined as: deferential or servile) defies the evidence. The dichotomy in the argument Sister Helen had with Conference was that while as a white woman she could exercise authority, for Nigerian women it, and the process of empowerment for it, was thought inappropriate. I believe that it is this cultural tradition that has caused the gradual disappearance of the deaconess movement in Africa. From a missiological point of view, this may have consequences as both biblically and historically Christianity has drawn tremendous strength from women.

6.5.3 Côte d'Ivoire

Christianity came to the Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) as part of the French colonial rule, but did not take a firm root for many years. In 1914, a Liberian called William Wade Harris, who had been brought up as a Methodist, received a conversion vision. He discarded his European ways, donned white robes and set out to preach to the people of the Ivory Coast. Known as Prophet Harris, he preached a very simple and basic Christianity that attracted many followers. In common with the people to whom he preached, however, Harris was a polygamist. His ability to accept the cultural norms of those to whom he offered conversion remained a factor in the future of his converts. Most of Harris' converts could not read and the only Bible he had was in English, but he brandished it as the guide to be obeyed and promised the coming of a white missionary who would bring them 'the Book'.

At first the French administration accepted Harris, but later it became afraid of his influence and threw him out of the country, burning his churches and forbidding preaching other than in the French tongue.

The Methodist Missionary Society heard rumours of a great evangelistic movement in the country, though at first they refused to believe it. Early in 1924, they heard from a French Official of a mass movement of baptised Christians awaiting the coming of the white missionary promised by Harris. Despite massive debts at the time the missionary society, under their secretary William Platt, decided to follow this up and Methodism was soon well established. Platt himself went out to the Ivory Coast. The people saw him as 'the man with the Book' and would not let him go. Mission House gave him leave to stay in order to become the first Methodist Superintendent. Not all the Harrisites would come over to Methodism, however, because of their desire to remain polygamists. Today, both the Harris church and the Methodist church retain a strong presence.

The Deaconess Order has not had a major involvement in the Ivory Coast at any time, only two deaconesses having been stationed there. Sister Anne Whytehead went in 1954, remaining until 1972; and Sister Grace Brehaut went in 1962, continuing to work as a deaconess until her marriage to Dan Parry, a minister, six years later. Both of these deaconesses offered their services to 'Women's Work', the female arm of the Methodist Missionary Society. Sister Anne served in Abidjan for most of her service, largely as an evangelist. Unfortunately, I was not able to interview her as she died in August 2000.

Sister Grace remembers being sent to Paris for six months to brush up on her French (2002a). As a Channel Islander she had been brought up with French patois as her mother tongue, but it had been lost during her time in England. I asked Sister Grace the question "Was there a particular role set out for you?" She replied: "No, I was just sent out as a Deaconess." This unstructured situation differed from the early work of deaconesses on the West Coast, who were sent to fulfil a specific function, usually running a school. Sister Grace was initially sent to a school in Dabou as part of her familiarisation period. She was not to teach or run the school, but by helping the children to study the Bible she was able to get to know the something of the people amongst whom she would work. During this time she went to visit the outlying villages with a Swiss evangelist, which led her to ask what she could do in this situation. After a time she was sent further inland to Agboville, where there was a Methodist circuit within which she would later work. Here, Sister Grace had an Abobo minister as Superintendent.

She worked with two different peoples. The main group were the Abobo, the tribe indigenous to the area, but she also worked with three villages of a different tribal group called Krobo, who had immigrated from Ghana in the past. Sister Grace's primary role was amongst the women, though she was also required to take services regularly. The circuit was about hundred miles in diameter, which meant that she would often have to stay in the villages overnight when she was visiting. Because the people worked away all day in their plantations and would only return to the village late at night, she would let them know she was coming so that they could arrange for someone to be there when she arrived. If Sister Grace intended to run a Bible study during her visit she needed to give notice so that people would return early.

As the women had few skills, she taught them basic hygiene and sewing. They had never held a needle and it took her over an hour to teach them to thread one. Gradually, she tried to teach them a little reading. The men brought her a book written in pencil, which was the gospel of Mark translated into Abobo by a French missionary, and asked her to type it so that it could be printed. This was eventually achieved with the help of the Bible Society, but Sister Grace had to type it three times before it was as wanted.

Sister Grace described the central core of her work as introducing people to Christ and the love of God, while trying to improve the lot of the people with whom she worked. This story offers at least one answer to one of the questions in the problem statement: What was the theological understanding of ministry that guided the work they undertook? It seems that the Church did not have a theological, or even a clear ecclesiological, understanding that they could offer for the guidance of a deaconess in this situation. As seems to have been the case in a number of places over several decades, the only starting point the sisters had was 'to be a deaconess'. The description of what Sister Grace saw as the core of her work offers a retrospective theological understanding of her ministry, which would seem to be giving people an awareness of the love of God, principally through an exemplary ministry.

In her original letter to the present writer, Sister Grace Parry tells how a Miss Stennett of the Mission House visited the Ivory Coast and asked her if she thought she would have been better to have been a teacher or a nurse than 'only' a deaconess (2002b). Sister Grace took her to see the work she was doing and Miss Stennett seemed satisfied to the extent that she provided Grace with a larger car for the work.

6.6 SUMMARY

There is much argument today, at least in Western Europe, about the morality and propriety of inculcating Christian faith through the schools. However, that was one of the clear purposes that the members of the Wesley Deaconess Order were asked to address when the call to go to West Africa was delivered. The Rev Thomas Bowman Stephenson wrote:

The one great reforming influence of the world is the love of God through our Lord Jesus Christ... And if Protestant women will not do this [ie teach], they but hand over the children with whom, in [sic] the future of the race, to Romanist 'Sisters,' who will inculcate by every means the special tenets of the Vatican.

(Flying Leaves, August 1905.)

There was clearly no problem in his mind – teaching was an ideal opportunity to bring young people to faith. The unfortunate religious prejudice of his day forms part of his argument because he was aware that the Catholic teaching orders were already at work in many of those areas of Africa.

The deaconesses took on the work they did, entering a frightening and dangerous world, working with strange and different people, not because they thought that they were superior or better than the Africans, but because they felt that the love of God and a relationship with Christ was so important to them that they had to share it. They believed that the grace of God that they had received was so valuable and worthwhile that they must help others to find it. The schools they enabled were primarily concerned with bringing people to Christ. The means by which they set about this purpose were largely through the self-improvement of the young people. They taught them to read so that they could read the Bible to their families. They taught them hygiene, cooking skills, sewing, and language so that they would be seen to be people worthy of respect and, therefore, listened to. The deaconesses saw themselves as respectable, God-fearing women, worthy of respect. So they made themselves an example of what others could be. In this educating purpose they were following Wesleyan principles. As Theodore Runyon puts it: “Is it not reason that enables us to understand the nature of our relationship to God and the way of salvation” (1998: 15).

This makes good theological sense. Nobody would respect a God whose representatives were not worthy of respect. The author of the pastoral epistles gives guidance on the leaders of the church when he says: “Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect” (1 Tim 3:8) – the deaconesses expected no less of themselves. In Genesis we read: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them... God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (1:27, 31). The inference is that God’s creation is worthy of respect. The deaconesses strove to give those whom they served a sense of that respect. Runyon paraphrases Wesley’s concept of ‘spiritual respiration’ thus:

To this we are called as the image of God, to take into ourselves continuously that breath of life which comes from the Spirit of God, and continuously to breathe out this same spirit in a life of service to God, our fellow human beings, and all creation.

(1998: 18.)

This seems to me to describe the way the deaconesses understood their purpose.

7.0 SOUTH AFRICA: THE FIRST STEP

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In these introductory sections I do not intend to offer a detailed history of South Africa or the various churches, but rather to indicate the context into which the Wesley Deaconess Order sent its first workers. Within the land that has become the modern South Africa, there were two separate and antagonistic European power structures: the Afrikaner descendants of the original Dutch colonists and those who had come to join their number since, and the British colonists who first arrived in 1795. The South African experience will be of particular interest both to the methodology adopted and to the principle aims of Chapter 1, as South Africa has a thriving Methodist Church today and a Diaconal Order that has developed in parallel with its British counterpart.

7.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

7.2.1 The Afrikaners

The first Europeans to land in South Africa in the fifteenth century were Portuguese traders who formed no colonies. It was not until 1652 that a colony was established at the Cape. This colony was planted by the Dutch East India Company, which was solely interested in trading and colonisation at that time. These colonists were Dutch Calvinists, who soon formed the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* (NGK) in the colony. Prior to 1824, this was part of the Dutch Mother Church and was fully interracial in its worship. In 1857, some objectors began the move that led to the separation of the two racial groups for worship. The NGK opposition to the great trek of 1835-43 brought about the formation of the *Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk* amongst the *Voortekkers* in the Transvaal in 1855. Each of these churches formed segregated 'black only' offshoots as their mission work.

7.2.2 The British

When the British came into the Cape, the two colonising groups clashed over culture, slavery and land use. These clashes, leading as they did to various breakaway settlements of Afrikaners and the setting up of rival republics, eventually led to a war between the British and the Boer. Methodism first came into this situation in 1806 by virtue of some zealous British soldiers. Some parts of England were still disapproving of Methodism and 'troublesome' Methodist local preachers were often conscripted into the army, which thereby proved a ready channel for the dissemination of Methodist preaching.

Extensive mission work by the Moravians began in 1734 with the establishment of a mission among the KhoiKhoi at Genadenal in the interior. In 1798, the London Missionary Society (Anglican) set up its first mission work amongst the AmaXhosa, later becoming involved in work amongst the people now called Griqua.

The first Methodist minister, the Rev Barnabas Shaw, arrived in 1816 and started work in the west of the country. In 1820, the Rev William Shaw came to work among the native peoples of South-Eastern Africa (Eveleigh, 1923: iii). Remarkably, only a hundred years later the census shows the Methodist Church as having the largest membership of any denomination in South Africa.

The place the early deaconesses came to was a frontier situation, with towns full of immigrants and gold seekers. It was to a country where war with the native peoples was still a possibility and violence between the Afrikaans and English-speaking people was a present reality. They did not come to convert the heathen but to work with Christians in turbulent circumstances. There was already an established church presence, both Methodist and other denominations, so the deaconesses were not so much pioneers themselves as that they came to work alongside pioneers.

7.2.3 The First 'Deaconess'

An article by the Rev R Fuller Applebee in the *Transvaal Methodist* (April 1927), which had been reprinted from the *British Methodist Recorder*, tells an interesting story. The Rev Applebee was stationed in Johannesburg from 1889. He reports how he opened the manse door to a caller one day in 1890 to find a woman, who told him that she had been employed in Durban as a nurse by the Roman Catholic Church but now sought to serve through the Protestant church. It appears that she had chosen his church at random, and wished to offer herself for service. Applebee accepted her offer and, with the help of the women of his church, built her a small deaconess house. This woman ministered to the poor and the needy of the area under the name of Sister Theresa for eighteen months before suddenly dying. The article tells how subscriptions paid for a cross to be erected over her grave, the inscription on which read "Sister Theresa: Wesleyan Deaconess, a healer of the sick and a friend of the friendless: Lover of little children". Amazingly, the Rev Applebee claims to have "ordained her as the first Wesleyan Deaconess on the Johannesburg goldfields". This story is recounted by the Rev Constance Oosthuizen (1990: 1, 2), who was Warden of the South African Methodist Diaconal Order for 26 years. This Sister was 'ordained' by Applebee at around the same time as the first deaconesses in Britain were being set aside by the laying on of hands.

7.2.4 Sailing for South Africa

The first of the Wesleyan Deaconesses to go overseas was Sister Evelyn Oats, who sailed for Durban on 17th March 1894. In a letter published in *Highways and Hedges* (the magazine of the Methodist Children's Homes), Sister Evelyn described her horror at the conditions she encountered in the back streets of Durban and her hopes for a good response from the people. Less than twelve months later, we find her in Johannesburg. She gives no reason for her departure from Durban, but says that she was well supported by the local people in Johannesburg and was confident that the work would soon warrant the sending of another deaconess (*Highways and Hedges*, 1985).

Sister Evelyn described what she called her 'Deaconess Doll's House' as a three-roomed brick and iron structure situated just below the principal Methodist church in Johannesburg. This was to be known officially as Stephenson Cottage. The church raised £20 for furnishings and Sister Evelyn reported that she had created a "cosy little place" (*Highways and Hedges*, October 1985). This small cottage was to be used as a proper Deaconess House, a focal point for those in need and the weary amongst the ministers and doctors. Her work clearly involved her as much with those who were working in the church as with those beyond, working with black South Africans as well as the white community. Towards the end of 1896, Sister Evelyn visited Australia and on her return found that some form of explosion had demolished the church where she had been working with the natives. The rebuilding work was well under way and she took part in a reopening service, speaking through Zulu and Dutch interpreters. The following Sunday

was a gift day, a noisy and exuberant occasion, when the people gave £17 17s 9d (£17.89 in today's currency) towards the project.

7.2.5 Why to South Africa?

It would be reasonable to ask the question: 'Why to South Africa?' There is no evidence that the church in South Africa asked for a deaconess, or that the Missionary Society asked for her services. Sister Evelyn offered herself for this work; the Wesley Deaconess Order accepted her offer and sent her. The history recounted above informs us that there was not a receiving church in Durban and it was not until she had spent some time there that she took up the post in Johannesburg. This can only have been Sister Evelyn's own initiative, with the support of the Order who probably paid her initial costs. The Methodist Church had a view of deaconesses as assistants to ministers rather than as free agents, their conditions of service in England being that they should be always under the control of the local Superintendent. Requests for deaconesses in other overseas appointments were always to come with ministerial support. This South African initiative gives the first insight into the different understanding the deaconesses had. When one looks at other overseas fields of endeavour, it is possible to see how this view of their ministry affected what happened on the ground. Only in South Africa is it the undisguised starting point.

7.2.6 A Second Deaconess

The second deaconess, Sister Miriam Scrivens, sailed in May 1896. Like her predecessor, she had been consecrated immediately prior to sailing. Sister Miriam was also to work in the Johannesburg area, but more especially in Fordsburg, a fifteen minute train ride out of the city. The population of Fordsburg was largely made up of miners and, at the time Sister Miriam arrived, the suburb was in the throes of a typhoid epidemic. She found the nursing and visiting quite a heavy task, one of her early concerns being for the children of the miners who had died. As most were immigrants, the women and children were left destitute after their loss and Miriam longed for a home for the children such as she had known in London. The work progressed well. In the following year, Sister Miriam managed to start a Women's Meeting and establish a Society Class in Fordsburg, despite the difficulties the people faced with uncertainty of work and the struggle to survive. Sister Evelyn had taken the adventurous step of opening a Convalescent Home, through whose care more than a hundred passed in the first year. Oosthuizen quotes Evelyn on the subject of charges: "The charge is two guineas per week, but a large number of the patients have contributed nothing, being both friendless and penniless" (1990: 20).

Others saw the value of their work and the Deaconess Order received requests for help from a church in Cape Town and from a minister who had moved to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Unfortunately, there was no help available at this time. There was so much work to be done in the Johannesburg area alone that the two Sisters wrote to the Order, saying that there was sufficient work for six deaconesses. They attended the sick, often young men or women who had followed the gold rush. There were many deaths, often with the deaconess the only mourner at the funeral. Somehow they had become involved in 'search work', receiving letters from all over the world asking for news of loved ones and the letter writing that this involved occupied a great deal of their time. Visitors calling at Stephenson Cottage were another major time commitment. During one fortnight alone these averaged fourteen callers a day, often before nine in the morning. While Sister Evelyn was still involved with nursing and general care, she was also taking many services, especially in the churches serving the native Africans.

In their records of work done and needs met, the deaconesses seldom mention or convey any sense that they were in a dangerous environment, but occasionally there were desperate moments. Sister Evelyn's house was burgled twice when she was robbed of a watch and chain, and a "beautiful little loaded revolver" (*Highways and Hedges*, October 1898). On one occasion, she had to flee in the night as drink-maddened men besieged her door.

7.3 THE COMING OF THE WAR

After five years working in Johannesburg, Sister Evelyn returned to England on furlough, arriving in time for the 1889 Convocation of the Order. This was a time for congratulation on a job well done; the Rev Hudson, also on leave from Johannesburg, added his voice to the praise. Autumn brought news of the approach of war between the British and the Boers, with Sister Evelyn immediately breaking off her furlough to return. At the same time, news arrived that Sister Miriam had had to leave Johannesburg and was now in Durban. The deaconesses worked among the refugees in Durban until Sister Miriam was called to move to Cape Town to help with the refugees and soldiers. *The Methodist Times* paid tribute to Sister Evelyn's work with the Transvaal Refugees Committee (*Highways and Hedges*, April 1890). The Committee was hard pressed to know what to do with those refugees who were in need of convalescence. When they found premises to rent they called on Sister Evelyn Oats to manage them, which she consented to do.

In a report to the Order printed in *Flying Leaves* (April 1902), Sister Evelyn Oats described some of the work of the Refugee Aid Committee. Everything that could be needed for the dispossessed and the homeless was provided. Members of the Committee met each train and accommodation was provided, either on a short term basis or, when needed, furnished housing. A doctor was available to provide medical aid, the Committee providing the medication free of charge. Sister Evelyn was personally responsible for maternity care.

At the end of 1900 when Sister Evelyn got back to Johannesburg, she wrote to the Warden on the 7th of December to describe things there. Oosthuizen quotes from the letter:

Just a line mid the stress of manifold duties to let you know I am here. At present I am a Jack of all trades, at one moment playing an instrument, at another addressing a meeting then cooking a dinner, cleaning a room, mending socks and sewing buttons on trousers, or careering around in the tearoom, serving ever so many different drinks and viands.

(1990: 12.)

Despite the war and all the troubles it brought, the Methodist churches in Johannesburg held services on Christmas Day and took up the usual collection for the Children's Homes (a tradition continued to the present day). Sister Evelyn was able to send home £14 14s 3d (ie £14.71 in today's currency) (*Highways and Hedges*, March 1901).

When Sister Evelyn returned to Stephenson Cottage it was to find it looted and dirty. Even her books had gone. The same fate had befallen Miriam Scrivens' possessions in Fordsburg. When she returned in 1902, she wrote: "My bed and every particle of clothing have been stolen or destroyed" (*Flying Leaves*, April 1902). She also found on her return, much to her regret at having left, that the young people of her classes had been left "without restraint", but she had hopes of getting them together again.

What the beginnings in Johannesburg and the interval of war demonstrated is the flexible nature of the deaconess ministry. One thing remained firm and that was their belief in the need to bring people to a knowledge of Jesus Christ and the love of God. The constant thread that runs through the stories told about the two deaconesses is that of bringing young people to Christ. While that remains immovable, however, all else shifts and changes. The work refocuses as they discern a need, nothing demonstrating this more than their response to the war. They did not simply nurse or help in refugee situations, they set up convalescent homes, children's homes, clinics for those with typhoid, feeding stations for the wounded and rest stations for the soldiers and others in Cape Town and Johannesburg. It seems that their ministry took place wherever there was an opportunity to provide for the need of the moment, while at the same time helping people to see the connection between that provision and God's love.

7.4 THE NEXT STAGE

In September 1902 and under its South Africa stations, *Flying Leaves* has the comment: "Pretoria – wanted". Clearly another request had been made and a position identified, though it was not until the following year that a deaconess was found for that post. Sister Nellie Cooper commenced work in March 1904, her appointment bringing about some confusion. The rule for the provision of deaconesses was that the receiving circuit should pay the Wesley Deaconess Institute what was asked of it and the Institute would pay the deaconess and provide for pension and other care. The Rev Amos Burnet, who had been appointed sub-Warden, represented the Institute in Transvaal, and as such should have received payments from the local church. However, the Pretoria society insisted on paying Sister Nellie directly. The minutes of the Deaconess Institute record the dispute but no settlement, though Sister Nellie continued in post until 1907 so some agreement must have been reached. Oosthuizen mentions a street collection in 1919 on behalf of the Central Deaconess Society, which "has worked for the community for 30 years" (1990: 27). Such societies existed in New Zealand and Australia at about the same time. The Australasian societies were set up to initiate local deaconess work, but they also funded the deaconesses sent out from Britain. The Society at Pretoria would have been involved in the employment of Sister Theresa and of another 'local deaconess'. It seems that there was an initial misunderstanding as the Transvaal Society began its association with the British deaconess; the Order in Britain was operating on the basis that they had sent a deaconess to work in the circuit, while the circuit understood themselves to be employing Sister Nellie directly.

7.4.1 Pretoria

Between her arrival in May and her report at Christmas, Sister Nellie Cooper found her work and involvement grew immensely. The area she covered seems to have been large and widespread, but she was provided with a bike that she found very useful. The Methodists had started services in three new townships and Sister Nellie preached in one of these, taking Sunday School regularly in the principal church. Christmas Day must have been busy as she was involved with a breakfast for young men away from home, as well as visits to 'K'way camp' (*Flying Leaves*, March 1904), hospital and the women's prison. (Oosthuizen suggests this should read 'railway camp' 1990: 19.)

In August 1904, Sister Nellie wrote a letter to the Warden from Beulah, Evelyn Oats' convalescent home in Johannesburg (*Flying Leaves*, November 1904). She had gone for a rest and for an informal convocation with the other deaconesses. This gathering included

the two deaconesses from Johannesburg and a Sister Isobel Hunt, a Children's Home Sister. Greetings were sent to Sister Lucy Hawkens in Cape Town and a Grace Carr, who was probably another Children's Home Sister. Their meeting included a time of worship, as well as a period of questions and answers on the work of deaconesses with members of the President Street Church, where it was held. Sister Nellie commented on some people who did not know that the Methodist Church had deaconesses, but who explained it away by saying they were from Australia. (In recent conversation with deacons in Natal, I was told that there was still widespread ignorance about the Order.) During her week away, Sister Nellie had asked some people to visit some of what she referred to as "my sick folk" and to do hospital visiting in her stead. Although this was early in her ministry in Pretoria, she was only to remain until 1907 and was not then replaced, I wonder if she was able to persuade these people to continue this sort of work themselves after her return from her convalescence.

At the time of writing, the author is on sabbatical at the end of which there will be only six months remaining of his present appointment. In preparation for his sabbatical, a very similar process to that which Sister Nellie adopted was put into place, with a group of lay pastoral visitors agreeing to do the visiting that would otherwise have been done by the deacon. The intention is that those doing the pastoral visiting during this time should be supported to continue to do so for the last six months of the appointment so that this work will have become a congregational ministry once they are without a deacon.

7.4.2 Fordsburg

At the beginning of 1904, Sister Miriam Scrivens returned from her furlough in England. Sailing into Cape Town, she was able to travel to Johannesburg with one of the people from her Fordsburg Society who had been visiting there. Her return brought her a welcome surprise, for the Society had built her a three-room cottage while she was away. Her response is most revealing:

There are many advantages to having a cottage – the people come to the Deaconess more freely when she is alone. I have found that already, and I am hoping that my little home will be made a blessing to many a one needing any help that I can give.

(*Flying Leaves*, January 1904.)

Sister Evelyn had already noted the value of a place of sanctuary and a space for private counselling and this comment highlights the use that could be made of a Deaconess House, however small.

Sister Miriam was able to encourage her Class Meetings and continue with the work amongst young people, but her community struggled with poverty and disease. The work in the mines was not regular and many of the young men who had come out to make their fortune were in severe distress. Apart from soup kitchens, Sister Miriam's ministry was often one of support and encouragement. In the middle of the year (South Africa's winter), bubonic plague came to the minefields, sweeping through the community. By October, Miriam could write that the plague had left (*Flying Leaves*, October 1904), with the hope that they would never have such an experience again. Her October letter also provided news of a Mission held by Gypsy Jones, the international evangelist. The mission marquee held three thousand and was filled each of the twenty nights of the event. Sister Miriam, who helped to staff the enquiry rooms, tells how at least three thousand enquirers came to speak with them. Despite the recent war, the Dutch Reformed

ministers were very involved with this and Sister Miriam suggests that that denomination gained the greatest number of converts. She was also able to express her pleasure that the two peoples were working together again.

With a large number of men living in poverty due to unemployment in the area, there were several instances of theft and Sister Miriam was the victim of a burglary. She lost a number of small pieces of jewellery, which saddened her, but about which she could also be philosophic. The loss of her deaconess badge was not so easy to accept, not so much for its intrinsic value, but rather for its symbolic worth to her. In the Autumn of 1907, Sister Miriam became ill and went to Cape Town to rest. The doctor there advised that she return home and she left South Africa in early 1908. After a rest in England, she was able to take a home appointment at Otley in the following September. She died in 1924 in retirement, leaving her estate to the Order.

7.4.3 Johannesburg

Despite the various other projects she had undertaken and the continued management of the Convalescent Home, Sister Evelyn Oats was primarily a circuit deaconess, in which role she seems to have seen evangelism as her most important work. She preached a 'Native Service' once a quarter in the main church with a congregation of 850-900, most of whom were men. She was frustrated that she was not a linguist and had to do this through an interpreter. She had a Mission stand in the Market Square, right under the Post Office, and led her mission band in hymns on her baby organ. This had been with her since she came to South Africa, except for a short time during the Boer War when it was taken from her house. After the war it was returned to her, having been found in Maraisburg in pieces.

In June 1905, Sister Evelyn was being welcomed to Convocation after a second tour of five years. The importance given to her visit may have been due to her being the first to leave for overseas work – or it could simply have been her personality. She was certainly a strong character who left a lasting impression on the Order and in South Africa. Sister Evelyn returned to Johannesburg in October of that year and the report in *Flying Leaves* tells us that she was in delicate health, the accompanying photograph showing a thin grey haired woman with a stern expression (October, 1905). Writing in 1958, Mr GW Stewart remembers meeting her in 1896 when he himself was in his twenties. He describes her as: "Slim, and of small stature blessed with beautiful features, a lovely smile, very quick and active" (Oosthuizen, 1990: 14). the intervening nine years had apparently taken a heavy toll.

When, on her return, a training college for 'native girls' was established at Kilnerton, Sister Evelyn Oats was asked to be Principal. She arrived with a woman friend to find the carpenters still at work and no furniture or fittings. Her own furniture was to come by bullock cart and did not arrive until eight in the evening. The students arrived some days later, nine daughters of native ministers and evangelists from the Johannesburg area. A further twenty came later from all over the country. Sister Evelyn had two teachers to help her, both girls of twenty, one white and one black (Oosthuizen, records the name of one as Miss Burnet, daughter of the Rev Amos Burnet; 1990: 15). The deaconess was, understandably, unsure how much help these two inexperienced girls would be to her. Her time at Kilnerton was cut short when late in 1907, a student at the male institute fell ill with tuberculosis and Sister Evelyn had him brought to a room in the Women's Institute, where she nursed him personally. She too became ill with the disease, becoming too unwell to remain at Kilnerton. She was transferred to a nursing home in Johannesburg

until she was sent home in 1908 to recover. *Flying Leaves* records that she had temporarily left her post (January, 1908: 188). In fact, she remained on the sick list for about two years before retiring, still in ill health. Sister Evelyn Oats died on 13th August 1937.

7.4.4 Cape Town

One of Sister Evelyn Oats' contemporaries in the Wesley Deaconess Order was Lucy Hawkens, who entered in 1893. She too had wanted to serve overseas, but her probationary appointment had been to Maidstone where, as a Nurse-Deaconess, she had helped to fight the typhoid epidemic. Having been ill with typhoid herself she was thought to be of too delicate health for work in West Africa, but she eventually persuaded the Order to allow her to serve in South Africa.

In 1904, the stations of the Order show Sister Lucy Hawkens serving the South African Conference in the Cape of Good Hope District, which was a new departure. The Methodist Church in South Africa had had its own Conference since 1883, though the previous three deaconesses had not come under its authority in this way. The three in Natal continued to serve under the authority of the Wesley Deaconess Institute and its Sub-Warden, the Rev Amos Burnet. The difficulties that were encountered when Nellie Cooper was sent to Pretoria had made it necessary to change the status of the deaconess from that of a British deaconess serving in South Africa to one of a British deaconess on loan to the South African Church. Sister Lucy remained a member of the Wesley Deaconess Order, but became part of the ministry of the Methodist Church of South Africa, an understanding that was to become the norm in future arrangements.

Very little is heard of Sister Lucy after her arrival in Cape Town until an item in *Flying Leaves* that shows she had become involved in the Temperance Movement in Cape Province (October, 1908). A bill had come before the legislature proposing wider marketing possibilities and easier licensing for light wines. Sister Lucy represented three hundred women as part of a deputation to the Premier in opposition to this Bill. They argued that this cheap and easy access to alcohol would lead many more young people to use it and perhaps go on to stronger drink. Temperance was a strong Methodist policy at this time and a deaconess would have been a natural leader in this field, as they were being in New Zealand at about the same time.

In February 1909, Sister Lucy wrote home to say that she was returning on furlough and hoped to be at Convocation. She sailed for England on 20th February and is mentioned as one of those present at Convocation, giving a report of work in foreign missions. The only further mention of Sister Lucy Hawken in South Africa comes in November 1909 when she wrote a report on the Convention of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (ie WCTU) and its continued fight against the liquor trade in the Cape Colony. The great stumbling block in this endeavour was the significant number of farmers in the Colony who were wine producers. WCTU attempted, with little success, to persuade them of the possibilities of non-alcoholic uses for the grapes. WCTU was also campaigning for the franchise for women at this Convention. Sister Lucy comments on the breadth of political opinions among the delegates and the strength of their personalities. Her work seems to have taken on a particularly political bent, for she never makes mention of any church related work or ventures. The one other project that she mentions is the formation of 'Snowdrop Bands' among the coloured girls. She instigated this in connection with the 'Purity Department' (an organisation I have not been able to identify). There are no further communications from Sister Lucy. In September 1910 she is shown as 'resting',

which usually implies ill-health or a family problem. Her name appears under this heading until *Flying Leaves* ceased publication in 1914.

7.4.5 The End of an Era

When Sister Lucy Hawken returned home she was the last of the Wesley Deaconess Order to serve in South Africa in a 'Mission' capacity, though it is questionable whether the South African Conference saw her in quite that way at the time. The three Transvaal District Deaconesses were clearly working in 'Mission' situations amongst the mining communities and the native African communities. They were Wesleyan Methodist Deaconesses working with the local churches. As in New Zealand, they were not the first deaconesses in the field. In the Transvaal we have the story of Sister Theresa, who was appointed locally. As we will see in the next section, there was at least one other deaconess at work during this time and there may have been others.

It is perhaps significant that there appears to have been a perception of difference between the Wesley Deaconesses and local 'deaconesses'. I would suggest that there is, in fact, a perceived ontological difference between the two groups. What is of interest is that the Methodist Church did not at this time ordain deaconesses, nor indeed accept women into the ministry. Despite the Church's stated stance – and apparently strongly held beliefs about the non-ministry of women – its actions belie its statements. The churches behaved as though the Wesley Deaconesses were of a different order to any other, whilst the deaconesses behaved as though set apart to authority. The Methodist Church insisted that the Deaconess Order required a male minister as warden and, during this particular period in history, women were not permitted to preach. Despite these strictures, it seemed to be accepted that the Wesley Deaconesses did whatever was needed and acted with authority, while local 'deaconesses' were usually regarded as congregational functionaries and social workers for the needy.

7.5 LOCAL DEACONESSES

Here the record is not as clear or so well documented. Despite the limited evidence, I suggest that the clues we have are important for a full picture of the situation in this early period. When Sister Evelyn Oats came to Johannesburg, she moved into a cottage just by the church that had been occupied by another 'deaconess', who had died suddenly and whose body was not discovered for three days (Oosthuizen, 1990:9). This deaconess is not named but seems likely to have been Sister Theresa. Although Rev Applebee tells us that Sister Theresa was only with him for eighteen months, he is not sure about the year she joined him. Allowing for a period of time before Sister Evelyn came to Johannesburg, this would fit quite well. It is impossible to be absolutely certain, but the clues suggest this as the most likely interpretation. Sister Evelyn tells us that 'the Committee' granted her £20 for furnishings (*Highways and Hedges*, 1985), and Oosthuizen quotes a newspaper cutting that links the Central Deaconess Society with both Sister Evelyn and another deaconess, Sister Ollerenshaw, while dating the society's inception as around 1890 (1990: 27). This grouping of events would seem to tie in all three deaconesses to the Central Deaconess Society.

Although never mentioned by Sister Evelyn Oats, Sister Ollerenshaw started work at the Johannesburg Church in 1906 and worked there throughout the time Sister Evelyn was stationed there, carrying on without change until 1917. That Sister Evelyn does not mention her name is not remarkable, as the deaconesses often spoke of others obliquely, hardly ever appending their own names to reports. Often the only way to identify the

writer is by cross-reference with the stationing list. The one sure indication that Sister Ollerenshaw was seen as different is in the local Convocation meeting where her name is not included amongst the Sisters, while the Children's Home Sisters are included. She was not part of the Order. In Britain, there had been a number of local sisterhoods before the setting up of the formal Wesley Deaconess Order, including that of Stephenson. Some of these continued for many years. Manchester Mission Sisters were still in existence when the Methodist Union took place in 1932 and the Leeds Mission Sisters were disbanded in 1904 with only some being accepted directly into the Order. Sister Ollerenshaw seems to have been understood as being in this category, someone under the authority of the local church rather than a representative of the Church as a Connexion.

When Sister Ollerenshaw resigned in 1917, it was because of the unreasonable workload that had been placed upon her. The Society met and offered her a new agreement, in which the seeds of a Deaconess Order can be seen. All of the menial tasks she had been subject to are specifically excluded. Who 'she' is is also clearly stated:

That sister Ollerenshaw be requested to enter (at the termination of her notice of resignation) upon a new term of service as Deaconess of the Central Deaconess Society.

The first duty of the Deaconess is to be for the care of the sick and the poor of the city. She is also required to assist the minister in the spiritual work of the church in such a way that the people feel the Church cares for their souls. Along with the authority she is given to act as she sees fit, these are the first steps towards a new understanding. Whilst this may not yet be 'setting apart', it is at least a local commissioning.

The Society made several attempts to find a second person to work with Sister Ollerenshaw but no one lasted long until, in 1921, the Wesley Deaconess Order stationed Sister Donna Levy in Johannesburg to work at Central Hall. In 1924, Sister Emma Joan Ollerenshaw retired and, on the recommendation of General Smuts, she was awarded the MBE, which she received on her return to England. The Society placed an advertisement in *The Methodist Churchman*, from which they employed Annie D'urban as deaconess to replace Sister Ollerenshaw. There is still a distinction here in what the women are seen to be. The new deaconess, Sister Annie, was employed by the local Society for a specific job. The Wesley Deaconesses were trained, consecrated and sent to minister where the Order felt they were needed. However, despite the local sisters lack of training, the two sets of women were probably doing very similar work.

During the years leading up to the Second World War, Johannesburg Central Hall was staffed by a succession of locally employed deaconesses, usually working alongside a Wesley Deaconess. Sister Dorothy Teare was the last of this group of Wesley Deaconesses. In 1935, the Society found itself unable to fund two deaconesses any longer and Sister Dorothy returned home for a time, leaving Sister Annie on her own. Whatever the funding position the work was too much for one person, and Sister Annie had to retire in 1937 suffering from a nervous breakdown.

One of the churches in the Cape Town circuit, Sydney Street, employed a locally appointed deaconess during the 1920s. Sister Annie Wells came to Cape Town to take up this post and carried on some form of deaconess work after marrying. It is also worth noting that the Metropolitan church in Pietermaritzburg employed a succession of 'Sisters' before the First World War, but there is little information about their work. None

of these sisters can be seen as the seeds of a South African Order as, despite the use of the term 'Deaconess', there was no intention to set them apart; they remained employees.

7.6 AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

With the changes in expectations and the broadening of the scope of the work of women during the war, the 1943 Conference approved the training of suitable women to serve the Methodist Church of South Africa as Deaconesses. The resolution included the intent to form an Order in 1944. As with so many things in the Methodist Church, theory took quite some time to catch up with practice and the constitution of the South African Order was not adopted until 1953. Nevertheless, a start was made; people trained, though still at Ilkley, and Deaconesses were ordained in the intervening nine years. Somewhat more sadly, the first three had to be ordained in Britain as the South African Church had not yet decided on a process. Technically, Mary Caley, Unez Smuts and Yvonne von Hagen were members of the Wesley Deaconess Order stationed in South Africa until they were able to transfer to the new South African Order

The Rev EW Grant was appointed Warden for the South African Order in 1954 and the first Convocation was held at Queenstown. The first ordination in South Africa took place at Queenstown, that of Sister Beryl Alexander, who had trained at Ilkley. Unez Smuts, a South African Deaconess who had been ordained in Britain in 1951, tells us that the whole Order took part in the service (*Wesley Deaconess Magazine*, December 1954). At that time there were three South Africans and Sister Winifred Woods, who was on loan from the British Order. Sister Unez' article quotes the Annual Report of the Order, in order to answer the question "What do we do?"

That work covers a wide field. It includes teaching and preaching; training of Sunday School teachers and other workers; pastoral work in town and country (complete pastoral charge of congregations having been undertaken in some cases with excellent results); hospital visitation; founding and leadership of new branches of the Women's Auxiliary; specialised work among University students and pupils in Girls' High Schools; youth work in Churches and Youth Camps; personal interviews and evangelistic work.

The way should have been open for the effective establishment of a deaconess order, but it was slow to grow. Sister Winifred Woods left Johannesburg for home in 1956 to be replaced by Sister Constance Oosthuizen, who had just completed her training at Ilkley. For some time this was to remain the pattern: young women went to Ilkley and trained for two years before returning home for ordination. Initially, recruitment was steady and between 1956 and 1961 the South African Order grew to nine deaconesses. Perhaps the Church got cold feet, or maybe the leadership lost faith in what it had begun, because in 1961 the Church stopped recruiting for the Deaconess Order. Oosthuizen suggests that there were problems in finding suitable stations for the deaconesses (1990: 55); and certainly, for such a widely scattered church, this rapid growth would have offered problems. The Deaconess Order would have suffered from the difficulty that it was comparatively unknown as there had been no deaconess presence apart from at the three large centres of Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pietersmaritzburg.

The Deaconess Society, which was no longer responsible for the deaconesses, noticed that there had been a considerable change in the character of the work, "conforming more with the pastoral and preaching work of the ministers" (Oosthuizen, 1990: 67). The Society saw themselves as no longer having the services of a deaconess. The situation was such

that Sister Ursula Zerst, who had served only three years, resigned as there was no longer an appointment for her. By 1969, there were only four deaconesses in the Order. Several had left because of marriage, this still being the rule at that time. Sister Gwen Thomas married in 1969 and should have left the Order, but she applied to the church for permission to continue, which was granted. It was soon followed by a decision of Conference to permit deaconesses to remain within the Order after marriage. Sister Gwen was still serving in 1990. It should be noted that the first black deaconess, Sister Mavis Mbilini came into the Order in 1974.

With changes in the Wesley Deaconess Order, including the loss of Ilkley as the base of the Deaconess Institute, the South African Deaconesses no longer went to Britain for training but started a process of 'in service' training. In 1975, Sister Constance Oosthuizen was accepted for the Presbyterian Ministry and two years later was appointed Warden of the Order, a post she was to hold until recently. South Africa's own Deaconess Order had become a reality and was developing, but perhaps not with the vigour anticipated. Women were being accepted into the Ministry of Word and Sacrament (Presbyterate) in the early 1970s, and the social demographics of the country were a long way from the early days of the twentieth century. There was little acceptance of their ministry with few churches offering stations for deaconesses, so the development was very slow.

7.7 A MINISTRY OF PERSONAL SERVICE

In Constance Oosthuizen's book, there are a few pages describing the ministry of some of the deaconesses. Typically there are no names attached, but one item made such an impression that it provides the title for this section. Whoever the deaconess in question was, she did not mean that to be taken too literally; she was not referring to serving individuals, but of serving personally.

According to the gospel of **John**, Jesus gave a new commandment that we "Love one another" (13:34). This is a commandment to a very personal love, not the much more general and impersonal sense of "Love your neighbour", but the close involvement of mutual love. Sister Miriam Scrivens expressed her pleasure at being able to offer personal care in her new cottage, to coin a phrase 'one to one care'. Sister Evelyn Oats' home, Stephenson Cottage, had been described as a focal point for everyone in need of help. So often, the evangelist reminds people that God loves them. For many, that is difficult to believe, but the immediate personal awareness that someone offers love can create a bridge to belief in God's love. This is what the deaconesses were called to: to be examples of the love of God, to offer the good news as an enactment rather than by proclamation. As an institution, The Methodist Church viewed deaconesses in much the same way that local churches viewed the 'Sisters' it had authorised the Order to consecrate and later ordain at Convocation, which made the act of setting apart something disconnected from Connexional activity. The President of Conference led the service of Consecration with all the deaconesses present, which meant that the deaconesses were regularly part of a very visible act. It was from this that they saw themselves as having received an authorisation to minister on behalf of the Church.

7.8 SOUTH AFRICAN DEACONS TODAY

The Methodist Church in Great Britain closed the Wesley Deaconess Order to new candidates in 1978, but reopened it in 1987 to both men and women under the new name of the Methodist Diaconal Order. Early in the 1990s, the Order in South Africa was

renamed in the same way and the first male deacon was ordained in 1996. The Order is growing and changing.

The Warden for the previous 26 years, the Rev Constance Oosthuizen, gave faithful service to that role, but she had been a deaconess before choosing to candidate for the presbyterate and she had not wished to be Warden. She explained to me that no one else was willing at that time. There seems no doubt that Constance nursed the Order and was proud of its successes in the field of interracial ministries and its acceptance of black candidates, but she had been required to take up this role at a time when she was hoping to establish a new ministerial identity as a presbyter.

The polity of a church is not quickly amended, nor does it easily accept change. For several years, the understanding of diaconal ministry has been under consideration in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). In 2003, a statement was presented to Conference and agreed by that body. The statement made a distinction between 'diaconal ministry' as a generic term and the ministry of deacons as a specific calling. This was not to infer that one was superior to the other, but to express the specificity of the deacon's ministry as an expression of diaconal ministry, whilst recognising other forms of diaconal ministry. The MCSA recognises deacons as a formal expression of diaconal ministry to which some persons are called and to which the MCSA ordains them. This is a ministry of service and Word. Since it also recognises that others, such as Evangelists, Bible Women and lay pastoral workers exercise a diaconal ministry, it has agreed to a change of name for the Order. Since Conference 2003 it has become known as the Order of Deacons. At the same Conference a new Warden was appointed, Deacon Ernie Nightingale. Deacon Ernie has been working towards picking up this role throughout 2003 and had been closely involved in the preparation of the statement for Conference.

The areas of ministry that have been recognised as the most likely ones for deacons to become involved in are largely those about care. Alongside these are ministries in places where the church may not otherwise be present, such as informal settlements, plus a presence in education and teaching. The new warden is looking at alternative ways of expanding the role of the Deacon within the ministry of the MCSA. His thinking at present includes encouraging deacons to move into more formal positions that may be paid for by other organisations than the church. One of the present deacons is Andy Lemley, who works as Principal of the Methodist Children's Home in Durban.

The Ethelbert Children's Home cares for around fifty children in a group of cottages. There are 27 staff and the focus of the work is on children who have been abused or who have HIV/Aids. At present, the small Garden of Remembrance holds the ashes of five babies who have died in the past twelve months from HIV/Aids. Deacon Andy is an experienced worker with children, but he did not apply for this post – the Church stationed him there. There are two other such children's homes in South Africa and Andy sees those as appropriate posts for deacons also. As a deacon, Andy considers that his ministry does not stop at the gates of the children's home. He has contacts in the child welfare departments, with whom he engages in some of the townships and the shanty towns (informal settlements) that are so numerous in and around Durban.

Another deacon, Paul, works alongside a presbyter focusing his ministry on pastoral work, both within and outside the Church. He also offers Christian counselling. Deacon Paul conducts funerals and preaches, but is not licensed for weddings.

In Hipperdene, a pleasant town on the coast south of Durban, Deacon Kathy has pastoral care of a well established church with a largely white congregation. She is working with them to create partnerships with the smaller, financially impoverished churches in the Zulu tribal lands of the inland hills. Together they have built a new church many kilometres into the hills and they support and encourage other small Zulu congregations in the area. Kathy is seeking release from her post so that she may widen her pastoral work in the rural community inland. At the time of writing, she is still negotiating financial assistance for this.

These are typical of the sorts of work that deacons in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa are called upon to respond to. The Warden is looking at other workers within the wider church sphere. He offers the example of a nurse/manager of an AIDS centre whom is a church member working within a church project and sees this as her specific area of ministry. The Warden feels that she and others who have been involved in such projects with the church could be seen as candidates for the Order of Deacons.

The MCSA has also recognised Evangelists and Biblewomen as diaconal ministries, and has suggested that they should continue as separate Orders with their own uniform and Wardens. Each of these Orders is part of traditional black Methodism, where educational limitations would deny them a usual path to ordained ministry, but who have served the church well in these roles in the past. It seems clear that the MCSA has taken diaconal ministry seriously again, and it may be that new life will be infused as people become more aware of the work being done by deacons.

7.9 PRAXIS VERSUS CONCEPT

The earliest deaconesses to come to South Africa from England were part of Stephenson's original group of women, who were partly responsible for the formation of the style of the early Wesley Deaconess Order. Although Stephenson is often portrayed as stern and authoritarian, his photographs in the magazines show him surrounded by his deaconesses. Years before the formalisation of the Order, he had found women to be of unique value in work amongst the poor. It might even be reasonably argued that the women with whom he worked influenced Stephenson as much as he influenced the Order.

What is remarkable about Sister Evelyn Oats' story is that she arrived in South Africa without a post or a plan. The conditions she encountered in her brief sojourn in Durban horrified her, but she apparently found no way to involve herself. Although she was not sent to Johannesburg, it was an opportunity she was able to use. There was a committee in place to fund the work, a house she could occupy and an expectation she could use to create her role.

Her predecessor had approached the Rev Applebee with an offer of service. Communications with England were good and Applebee would have heard of the new work being done by the deaconesses back home. He took this opportunity to become part of something new. The records speak of a tremendous work having been done by this lone Sister, but also serve to illustrate the difficulties associated with such solo efforts. Sister Theresa's early demise demonstrated how important the support and oversight of the Order was in giving structure to a deaconess' work. The tendency in situations like these is for congregations to assume that 'deaconesses' work 'out there' doing things ministers cannot, which in turn fosters the opinion that they are not a legitimate 'ministry'.

7.10 SUMMARY

South Africa is particularly valuable in this study in that two forms of deaconess existed alongside each other for many years, which throws considerable light on the view the Wesley Deaconesses had of themselves. The letters to the Order and the reports printed in the magazines never mention the locally appointed deaconesses and the only South African Convocation held by the group of deaconesses from the Wesley Deaconess Order did not include local 'deaconesses' in its fellowship. At first sight, this would seem to suggest arrogance on the part of the Wesley Deaconesses. It was not. They were different, they knew they were different, and it is my understanding that it was this difference that made possible the work they were able to do. The Wesley Deaconesses were a disciplined Order, set apart for ministry. It was a model to be emulated and South African women gradually began to go down this path, which eventually led to the creation of an Order within their own church.

Whether Stephenson imbued them with a belief in their difference, or the deaconesses were part of the initial creation of the Order, we can never know. What we can see clearly is that the creation of an Order gave the Wesley Deaconesses an authority that local 'deaconesses' never had. There had been locally employed 'sisters' in England for some years before the Wesley Deaconess Order came into being, Sister Evelyn Oats being one of these. They had had no authority, however, and as the example of Sister Ollerenshaw shows, their work was seldom given the respect it merited. Probably because of what they did, cleaning up messy lives, caring for women, drunks and the poorest in society, there was a tendency to regard these local deaconesses as a kind of servant at a time when household servants would have been common, but of little consequence. Seeing them as servants, at a time when servants were not seen, devalued all that they did. Few of the local 'deaconesses' lasted long, some leaving after short spells, some breaking down under the pressure of the work.

The Wesley Deaconesses had become something different. They were consecrated by the Church, trained and tested, which gave them the status of representatives of the Church and with that status they assumed confidence. They were able to present a belief in themselves that allowed others to see them as authoritative. A short time ago, I had a discussion with a young man about to go into higher education about the different way waiters perceived themselves in different countries. I gave him the instance of waiters in the tourist hotels in Tunisia, where they have to attend a special training school, entrance to which requires the ability to speak three languages. His response was "I can see how they would perceive their job as worthwhile if they have such training". There was a similar effect with the deaconesses, which I would contend was intentional. In a world where women's worth was limited to the domestic they guarded this respect and recognition carefully, and so could not allow the perceptions placed upon the local 'deaconesses' to be put on them by association.

What they had achieved was acceptance as offering 'ministry' rather than domestic service. Today's Order is described as offering a ministry of 'service and Word'. I am aware how often 'service' has been translated in the British context as 'humble servant', with all the least helpful connotations that can be applied to these terms. The earliest members of the Wesley Deaconess Order were described as "a 'Servant of the Church', as was Phoebe of Cenchrea" (*Flying Leaves*, September 1901). The comparison is not with a scullery maid, but with a woman of position. They were very aware of their ambassadorial role as agents of the Church, but as exemplars they were modelled on

Mark 10:45: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Individual deaconesses have always been self-effacing, which is why there are often no names attached to their work. It was the Wesley Deaconess Order that had recognition. What had become important was to ‘be a deaconess’. Where someone was ‘being a deaconess’, work was done in the name of Christ through the agency of the Church. This is one of the lessons that the Methodist Church may need to relearn. Many ask the question “What does a deacon do?” The early Wesley Deaconesses understood proclamation through practice very well.

8.0 THE WEST INDIES: NEW OPPORTUNITIES

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This is the last of the overseas fields in which the Wesley Deaconess Order contributed a major and distinctive mission effort. This quite detailed examination of its history provides a means of understanding the deaconesses' praxis while hearing what was, or often was not, asked of them.

Methodism took root in the West Indies very early with Nathaniel Gilbert – speaker of the House of Assembly in Antigua – being one of its first influential converts. Nathaniel and his brother conducted services for white colonists and black slaves in their own home. When Thomas Coke (later to found the Methodist Missionary Society) landed in Antigua on Christmas morning 1786, he was met by John Baxter who took him home for refreshments and then into the church he had built. Coke found himself facing nearly a thousand Negro slaves, and preaching to his first missionary congregation (Davey, 1951: 12).

Methodism spread rapidly throughout the islands, mainly amongst the slaves, though many colonists also joined in worship with them. The act of preaching to the slaves enraged the planters. So much so, in fact, that there were many cases of preachers being beaten and having their houses burned before Coke persuaded the Minister for the Colonies to pass an Act of Parliament giving religious freedom to planters and slaves alike. Violence against Methodist preachers continued for a considerable time as they were seen as agents of the abolitionists, but in some places real progress was made. In Anguilla, a coloured freeman by the name of John Hodge was admitted to the ministry. By the time of the declaration of emancipation of the slaves in 1834, the announcement was made to full churches. This was not to continue, for in the years that followed Methodism lost thousands of members. Those working in the West Indies came to the conclusion that the slaves needed education in basic community skills and home-making. They had been denied even the right to marriage, and freedom had brought them problems with which they were ill-equipped to deal. There was not the money for an education programme, however, and Methodism continued to decline. In 1884, the West Indies church was given autonomy, forming its own Conference. The lack of

educated lay leaders, West Indian ministers and financial stability meant that this step was a disaster and, in 1904, the Methodist Church in the West Indies had to come back under the umbrella of the British Conference. It was not until 1967 that the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas was formed with its own Conference.

As in many things, perspective is important and the view from Britain of a failure in education and its consequences may be a view from above. Sister Elsie Bemand, the first of the West Indian deaconesses tells of the success of Methodist education. She describes the early schools in Jamaica and the opening of the first Wesleyan day school in Kingston with pride. Sister Elsie felt that it was worthy of note:

... that in the difficult pioneer days when responsible leadership was so urgently needed, many of the sons and daughters of Methodism were able to serve usefully and devotedly.

(1960: 60.)

Clearly, the view from Jamaica was not the same as that seen by those who wanted to lay down the 'burden' of a distant and difficult mission church.

8.2 THE FIRST DEACONESSES

8.2.1 A Brief Adventure

Methodism has had a long and troubled history in Haiti, with considerable civil unrest as the main contributory factor. Haiti had a Girls High School, founded in 1893 and named after the Rev Mark Bird, who had been Methodist District Chairman for forty years until 1880. In 1911, Sister Edith Le Masurier was sent to Port-au-Prince as Principal of Bird College. The Methodist District in Haiti was in crisis by the time Sister Edith arrived. Within a year of her appointment, the District offices had been destroyed by fire and her time there was brought to a hasty end. Sister Edith had previously served in Sierra Leone, where the work in schools had been the key to a long term missiological effort. The circumstances in Haiti were very different and there was neither the Methodist presence nor the colonial structures to create a stable platform for this work in 1911. It was not to become possible for a further forty years.

8.2.2 A Fortunate Coincidence

Organised work with women had been started in 1925 with the foundation of the Women's League. This organisation owes much to the inspiration of ministers' wives, and in particular to the Rev John Currey and his wife, who were the guiding lights behind some of the early branches of the Women's League. The work that the League was doing included visiting, church based activities and the establishment of an orphanage. Around the same time, the Barbados and Trinidad circuit sent a request to Britain for two deaconesses to be stationed there; none were available at that point, however. So it was with great pleasure when, in 1927, Jamaica heard that their request for deaconesses had been granted.

When the request came to the Warden at Ilkley, the Rev Maltby was able to find two deaconesses to go. The most obvious candidate was Muriel Ellis, a student who had been born in Trinidad where her father was a missionary. When Maltby turned to find another, Muriel's friend, Jessie Kerridge was quick to volunteer. Jessie was twenty-six years old and a trained teacher. She had not really enjoyed teaching, finding the children difficult to cope with (Webb, 1963: 58). By the time she was accepted by the Wesley Deaconess Order, Jessie had almost abandoned her lifelong ambition to go overseas as a missionary, as she had thus far not found any path forward. When the Warden received the call from Jamaica for deaconesses, Jessie was again convinced that she should try for overseas service and willingly embraced the opportunity. There were initial concerns about her age and experience, but the Rev Maltby decided that she should go. In 1928, she and Sister Muriel arrived in Kingston, where a new Deaconess House was under preparation at 88 Hanover Street.

Not everyone was overjoyed to see them. There was still some opposition to women sharing in the ministry of the Church and many were puzzled as to what they could do. The Methodist Church in the West Indies enjoyed a dependent relationship with mother Church in Britain, having failed to make it on its own. Although there was a majority of West Indian ministers, all the positions of significance were in the hands of British ministers, including leadership of the large churches, few of whom would have had any contact with deaconesses. This situation was to create an atmosphere in which collegiality was unacceptable with an Order that Sister Dora Dixon said was regarded as "second class" (2003). The one instruction they were given was that they must not

interfere in any of the women's work already being done in the churches; they were also told that they would never be required to preach. Since work with women was the most prominent part of their role in other areas, it might reasonably beg the question why they were sent. Accommodation was provided for them and each was nominally attached to one of the two major churches in Kingston, but there was no vision attached to their role.

It soon became clear to the deaconesses that something was needed in Kingston for young girls. They needed some form of social activity that would help to keep them away from the problems in the city and which might offer them some guidance that could stop them ending up in the usual trap of becoming unmarried mothers. This aim of the newly formed Girls' League was to be a central purpose and a pressing need for the rest of the time deaconesses served in the Caribbean. It is hardly surprising that such a problem should have existed. The slaves brought to the West Indies had for generations been forbidden to marry; when a coloured freewoman gathered the slaves in her area for worship and prayer and performed marriages, she had to flee to Kingston (Cousins, 1960: 35). The planters had treated the slaves they owned much as they did animals, using the women as breeding stock. Such a background created little hope that young women could expect to be shown any respect, especially by the men. In 1928, the number of settled homes amongst the Jamaican population was very low. Many of the girls that the deaconesses hoped might become leaders of the Girls' League themselves fell victim and had to leave to have their babies.

Dealing with these problems brought the two young deaconesses up against a need to make more use of the Deaconess House. Number 88 was an old bungalow that had been built on a seven foot high brickwork base and roughly partitioned into five rooms; (as a home, this would have been quite large for two women). Under Sister Muriel's leadership, the Deaconess House became a rescue home for girls in trouble and for women released from prison, making maximum use of the space in ways we would perhaps not consider possible today.

Not all of the work was being done in the House, however; it also continued at the two churches with which the Sisters were working. Sister Jessie's intended role had been training and she had instituted changes in the Sunday schools, with preparation classes for the teachers. Her other interest was Girl Guides, an association she had enjoyed in

England. She started by forming a Ranger company at Wesley. In a letter to *The Agenda* they wrote:

We have felt very keenly the need for work of some kind amongst the women of this town – that is, amongst the women who only come under church influence at the baptism of their babies. We have it in mind to visit such mothers and invite them to a weekly 'Women's Bright Hour'. We hope in this way to bring sunshine into their lives as well as to give them practical help and spiritual inspiration.

(April 1929.)

Much of the above echoes the intention of the Girls' League meetings, which started with physical exercise, going on to introduce training in home craft and child care, and culminating in devotional sessions that were intended to "lead these young girls into the deeper experiences of the spirit" (Webb, 1963: 59). Intrinsicly bound into everything the deaconesses did was their concern for the spiritual life of those for whom they cared. It was not enough to improve their lot in this world if they did not improve it in the next. While this was certainly the purpose of the deaconesses, much of the official Church saw them as servants of that Church. For many ministers this meant giving them with practical assistance, while at the same time providing charitable care for the poor.

All of this work would seem enough for two people to take on, but the two deaconesses realised that there was just as great a need in the country areas. The problem they faced in this venture was travel. The distances were large and there was no ready means of transport. Christmas brought an answer. Sister Jessie's parents came on a visit to see what their daughter was doing. Despite having spent many years trying to convince their daughter that the work of overseas mission was not a suitable life, they eventually came to support her in her work. They brought with them an Austin 7 motor car, which they gave to their daughter. This made a huge difference in the deaconesses' mobility.

The car took them far and wide, and the branches of the Girls' League multiplied. Sister Jessie held training sessions in schools, old barns, in fact anywhere she could find a space, and the leaven of the Girls' League was introduced to communities throughout the island. Day Conferences were held, which were ideal opportunities for members of the Girls' League from a number of branches to meet together to share ideas, as well as to become aware of the strength of the organisation to which they belonged. These were to become an annual event, which helped to raise the profile of the Girls' League. The

Guides and Rangers also benefited as Sister Jessie took them beyond the city into the Blue Mountains, thus introducing them to the world of camping.

Muriel Ellis had become friends with a young probationer minister. They became engaged and, in 1933, Sister Muriel returned to England and married the Rev Wilfred Easton, bringing about the end of her time in the Order. She had been the first choice for Jamaica and had served well, but Sister Jessie Kerridge was to become the anchor for all the work in the West Indies now that her friend was gone.

8.2.3 A Growing Band

Life in a West Indian Deaconess House was a little different to that at Ilkley and Sister Mary Morton, Sister Muriel's replacement, found the range of creatures that shared the premises at 88 Hanover Street – bats, giant moths, cockroaches and the occasional rat – initially gave her cause for concern. Sister Jessie encouraged her colleague to overcome her fears and the new deaconess settled in. With her help a new branch of the work was begun: Young Adventurers for the younger girls and Young Crusaders for the boys. This was initiated with the intention that it would not only involve younger children in church life, but also provide opportunities for members of the Girls' League to be involved in leadership. The work spread so widely and became so time-consuming that another deaconess, Sister Gladys Cook, was sent to Jamaica in 1937 to take Sister Jessie's place at Wesley Church, freeing her for the wider work of training and promoting the girls' organisations.

Now that the deaconess work in Jamaica was established and on a firm footing, Sister Jessie set off on a tour of the West Indies. Her first call was Trinidad and then onto British Guiana, where she again found ministerial resistance to the idea of work amongst women. This opposition from ministers was a regular pattern of her tour, though there was immediate interest among the lay people. In Antigua, the people believed she was an answer to their prayer, as they had been anxious to have a deaconess. It was to be some time before Sister Jessie was actually able to fulfil their hopes, but Sister Gladys Cook was sent to Antigua in 1946. What Sister Jessie did offer wherever she went was the Girls' League. She was away less than a year, during which time she visited ten of the islands, as well as Panama and British Guiana. On her return she was able to say:

It is good to remember that there is a circle of GL [ie Girls' League] lamps alight all around the West Indian field... I saw that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love which flowed over the ocean of darkness.

(Webb, 1963: 65.)

For women who were not to preach, they had a tremendous evangelical effect, bringing women to a knowledge of the Good News in great numbers. Perhaps their real achievement was that they turned the women from being merely passive recipients of the Word into an active diaconal community.

The *Golden Jubilee Brochure* of the Wesley Deaconess Order of the Caribbean and the Americas records an important date in 1939, when the first West Indian deaconess was accepted for training. Sister Elsie Bemand began her training at Deaconess House under Sister Jessie, before going on to Caenwood Theological College. She was the only female student at the College, the remainder being male presbyteral students. Sister Elsie's ordination service was a great day for the West Indies. The service was conducted at Wesley Church by the Rev Armon Jones, the Chairman of the District, and was shared by Sister Jessie and her new colleague, Sister Marjorie Watson. For Sister Jessie, this was the beginning of a dream come true, for she had such faith in her West Indian girls that she had longed for the day when they would join her in the work.

During 1938, the Hanover Street house had been added to with the acquisition of another building and an extension of number 88. Training courses were being run for voluntary Church workers of various kinds. Two more West Indian deaconess students were accepted and the work rapidly grew. Alongside the training of deaconesses and voluntary workers a new project was started, training girls in home craft. This meant further expansion to the Deaconess House to provide kitchens and work space. Its aim was to give every girl the opportunity to add to her skills, whatever her situation or ability, which characterised the Girls' League ethos that the deaconesses had created.

All of the work had been focused in and run from Kingston and Hanover Street. The first rural outstation was opened at Ulster Spring in the centre of the island. Miss Kathleen LaTrobe, who was known as 'Sister' Kathleen, staffed this outpost; she had been sent by the Methodist Missionary Society to replace Sister Mary Morton. Although

she was a lay missionary, Kathleen was seen as doing 'deaconess work' and was known by this honorary title, which seems to demonstrate a recognition of a ministry understood as particular to deaconesses. The next step came in 1945 with the opening of a centre at St Anns Bay on the northern coast of Jamaica. This new centre was to oversee women's work in the five circuits of St Anns. The work officially began in 1947 with the opening of a converted lookout post as a deaconess cottage and the stationing of a West Indian deaconess there. The West Indian Order continued to expand with new deaconesses coming into training from several islands. Now that the trainees at Deaconess House were provincial as well as Jamaican, the work had to come under the West Indies umbrella and the Order became the Wesley Deaconess Order of the West Indies.

8.3 A DEVELOPING ORDER

8.3.1 The South Caribbean District

In 1946, Sister Marjorie Watson was appointed to this District, which covered Barbados, Trinidad, Tobago, St Vincent, St Lucia and Grenada. She was based on Trinidad and began her training work there. Later in the year Sister Eileen Shanks, a West Indian deaconess, was sent to join her and it was agreed she should concentrate on Trinidad while Sister Marjorie would visit the other islands as often as possible. A small Deaconess House was established in 1948 and this became the venue for short courses with two or three girls living in and others coming in on a daily basis. The core of the work was around the Girls' League and the Women's League. In Trinidad the deaconesses organised an Easter Conference, a ten-day inter-island gathering for the Girls' League, which was held for the first time in 1947. This was the first of what was to become a regular event, in future years moving around the other islands in the District. It was just after the Easter Conference that Sister Eileen moved to a regular station on St Vincent, a post that was to continue as a deaconess station into the 1970s. During her time in St Vincent, Sister Eileen began open-air Sunday schools, thereby creating a new opportunity for work with the younger children. A Methodist Hostel for Girls was opened on the island, becoming the focus of the work by the time Sister Elsie Bemand was stationed here in 1959.

It is of interest that much of the work done in the south Caribbean District at this time was ecumenical. The training of Sunday school teachers, classes in Religious Instruction and day schools were all run ecumenically, but facilitated by the deaconesses. Sister Vera Richardson, who was stationed in Trinidad from 1955 to 1961, wrote a description of the work in her time for the *Golden Jubilee Brochure*, in which she tells of summer camps with the girls, and training with all sections, alongside regular pastoral visiting and preaching. She says of her work: "The aim of it all was to try to help young and old in their knowledge of and commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ and to His service" (1978).

Despite the perception amongst the male members of the Methodist ministry that deaconesses were concerned with social welfare, this statement of Sister Vera's is repeated in a variety of ways and demonstrated in the way the deaconesses went about their business. They were involved in social welfare to a remarkable extent, most of the work they did being of their own initiative. The aim of all they did, however, was to bring people to a closer relationship with Jesus Christ. Their objectives and methodology involved the training and enabling of young people for Christian service. Thus they were involved in reversing the situation and solving the problem of lack of education that had been complained of after emancipation. The ban on deaconesses preaching had not been sustainable, as new work started away from the main centres in places where there were few local preachers.

Travel in the West Indies in the 1950s was not always easy. It was usually by boat, and some of the Girls' League Conference trips brought difficulties and dangers. A party travelling from St Lucia was shipwrecked and one of the girls drowned, while on another occasion the boat the girls were travelling on suffered steering problems and was a day overdue on its journey from Grenada. Since one of the girls on this latter boat had fallen off a cliff on the way to the boat and was travelling on a stretcher, it seems clear that the deaconesses operated under different rules to those of today. Improving travel possibilities brought about new demands. This led to the inception of a major event for the Women's League, as the women asked if they could have something like the Girls' League Conference. Plane travel was now possible and a gathering, which took its name – 'A Holiday with a Purpose' – from an earlier event in the Leeward Islands was arranged in Antigua (see 8.3.2). Women came from all the South Caribbean District islands, spending ten days in study and discussion. It was such a success that it

became an annual occasion to be renamed the 'District Teaching Seminar', continuing into the 1980s.

The South Caribbean District sent three candidates for training for the Deaconess Order between 1950 and 1970, although one was not able to complete her training as she became married. During this time the headquarters of the Deaconess work in the District moved to Barbados under the direction of Sister Vera Richardson.

8.3.2 Leeward Islands District

As mentioned earlier, Sister Gladys Cook was the first deaconess to serve in this District. She was sent to Antigua in 1943 at which time *The Agenda* reports her travelling around the islands in sailing sloops, sharing the accommodation with donkeys, goats, pigs and hens (July 1944). These journeys took anything from sixteen hours to a week to accomplish, but she found the welcome she was given at the end far outweighed any discomfort.

It is worth noting that the deaconesses were very conscious of their appearance. Their West Indies uniform of beige dresses with brown trim was expected to be neat, clean and tidy at all times. Sister Gladys would have felt it of major importance to arrive at her destination looking as a deaconess should. Some branches of Women's League and Girls' League had already been formed after Sister Jessie's visit a few years previously, but training leaders and extending their presence was one of the priorities. Sister Vera Richardson, newly ordained and originally from Antigua, had been appointed to assist, but between them they had 72 churches and twelve circuits on as many islands to work with.

The deaconesses held a District training day for which they coined the name 'A Holiday with a Purpose', gathering girls from all over the District. This early event meant travel by island sloop, often for girls who had never been away from their home village. It not only provided training opportunities beyond those available on the home islands, but also gave the girls an awareness that they were part of something far larger than their local branch. This sense of being a part of a wider church has enormous importance, even today in Britain, where the importance of Conference lies in engendering that sense of belonging to a greater whole. The 'something bigger' concept belongs to what

Methodists refer to as connexionalism in which the local church is connected to the circuit and to the Conference:

Methodists everywhere have embraced the idea that as a people of faith we journey together in connection and in covenant with one another.

(Beck, 1991: 44.)

As part of this understanding ministers are 'Received in Connexion' before they are ordained, which places them within a disciplinary structure. Paul uses a similar concept when he refers to 'the body' (eg 1 Cor 12:12-30). He evokes the same sense of corporate identity. The deaconesses were part of a tradition that understood belonging to the corporate both theologically and sociologically and were bringing that tradition into play for the Girls' League. Thus the Girls' League in the Leeward Islands produced a number of candidates for the Deaconess Order over the years.

Such a value was placed on the Leagues that another deaconess was sent to the Leewards. Sister Cynthia Clare was sent to St Kitts where she had oversight of five islands, though she was requested to concentrate on St Kitts because there was only one Women's League branch there. Sister Cynthia's work involved considerable training of Sunday school teachers, which she did in a very itinerant way, spending a period with one Sunday school and then moving on to another place to offer training there. Although there was a Deaconess House on St Kitts, she must have found it difficult to occupy it much of the time. It is worth noting that it was the Wesley Deaconess Order of the West Indies that sent deaconesses to these stations; Sister Jessie had immense freedom in these matters as the Conference, under whose discipline the Order then was, only met every three years.

8.3.3 Belize/Honduras District

Although Sister Jessie Kerridge had touched here on her grand tour of the West Indies, there was no deaconess work in Belize until the 1950s. Sister Amy Leslie, who had been a teacher for twenty-seven years, was the first woman to be a recognised local preacher in the district. In 1952, she gave up her job as a teacher and went to Jamaica to train as a Deaconess. She was stationed in Belize in 1954. Remembered as an indefatigable women's worker, she was nonetheless stationed as Pastor, first in San Creek circuit then in Toledo. Deaconesses were beginning to be used as substitutes for

unavailable ministers, but Sister Amy seems to have been asked to train as a deaconess with the intention that she should serve her district in this way (Nibbs, 1978: 28). It was to be twenty years before women were to be permitted entry to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, but Belize had apparently made its decision long before. Her successor at Toledo was Sister Joan Moyle, who was given pastoral responsibility for the circuit and eventually became a presbyter. Here is another example of deaconesses doing whatever is needed. It is this flexibility that seems to be the mark of authentic *diakonia*, as can be seen in that the models for the first deacons were ordained in response to the needs of the community (see Acts 6).

8.3.4 Guyana

The *Golden Jubilee Brochure* of 1978 suggests that the following year would be the celebration of twenty-five years of deaconess appointments in Guyana. I have been able to find no record of any deaconess stationed there prior to 1961, but an oblique reference to Sister Olga Brook-Smith, who undertook some short appointments in the early 1950s, may well be the answer to that conundrum. Sister Gladys Cook was stationed there in 1961, followed closely by Sister Elsie Bemand. As elsewhere, the main emphasis was on the training of women and Sunday school teachers.

By the late 1960s there were a number of changes. The two Sisters were Eileen Hand and Eileen Gaunt, each of whom ministerial appointments with charge of a circuit. In 1970, Sister Eileen Gaunt was replaced by two West Indian deaconesses who lived in Georgetown alongside Sister Eileen Hand. These two West Indian sisters did not have ministerial appointments, but with Sister Eileen they shared the deaconess work for the seven circuits of the District. The work was very demanding and one of the two young deaconesses, Sister Erma Rose became ill, returning to Jamaica for a less demanding appointment. She returned to Guyana in 1976 to take up a second appointment and remained until 1980. The other Sister, Edris Christopher, brought a new experience to the District when she became the first deaconess to be ordained in Guyana on completion of her probation in 1973. Sister Vera Richardson, an experienced West Indian deaconess who was to take a ministerial appointment, replaced Sister Edris. During the time Sister Vera was in the Friendship circuit, work was begun on a school feeding programme, an initiative of a Mrs Hyacinth Cunningham. The project grew from fifty children to over 120 by 1978 with the deaconess being heavily committed to

the financial and practical aspects of this work among needy children. This mix of pastoral responsibility and community involvement was typical of the work of deaconesses in such situations. While not unique to deaconesses (some presbyters also worked in this way), it was normative for the deaconesses.

The period deaconesses served the Guyana District was a difficult one for the Methodist Church in almost every country, but particularly so in the West Indies. There was an acute shortage of ministers/presbyters and women were not yet accepted into the presbyteral ministry of the Methodist Church. It seems possible that the presence of deaconesses may have brought the ordination of women into being more quickly than might otherwise have been the case. Deaconesses have always done what was needed where they were, the pastoral care of congregations being quite usual. Although there was great resistance to women in ministry when Sister Jessie Kerridge first went to British Guiana, necessity had brought a marked turnaround of views. Almost as soon as deaconesses were sent there, the churches were *asking* that the deaconesses should take pastoral responsibility for churches and circuits. It seems possible that the problem in the beginning was not so much with the laity, but with the ministers, who were no longer around to protest.

8.3.5 The Bahamas

Sister Dora Dixon told me that the deaconesses were not keen to go to the Bahamas (2003). It was an island that presented particular difficulties to the deaconesses and their Christian social ethos. Nassau in particular was a place where the majority of the Methodists the deaconesses would encounter were not only white, but also rich and seemed to consider money as of paramount importance. This was not the sort of congregation with which the deaconesses were accustomed to work. It is important to understand that many of these deaconesses were not from poor backgrounds themselves. Sister Dora was university educated and from a middle class family. Sister Jessie Kerridge, who was the driving force behind the deaconess work in the West Indies, came from a quite wealthy home. The materialism they encountered in Nassau, alongside real poverty, was not a comfortable situation in which to work. Neither was the racism. The first West Indian deaconess to be stationed in the Bahamas was Sister Althea Jacobs, in 1961. The Rev Edwin L Taylor wrote in the *Golden Jubilee Brochure* that: "She was quite young and placing her alone in the isolated Tarpum Bay Manse

was indeed a test of her Christian conviction.” Sister Dora remembers an occasion when working with a black deaconess one of the church ladies came up to her and said: “Your maid has finished what she was doing.” She still recalls it with outrage.

All of the early group of deaconesses were from Britain, the first being Sister Mary Morton, who had earlier served in Jamaica. She is remembered for her writing. Sister Mary produced a steady flow of service outlines for special events, agendas for meetings and programmes for the Women’s League. These were published in the *Methodist Quarterly* and the church groups eagerly awaited her ideas and items. She was succeeded by Sister Eileen Hale, who was a keen musician and tried to start a circuit choir, but with little success. The main focus of work for Sister Dora was Rhodes church, which was a mainly black church. Sister Eileen Hale had initiated work with the women’s prison and had been so successful with this that the authorities had treated her as an unofficial probation officer. She had used Deaconess House in Madeira Street, Nassau as a hostel for women prisoners on probation. Sister Dora took on visiting the woman’s prison, and at Christmas the ladies of Rhodes prepared a traditional Bahamian Christmas dinner to take to the prison.

Acceptance of black deaconesses into the church in the Bahamas was slow and at times painful, but all except one of those who followed Sister Dora were West Indian. When viewed alongside the other West Indian stations, the record in the Bahamas is sad. Despite having a steady flow of deaconesses from the early 1950s, there is no comparable list of development of work with Women’s League or Girls’ League, no evidence of training or enabling projects. Sister Dora’s work with the prison was mainly with Haitian illegal immigrants and black women from the outlying islands, but seems not to have had any connection with the wealthy white churches. This emphasises an aspect of the deaconesses’ ministry that can be lost in the record of achievement. It was a ministry to those in need, not simply financial want: but they were able to respond to social, medical, or spiritual poverty. As can be seen from their presence in Guyana, they were willing to offer whatever form of ministry was necessary. The churches in the Bahamas demonstrated no ‘need’ for a deaconess; even communities like that at Rhodes church offered little opportunity to respond to a ‘need’, which gave the deaconesses little chance to exercise their calling.

8.3.6 Return to Haiti

Haiti was revisited in 1953 when Sister Vera Gridley was sent to organise Women's League and start the Girls' Brigade. There had been little contact and no deaconess work since Sister Jessie made her visit twenty years earlier. What had brought about this renewed effort was the presence of a Haitian girl in training at Deaconess House in Jamaica. It was hoped that this would lay a foundation of work and a base for her when she completed her training. Unfortunately, this girl did not complete and there was no deaconess available to station at this time. Later, the deaconesses put in a tremendous amount of work to set things moving in Haiti. With a task force of two deaconesses and three students they organised a Girls' League camp on the island to help the leadership there. Older girls from the Girls' Brigade went to Jamaica on three-month leadership courses at Deaconess House.

Finally, in 1957, a candidate from the District came forward. Paulette Holly, a nurse, felt a call to offer herself for service through the Wesley Deaconess Order and went to Jamaica to train. She took up the post of District Deaconess in Haiti in 1961. From the start she preached every Sunday, but that was the least part of her work. She was responsible for the weekly preparation of Sunday school teachers and the organisation of Sunday school in the main church in Port-au-Prince. Amongst the other tasks she undertook were camps for young people, encouraging the Junior Boys' Brigade, training Boys' Brigade leaders and assisting with the Women's League. Sister Paulette's nursing experience came into effect as she helped to organise clinics throughout the country, taking responsibility for a clinic in the slum of La Saline. She appears to have responded to the development work of the Order on the island rather than to a request from Haiti for a deaconess. In this she illustrates something at the root of the calling of a deaconess. She was a nurse who was working on the island; she could have offered herself as a local preacher and in those roles she might have responded to all of these needs. As a deaconess, she was nurse and preacher, though in a different way, not just doing what *she* could, but working towards the creation of a diaconal community which could do things beyond her reach.

In keeping with the usual process entered into by deaconesses, Sister Paulette used the clinic at La Saline as a training opportunity. Young girls who came to the clinic were taught general hygiene and simple patient care for home nursing. They were also given

opportunities to learn further skills, many of the girls going on to medical aid or office work using the skills they acquired at La Saline.

The work in Haiti continued with only the one deaconess until 1976, when Sister Joyce Rohan completed her training and her probation at Coke church in Jamaica. She was engaged to a minister working in Haiti and, although she originated in the Dominican end of the island, she had always hoped to work in Haiti. Circumstances had changed and it was now possible to be married and remain in the Order, so Sister Joyce arrived in Haiti as the wife of a minister. She was also given charge of two churches on arrival, one of which was a school during the week that served 320 children. Sister Joyce was involved in the feeding programme that ensured the children had a hot meal each day.

John Collins says of *diakonia*:

Where we have an authenticated ministry of the word, we have churches, and it is in our perception of diakonia as precisely that ministry that we have potential for ecumenically recognised ministries among the churches.

(1992: 158.)

Collins argues that *diakonia* should be interpreted as the ministry of the Word, recognising only the preaching ministry as authentic. It seems the deaconesses interpreted *diakonia* as a ministry of proclamation through service. Within their understanding of ministry/*diakonia* was held a number of important ministerial concepts, which can be seen in several different theologies of ministry. Calvinists place the teaching ministry of the 'Doctor' at the apex of the various ministries of the Word. The deaconesses were teachers, though it would be a mistake to imagine that they taught only simple skills or that everything was practical. In their process all teaching was within a spiritual context, but had a practical application. Methodism emphasises the sermon as being at the centre of ministry and the deaconesses ministered in this way wherever there was a need, compelling the church to accept women preachers again. At the centre of their *diakonia* was a ministry of proclamation through action; they proclaimed the gospel as they offered God's love to those in need. They would have disagreed with Collins for offering a ministry that was exclusively cerebral.

Deaconess House was expanded in 1938 by the addition of another building on the premises. The expansion allowed Sister Jessie to add another activity to the work. She offered courses of four different sorts for voluntary church workers, some of whom would live in Deaconess House when they came from the outlying islands. This expansion was quickly outgrown and, when No 86 came on the market in 1954, a new phase was able to begin. The Deaconess House had become a recognised training centre for many different fields of work. Prior to the 1960s, school teachers came to the centre for six weeks to be taught religious instruction, and courses were held for youth leaders and prison visitors. The domestic science course taught at number 88 continued to expand, offering less able members of the Girls' League a training that would support family life.

In 1957, Deaconess House moved to the grounds of Caenwood College. All the Deaconess students were now trained there and lived in a hostel within the grounds. Jessie moved to these new premises and continued to guide the work from there. She was surprised to read in an annual report that she was listed as a member of the staff of the theological college, and even more so when, in 1962, she was appointed Chairman of the Faculty. Sister Jessie was still a Wesley Deaconess and for her these tasks were simply an extension of the work she had been doing since 1928. Sister Jessie Kerridge retired in 1963 having created a great work. She had been honoured three times by the monarch, having received Coronation Medals at both the coronation of George VI and that of Queen Elizabeth II, and in 1956 she was awarded the MBE for her work amongst the women of the West Indies.

The West Indies was producing a steady succession of candidates for the Wesley Deaconess Order, many of them having first come into contact when they were members of Girls' League. As fast as they could be trained the work expanded, moving out across the islands and spreading widely within Jamaica. To keep the posts filled deaconesses were sent out from England. The maintenance of this work, however, did not come solely from the provision of British deaconesses. In 1953, the Wesley Deaconess Order in Britain decided to cease its support of the work in Ceylon and to transfer the Ceylon Fund to the support of the work in the West Indies.

There were still some strange anomalies in Kingston. When Sister Dora Dixon went to Jamaica in 1953, she had two roles. The first was as assistant to Sister Jessie, a task in which she was involved in the administration at Deaconess House. The other part of her station was as deaconess at Lyndhurst Church. Her difficulty at Lyndhurst was with the minister, an Englishman, who had not wanted a white deaconess. The minister gave Sister Dora little to do, and she finally went to Sister Jessie and asked to be moved. The deaconess position at Coke was available and she went there for a time, eventually finding that holding down a full time job first at Coke then at Wesley was difficult while doing a part time job at Deaconess House. Having been rejected at Lyndhurst for being white, she found herself returning there after a few years, only to find that the minister (who had had a black deaconess in the meantime) was now quite welcoming and prepared to work with her. It is possible that the minister had originally hoped to have a black deaconess who would be less self assured or more malleable than a white deaconess. The timing suggests that the deaconess who replaced Sister Doris would have been Sister Cynthia Clare, who ten years later would succeed Sister Jessie in charge of training for the Order – probably not what he had expected.

At Ikley, Sister Dora had not considered herself a preacher. She had completed the course, however, later being accepted as a local preacher while at Kingsmead College, but she had not felt this was her particular calling. Her next station in Jamaica was on the West Coast where she was working among four circuits with few preachers, so she found herself preaching every Sunday. She worked in Jamaica for ten years, during which time she was involved in many different aspects of the work. Women's League and Girls' League were central to the work of every deaconess. Sister Dora remembers with pleasure the many girls who passed through Girls' League and have gone on to positions of leadership in the life of the West Indies. It has been suggested, however, that some of the West Indian deaconesses used their opportunities to gain extra qualifications for their own purposes and did not always contribute to the work. I asked Sister Dora about this. She was convinced that such a suggestion was wrong, saying that although most of the deaconesses had come up through Girls' League, they would not have gained selection as a deaconess if they had not shown signs of appropriate qualities and had some kind of appropriate experience (2003). Some were teachers or nurses, one was a civil servant; all were women who had demonstrated ability and had acquired a good education before being accepted for the Order.

Sister Olive Garnett, who served in Jamaica from 1968 to 1974, was influenced in her decision to offer for overseas work by Sister Dora Dixon. She had never felt called to overseas work, nor did she think there was any possibility that she might be sent abroad. On the last day of Convocation in 1967, Sister Dora said: "Lots of people, when they think about overseas, think you have to be someone with special gifts, and that's not true. It's a case of what we all promise that you are prepared to leave a place where you are needed to go to a place you are needed more" (Garnett, 2002). Sister Olive travelled home to Leeds that day for an extra day off. When she was returning on the Sunday she had a strong feeling that she should do something about it. She did not want to go overseas, but she rang the Warden. The following morning, she had a call from Mission House asking her to go for an interview. She was accepted and, after a term at Kingsmead, she was sent to Jamaica.

Her first appointment was at Coke Methodist Church in Kingston, where she worked with a number of others in a team. She described her experience of Girls' League in its last stages. At Coke she had only three members, who met with little interest. She suggested to the girls that they adopt a ward at the Mental Hospital in Kingston. Sister Olive started taking the three to the hospital on a Friday night to run a 'social' event. Soon others from the youth fellowship joined them, mostly boys. Any attempt to lure the women from the ward to the event met with little success. It comprised of mostly men, eventually even the last three girls drifting away and Girls' League was no more. An interesting comment from Sister Olive was that there was no mixed youth work, so that even the events for both genders ended with boys on one side and girls on the other. Sadly, the ministers' desire for integrated youth clubs did not bear the sort of fruit that Girls' League had been used to.

A great deal of Sister Olive's time was taken up with visiting and she was astonished at the vast difference in the homes she found herself in. She had never visited such wealthy households or such poor ones, the poorest people living in little more than shacks. She believed that there should be no distinction made at church level. After two years at Coke she went to Montego Bay and was replaced by Sister Joyce McCaffer, who had returned from Guyana. Sister Joyce had come back to live at Deaconess House, no longer at Caenwood but back at 88 Hanover Street, where there were five resident deacons. The role she had been given was divided between the work at Coke, with a

membership of two thousand, and two weeks every three months at St Anns Bay in the north of the island, where she was to help all of the groups, children, youth work and women's work. Like Sister Olive, she found the youth work at Coke slipping away, and she was glad that she had work at another church, Port Royal where, despite isolation and poverty, the youth work was greeted enthusiastically. But even here, the older teenagers are not being attracted. In one of her letters home, she comments that a greater lay participation would make a huge difference in the ability to get youth work done (M^cCaffer 1971). This, of course, had been a central pillar of the Girls' League system – training girls for leadership.

At Montego Bay on the northwest coast, Sister Olive found a completely different type of community. She told me that she had pastoral responsibility for four churches with a membership of 450 and is known as 'the parson'. The community is smaller, poorer and has many social problems. Her first three funerals involved victims of a murder, a suicide and a road accident. One of Sister Olive's comments about this has a familiar ring to it: "I didn't do funerals at Coke. There were several ministers and *it* wasn't needed" (Garnett, 2002). The word 'it' is important here; she is not saying that she was not needed, but that there was no need for her to serve in that way. The 'doing whatever is needed' is a key to the difference and to the deaconess's ministry. What was needed at Montego Bay that had not been needed in Kingston was community action. The road that ran through the community was the main coastal tourist road; it was extremely busy and dangerous, cutting the town off from the weekly market. The community wanted a pedestrian crossing and in such a community the 'parson' was the natural leader. Sister Olive formed an action group to work for the crossing and once they had achieved this aim the group took on a greater permanence as the Community Action Committee.

Both Sister Olive and Joyce comment on the rise in crime and the change in society in Jamaica during this period. The church at Coke changed during the time Sister Olive was there. When she arrived, the congregation was using the full service for Morning Prayer and started the service by singing the *Te Deum* with enthusiasm. Two years later they had ceased singing the *Te Deum* and sold the prayer books. She accounts for this by identifying a desire to put away the colonial past as they developed into full independence. There was a move to find a style that was their own. Sister Olive had been sent to Jamaica by the Methodist Mission Society and found herself in a church with 1700 members; having come from a housing estate in England and a church with

twenty-five members she wondered who was in the greater need of missionaries. Her concern was justified, even prophetic, for when she left Jamaica in 1974 she was leaving a vibrant Order in the Caribbean to return to a British Order only four years away from being closed to new candidates.

British Wesley Deaconesses ceased to be stationed in the West Indies in 1974, Sister Joyce M^cCaffer being the last. Her letter to home in 1973 describes her work much as it had been in the earlier letter, but adds the information that there were ten deaconesses stationed there:

One as a Deaconess-tutor at the United Theological College of the West Indies; another as Warden at Deaconess House; three in rural ministerial appointments; four on the staffs of Kingston Circuits and one in a rural circuit. One was working with the Caribbean Council of Churches and one, though officially retired, served wherever a need arose.

(A Way of Serving, 1974.)

Two of those were British Wesley Deaconesses, the rest would probably have been West Indian Deaconesses belonging to what was now the Deaconess Order of the Caribbean and the Americas.

By 1977, there were a number of appointments to be filled and Deaconess House had moved again, this time to a site around five miles outside Kingston where there was already a church and space for building. The new House provided a flat for each deaconess working in Kingston, accommodation for twelve student boarders, guest rooms and a cafeteria. The students also had a dining room and a sitting room, while a classroom had been provided to avoid unnecessary travel. The old Deaconess House was to be renovated and used as classrooms.

8.5 SUMMARY

The Wesley Deaconess order in the Caribbean has been reorganised to permit men to serve in this way alongside the women. Most of the modern Orders have taken this decision, although approaching it in different ways. For the Caribbean church there were two principal issues; that of being members of an Order, and that of a clear parity with the presbyteral ministers. These issues have been addressed in a different manner to that of other Methodist churches, but it is too early to comment as to how well the

changes have worked. The matter of membership of an Order has been addressed by recognising that there is a desire for a religious Order within the church and allowing ministers to opt into it should they desire. Parity has been resolved in a related process, according to which everybody offers themselves as candidates for ministry of the Church and, if accepted, is ordained into one ministry. Each minister has the option to choose which role they wish to enter, being stationed accordingly.

9.0 SOME THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

9.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to point to the things that have been learned through the study of the history. It cannot follow a neat chronological or geographical order as the chapters preceding have done; it follows streams of ideas. The primary research question asked about recognising differences and so I open this chapter with a gathering together of what has been encountered in the view of the Church, both in Britain and overseas. The various headings relate to concepts that I found to be important and have drawn together from within the whole. These concepts have helped to suggest that the deaconesses' understanding of their ministry often stands opposed to that of the Church. Finally, I have summarised how the question in the title is answered through this study.

9.2 THE DEACONESS: A CHURCH VIEW

For most of the period under examination, the mentality to deaconesses was partly influenced by society's attitude towards women, especially those in professional areas, which was generally negative. An observable exception would have been in the voluntary sector, where unpaid workers were highly commended. Early 'local deaconesses' were sometimes referred to as 'Sisters of the Poor', a terminology that was exported to Australia, which only added to that church's view of them as charity workers. The first deaconesses, in both Britain and Australia, were required to pay for their own training and to support themselves during this time. The stipends paid to them and the accommodation provided were miserly. None of the older deaconesses to whom I have spoken about their work ever complained, but the conditions they described were often disgraceful. This was not malice on anyone's part, merely part of the attitude that said that charity workers should not expect too much.

Within the framework of such an understanding, what deaconesses did was largely seen as 'good works' rather than important work. This mindset affected the thinking of the Connexion for most of the life of the Order. There has always been a tendency in the churches of the Reformation to place the Church's '*diakonia*' outside the purview of the ordained ministry, seeing it as coming under Jesus' second and lesser commandment,

“love your neighbour as yourself”, while ministry came under his first – “Love the Lord your God”.

This understanding was part of the resistance to the formalising of deaconess work that took place in Australia. As long as it could be put into the ‘charitable work’ pigeonhole, the women were easy to deal with. Each attempt to organise them as a Deaconess Order challenged this view. The Methodist Church never really knew what to do with deaconesses; they could not define the spheres of work that were proper for them. There was apparently a struggle in the Church’s thinking between wanting deaconesses, who were clearly doing good things, and not wanting to acknowledge their work as ‘ministry’. Part of the problem appears to have been one of control. In some countries the work of deaconesses was integrated directly into the ministry of the church, but Australia could not seem to accept that and sought a properly defined job for them.

The major difference in perception allowing the successful integration in Britain was that the driving force was seen to come from men. Stephenson and Cope were men of importance in their respective churches, but they were also unusual in that they worked with women. Without the inspiration and commitment they put into the initiative there would have been no Deaconess Orders. They were enablers themselves, giving women the wherewithal and the freedom to become Deaconesses. Such an attitude towards women was not commonplace amongst men. In Australia the impetus for a Deaconess Order came from women, which in turn created an even greater resistance. There were several initiatives and false starts, with the eventual agreement only taken as a means of avoiding women in the ministry of Word and sacrament. (This capitalisation is the normal practice in Methodism in which ‘Word’ is the Word of God while ‘sacrament’ describes a group of offices, not all of which would be capitalised.)

Even in England there were ministers who were not so ready to support women’s ministry, and some superintendents felt that the deaconesses were not under their control and this made them uncomfortable. This concern for control resurfaced when the new diaconal orders came into being and the church rewrote the definitions around ministry, feeling it necessary to include pastoral care as a particularly presbyteral role. This feeling of ‘ownership’ of the congregation may be derived from the authority ministers are given being expressed as pastoral charge. Since presbyters are specifically given ‘pastoral charge’, it could create confusion if a deaconess was sent to work in that

congregation and to undertake 'pastoral care'. I am convinced that a greater acceptance of collegiality and team working would help to lift some of the tensions in such situations.

Many presbyters have treated the deaconess' ministry as being something outside the Church. This understanding is different from that often expressed by the Deaconess Order, which sees itself as offering a ministry to the community beyond the Church. The first understanding has something exclusive about it, being an involvement with those who do not belong to the Church. The Deaconess' concept was one of reaching out from the church to 'seek the lost', as it said in their ordination service. This presbyteral view of deaconess ministry can be seen in the defensive reaction in the West Indies and has resulted in a total reshaping of the Order in New Zealand. When the Methodist Church in New Zealand was attempting the re-formation of the Deaconess Order into a diaconal order there were fears expressed about their doing the work of "proper ministers". The descriptions given of the kind of work they should be doing all related to life outside of the Church itself. This has led to a diaconal order in a different relationship to the Church, in which deacons are required to *do* rather than to *be*. They are much more closely related to the United Reformed Church's Church Related Social Workers than to the Deaconesses of the past.

There has been a tendency in the Church of the twentieth century to refer to the ministry of the deaconess/deacon as 'the servant ministry' and then to apply that thought pattern to the deaconesses as servants. The language many of the older deaconesses used of themselves and the quick rejection of any suggestion of status or authority seems to be born out of this situation. The New Zealand writer, DS Mullan, typifies that church view of the deaconesses' ministry as that of the servant in his superficial interpretation of the deaconess rubbing the feet of the Maori princess (1984: 57). There was, and is, a socio-linguistic problem around the theology of Christ the Servant, which muddles our understanding of the deaconess as representing Christ in this role. This is the confusion between Christ coming to serve, and treating Christ as a servant. The text most often used about diaconal ministry is the foot washing in **John** chapter 13. In **verse 8**, Peter's horrified refusal is because of just this; he does not wish to treat Jesus as a servant. It is perhaps time to change the English word used here to one that better conveys the original sense of 'minister to', that is 'care'. One can find this concept in **Mark 1:13**. Here '*diakoneo*' is translated in the Authorised Version as "ministered to", which

carried the meaning 'cared for'. If the language used about a deaconess had spoken of ministering as one who cares rather than as one who serves it might have been less necessary for the deaconesses to use such terms as 'humble' about themselves. Fortunately, there was nothing of the humble servant waiting for instruction in the way that they carried out their mission. From the very beginning, they showed initiative and a pioneering spirit in going into lands so different from their own, and the ready availability of volunteers for Ceylon and West Africa demonstrated courage along with a tremendous faith. These were women of indomitable will and resource, who offered leadership to some of the most downtrodden people on earth.

If '*diakoneo*' is understood as the service of others within a context of serving God, that understanding clarifies what we mean today in our use of '*diakonia*' as the service we offer within or on behalf of the Church. In the same way, we have a starting point for an understanding of '*diakonos*'/deacon as someone who serves God through the service of others.

9.3 A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

There are indications that deaconess has been an office of the church since the second century CE at least, focusing from the beginning on work with women. Central to the role of both deacons and deaconesses was the virtue of 'being accessible', which was the purpose of the setting aside of the 'seven' in Acts 6. Deaconesses needed to be accessible, offering access to the bishop as his ear in the community and also to the women in ways a man could not – a role that the Wesley Deaconesses continued to offer. They also had to be available. Deaconesses in the primitive church were drawn from and part of the local community. It was recognising this need to be part of the community one served that caused the Methodist Orders to become a dispersed community, unlike their Kaiserwerth colleagues. In such ways, the Wesley Deaconess Order revived the primitive ministry of the deaconess.

The recognition, brought into focus by Collins of the deaconess/deacon as 'representative' or 'go-between' (1990) relates to this function of accessibility, acting as intermediary between both the Bishop and the congregation, and the needy and the congregation. The Christian appreciation of '*diakonia*' as a necessary response to Christ's sacrifice involves a way of life in which the whole church cares for all of the

'brethren' (ie believers). The way in which the primitive church dealt with this was no longer feasible in the twentieth century, but the principle was at the centre of the deaconesses' perception of their ministry. They were operating in the manner described by Torrance as prompters to the people rather than 'doers' on behalf of the people (1966: 13).

When Stephenson created the Wesley Deaconess Order, he saw it as a trained body of women who would serve the church through mission work in the circuits. His was the inspiration. It was his style and commitment that seems to have been accepted by the succeeding Wardens. When the WDO became a department of the Church in 1910, Conference was acting in a typically Methodist fashion in agreeing to accept something already in place with the intention to approve or amend it at a later date. Although there have been a number of statements from the Church over the years, there has been no clear theological declaration. Other than the matter concerning preaching, which is addressed later in this chapter, most of the legislation about the Wesley Deaconess Order has been purely administrative.

9.3.1 Being a Deaconess

One of the reasons for the historical detail in this study is that it is only through the lives and work of deaconesses that it can be clearly seen what it actually means to 'be' a deaconess. Time and again this concept comes to the fore in matters such as the difference between Wesleyan and local deaconesses and requests, not for a worker, but for a deaconess. It seems clear that the deaconesses were not bound by a prescribed function, but operated out of a concept of attributes by which they could be recognised. Sister Elizabeth Baker, who remained in Ceylon for many years after her retirement, was one of those deaconesses who were sent to a place and simply carried on with what they were doing without ever being re-stationed. In a similar way Sister Jessie Kerridge was sent to Jamaica, but no one ever considered sending her elsewhere. As long as they continued to be deaconesses, the Order continued to support their work. When Sister Grace Parry was sent to the Ivory Coast, it was assumed she would need no further instruction but to go to this place and *be a deaconess*. Deaconesses were normally moved and replaced as the situation demanded or circumstances allowed. The difference in the cases of the Sister Elizabeth and Sister Jessie mentioned above would seem to be

that they were displaying particular ways of being a deaconess that fitted the situation they found themselves in.

In the 1970s, a pattern developed of losing deaconesses by using them as substitute presbyters. Two things were happening: women were being admitted to the ministry of Word and sacrament, and many deaconesses had been in presbyteral appointments for a considerable time. Since they were no longer able to 'be' deaconesses, they could not see any purpose in remaining 'second class' ministers while doing a presbyter's work, and so many offered themselves as candidates as presbyters.

9.3.2 A Religious Order

Being part of a religious Order had many advantages for the deaconesses, though Stephenson preferred the term 'Sisterhood'. Although they were said to work under local control, the examples shown in this study demonstrate the degree of autonomy they were able to exercise. Their primary responsibility remained to the Order, and when they became ill or could not exercise their ministry where they were they returned to the Order. The rotation system instigated in West Africa was an example of that strength. It worked because of an understanding that this was not an individual person being sent to a place, but a deaconess, and as long as there was a deaconess, the work was being done. When the Order agreed to take on the work in West Africa, it was aware of the high incidence of deaths and serious illness among missionaries and their wives. Stephenson took Jesus' instruction in **Matthew** to "love your neighbour as yourself" (22:39) very seriously, seeing that lack of care for self neither offered hope of long term help for the neighbour nor presented an image of God's love to which most people would be drawn. The care for self and for each other that this way of working brought about meant that the Wesley Deaconess Order lost only one deaconess through disease and kept long term illness down to a minimum. This stands in stark contrast to the numerous deaths amongst not only male missionaries, but also their wives.

Prior to the Wesley Deaconess Order being replaced by the Methodist Diaconal Order in 1987, there was no real dispute about the matter of religious order; it was acknowledged. Nevertheless, as a dispersed community, the Wesley Deaconess Order did not easily fit the normal image of a religious order. Some Methodist writers such as Rowe have questioned the authenticity of this description, bringing forward lists of

criteria they consider to be the marks of a religious order (1997: 63). It is the admission of married deacons that has raised most questions, demonstrating that there is clearly confusion between celibate and chaste. For all of the period of this study there would be little question that the deaconesses met the basic requirement of living a life of poverty, chastity and obedience while living by a Rule. The Methodist Church of Great Britain has stated its belief that the renewed Methodist Diaconal Order is both an Order of Ministry and a Religious Order but still demonstrates some lack of clarity in what it means by those terms as applied to the Methodist Diaconal Order.

9.4 THE WORD IN PRACTICE

In Ceylon, the deaconesses were asked to work principally as evangelists, though this request was translated into deaconess ministry and carried out through a process of '*diakonia*' rather than '*kerusso*'. The deaconesses did preach, they also taught the Bible, but the bulk of their work was responding to the needs of the people and in so doing they expressed the love of God in practical terms. It was in making the love of God clear to those for whom they cared that they proclaimed the Good News. That they understood all they did as evangelism is demonstrated by the measure of their success, which was the large number of persons baptised. The deaconess reports from Ceylon tell of many seen in clinics, the maternity care given, and the schools begun. A true measure of their success, however, lies in those who consequently came to faith. The mission to West Africa shows similar criteria for it was their declared purpose to lead the girls into an intelligent faith. Sister Persis Beer raised the question as to the necessity of continuing work in schools where education was the priority instead of mission, again demonstrating the primacy of the salvation of souls in their purpose.

It was never the intention of the deaconesses or the Order that they should be a permanent presence where they were sent. They always offered training to local women so that there would be a time when the indigenous church would no longer need them. In West Africa, the deaconesses had trained sufficient teachers to do most of the work in the schools by the 1930s. They continued providing ethos and moral guidance until even that was no longer necessary.

As I have stated above, accessibility was one of the original requirements in the ministry of deacons in the primitive church and it was one of the features taken on by

the deaconesses. Both Evelyn Oats and Miriam Scrivens made much of their accessibility in the “deaconess houses” they created in their cottages in South Africa. Neither was it merely a physical thing. A feature of the deaconess’ work, wherever they were, was the relationships they formed with the people; it was about a personal ministry, created by being approachable, not remote. One of the ways this was and is still expressed, is in a willingness to get their hands dirty. From Sister Evelyn Oats cleaning out a filthy handbasin to get water to wash a sick woman, through to Sister Helen Davie in war-torn Nigeria, the deaconesses had a hands-on ministry, working directly with the needy and the sick. In all these ways, they became truly accessible.

9.5 RESPONSE TO NEED

Despite being a male deacon myself, one of the realities that this study has shown me is that being a deaconess is a job for a woman. That may seem like stating the obvious, but we try to behave as though the modern diaconate is no different from the deaconess order that it succeeded; but the introduction of men has brought about changes. This is not to suggest that either gender is better than the other, but simply that they do things differently. One of the ways this can be seen is in this area of response to need. Women respond to need directly, men try to solve the perceived problem. While this is a generalisation and there will be many exceptions, it is probably something that the Order needs to keep in mind when considering people for particular posts. Of course this suggests some advantages, in that there are now two operating processes available.

One of the significant discoveries of this study is that I have found no cases where a piece of work was discontinued because there was not a deaconess, but only ones where there was no longer the need for that particular work. Sacrifices sometimes had to be made, but no work was ever seen as belonging to an individual person, rather as a station for a deaconess.

The ‘response to need’ factor can be seen working in another way. In South Africa, Sister Evelyn Oats had no success in establishing a ministry in Durban. She had gone without request, but was immediately accepted when she went to Johannesburg where the community was seeking a deaconess. This pattern could be seen replicated in Haiti and other areas. For the mission to be effective, it had to be in response to some form of

request for a deaconess. The root to which every diaconal order refers back is the 'ordination' in Acts 6, which came in response to a call from the community.

Another very specific example of a response to need that has been built into the role of the deacon in Australia is that of presiding at Holy Communion. Although not ordained to the sacraments, their ordination gives an authorisation to preside where the role they are fulfilling requires it, usually in chaplaincy or when working with remote communities.

There are things that the Methodist Diaconal Order of today can learn from this pattern. It may be important to be clear in discerning the need that the deacon is being asked to respond to as there is a tendency for circuits to search for what they want a deacon to do, rather than to demonstrate a need for the ministry of a deacon. In each station, there should be a flexibility for the deacon to amend the role to which she or he has been appointed in line with the needs which develop as the deacon becomes available.

9.6 ROLE MODEL

All of the deaconesses I have interviewed for this work, and others to whom I have spoken, react negatively to the suggestion that they had status or were given authority. They see status as prestige whereas the dictionary refers to a professional standing and relative position as being the primary definitions. Likewise, to be authorised to do something, to act on the church's behalf, to preach, or in other ways represent the church, is to accept a level of authority. If status is a comparative, then even to be a "second class minister" (Dixon, 2003) is an example of status. Whatever the present protestations about language, there can be no doubt that the Wesley Deaconesses understood the value of offering a positive role model. Whether it was in Ceylon with the Biblewomen, in the schools of West Africa, establishing deaconess ministry in South Africa, or the Girls' League in the West Indies, they offered an image to aspire to. The girls and women with whom they worked gained status through the work of the deaconesses, from the simplest level of those who learned to sew and clean and keep their family healthy to those who followed in the footsteps of the deaconesses themselves.

One of the modern terms applied to deacons and deaconesses is this word 'enabler'. It can be quite difficult to see this as applying to a present day deacon's work where they are often asked to *do*, but in the work of the deaconesses we have studied here it is much clearer. There are some obvious areas such as schools, but even in the clinics run by deaconesses, women were taught skills to enable them to improve their situation as, for example, the girls who learned to type in the clinic in Haiti's slums. The organisations set up by or supported by the deaconesses (eg Women's Fellowship, Women's League, Girls' League and others, such as the Manyano Women in South Africa) became enabling organisations in their own right.

"It is the deacons, in both persona and function, whose distinctive ministry it is to embody, articulate, and lead the whole people of God in its servant ministry" (Rowe, 1997: 64). This American Methodist statement on the deacon's ministry makes clear that it is not the deacon's job to 'do', but to enable others to 'do'. The deacon's role is to create an exemplary image of '*diakonia*' as a signpost for the whole people of God. The American definition offers a new way of speaking about something that can be seen throughout the deaconesses' ministry, wherever they served they worked to involve the local congregation in service and to encourage others to take up the deaconess role. This has been lost in areas where women were seen as of lesser value in their society, especially so in places like Nigeria and to some extent Sri Lanka, where the church has permitted the re-inculturation of old values to deny women a place of respect in society, or where poverty has caused a return to the old ways and education can be afforded only for boys.

In keeping with other churches of the Reformation, Methodism only recognises the two dominical sacraments and so should be numbered amongst those churches that understand ordination in the sense of an authorisation. The new Methodist Service Book of 1999 is careful to explain that it takes place within the context of Holy Communion, an emphasis that seems to suggest a belief that there is something sacramental in the juxtaposition. Such a subtle hint only moves a little way towards the actual reality of the situation, which is that Methodism has treated ordination as though it was a sacrament

for most of its history. Part of the problem within the accepted theology is that ordination is for life and cannot be revoked. For Methodists, an ordained person may be removed from Connexion, which means such a person may not practice their ministry, but there is no possibility of removing the ordination. Such a position infers a belief that something more has been conveyed than mere authorisation and is some considerable way towards an acceptance of the indelible character of ordination. Almost every Methodist presbyter I have spoken to, and most deacons, have said that they received something spiritual at their ordination service. I believe that, despite the official position, the general belief is that ordination is sacramental, but that the theology of the office as sacrament may not be acceptable.

Before 1936 Wesleyan Deaconesses were consecrated. Since this was an act of the Church, it is difficult to see how having a lifelong dedication of one's life to the Deaconess Order was in any way different to ordination. After the 1932 Union with the Primitive Methodists and the United Methodists, all Deaconesses were ordained. The words used in the service were amended from the service of consecration but there was no other recognition of the difference. In another demonstration of its confusion, the Methodist Church insisted that the deaconesses were ordained to a lay order, which is clearly a contradiction in terms.

Here again we can see the problem of what the church did and how it acted. There were 'Sisterhoods' at several of the larger Mission Halls in Britain, the members of which were treated as employees with a task to perform. As we have seen in our study of the overseas churches, such 'Sisterhoods', using the title deaconess, came into being in a number of countries. Again, these were treated as employees until some were recognised by their national church and ordained. Wesley Deaconesses appear to have put on the cloak of ordination from the beginning and, since they were 'set apart', behaved as though they were different, the difference evinced of 'being' not of 'kind'. Whatever the church may have said in its constitution these women went out to 'be' deaconesses.

9.9 THE DEACONESS: DEACONESS PRAXIS

If the church saw the deaconesses as charity workers doing good works on behalf of the needy, the deaconesses themselves certainly never did. There is a striking parallel with

Acts 6 in that what the presbyters were saying was exactly what the disciples said about 'logos' and *diakoneo*', although it would be a mistake to make too much of such a comparison. It is how the deaconesses worked out that role that is of interest as much as what they did with it. Wesley's prime instruction to his 'helpers' was "you have nothing to do but save souls". It can be seen from what the deaconesses said and did that they had taken this to the heart of their ministry: "Men and women can be saved, and will be, if our consecration is deep enough."

As I have elaborated elsewhere, there was never any sign that what deaconesses did could be described as servile or deferential (see p 112); but neither were they haughty or authoritarian. They treated everyone with respect, including themselves. Without any discussion or theological analysis, they simply assumed that since the church had authorised them they held a representative role.

Preaching has always been an area of contention as far as deaconesses are concerned. At the time the Wesleyan Deaconess Order was created, women were not permitted to preach in churches. Even when, in 1911, women were permitted to preach it was only in places where they were requested to do so by the Superintendent. From its inception the Wesley Deaconess Order had Deaconess Evangelists, who travelled the country preaching in the circuits. After 1911, deaconesses were appointed to preach by permission of the Warden after an annual check on their suitability. At least that is what the regulations said. Certainly in the overseas situations the deaconesses preached wherever they found it necessary. In South Africa, the two earliest deaconesses preached regularly. It is true that Sister Evelyn did the larger part of her preaching to African congregations, but she was also preaching to white congregations when it was needed, and Sister Miriam also preached regularly. The restrictions suggested in the West Indies were a conservative backlash that came to nothing. The deaconesses did what was needed and what they were trained for. The church made regulations, but often turned a blind eye to the reality of the deaconesses' praxis. It was not until 1942 that the church gave them free rein:

No gifts of leadership and insight need be denied their exercise, and a deaconess shall have scope and freedom to do the work for which she has been trained and ordained.

(The Agenda, August 1942.)

At last the Church's stated view had caught up with the deaconesses' practical reality.

A footnote to the above is necessary. After the Order was reopened in 1987, all deaconesses still desiring to preach were required to take the Local Preachers' examination and appear before the Local Preachers' Committee for oral examination. Today, those Deacons who preach do so as Local Preachers – some see this as freeing them from a specific preaching role and only offer limited preaching time, no longer responding to need in this area.

As can be seen, the deaconesses' praxis was informed by their purpose – to save souls. When the work in the schools was established, as no longer mainly about mission, they laid it down and moved into other fields. They did not cease work because it was unsuccessful, but because the missiological phase was finished and only ongoing education was left, which they did not see as their calling.

9.10 ABERRATION OR INSPIRATION?

The Order of Deacons in South Africa has developed a catchphrase that goes: "Let's do it now and apologise later", which is about sidestepping bureaucracy. The Methodist Church has all too often operated on the basis of approving something in the present and working out what it means later. This can be both a strength and a weakness. In 1987, Conference voted to reopen the Wesley Deaconess Order to candidates, both women and men, but it took another ten years to agree legislation and definitions. It was not until 1997 that the decisive change of receiving all the deacons in to Full Connexion took place. This shows little change from the process one hundred years earlier.

There were a number of groups of 'deaconesses' operating in various centres in England when the Rev Thomas Bowman Stephenson set up his Wesley Deaconess Institute to train women. When he asked for approval, Conference agreed the principle but made no legislation. The 'aberration' lies in the difference between what Conference understood as deaconess work and Stephenson's vision for it. There seems no evidence that the Methodist Church had a theology of deaconess ministry, or intended to establish one. The visible presence was that of the local 'Sisters' who were often poorly educated and untrained, though these women were hard working, offering caring hearts and willingness to help the needy. It would never be thought that they might preach.

Candidates for the Wesley Deaconess Order were required to be of good education and, since they were expected to support themselves during training, they needed to have some private income. These women were given two years' training before being sent to work in circuits as probationer deaconesses. It is little wonder that circuit ministers were surprised by their first encounter with a Wesley Deaconess. The longer term problem was that, since the Church moved so slowly, the Connexional understanding was still that of superior domestic servants, while the reality bore no relation to this expectation. They continued to expect 'Martha', while what they got was 'Phoebe of Cenchrea'.

Overseas stations offered the most immediate opportunity for the Wesley Deaconesses to step outside the prevailing perceptions. In Ceylon, despite the presence of a long-standing Methodist circuit, their mission had an independence that permitted them to innovate, discovering new ways of being deaconess. Not only did this encourage an increase in confidence in their own ministry, it seems to have made deaconesses more sought after in difficult circumstances. Each location has demonstrated adaptability to new situations and challenges. In all of these the deaconesses have provided solutions that were distinctive to their own ministry – in fact, it has often been their solutions that most clearly demonstrated that this was a case of ministering to those in need rather than undertaking a task.

It seems certain that the initial inspiration for this ministry in Methodism came from Stephenson, but the early initiatives taken by deaconesses tells us that his was not the only inspiration involved. In Australia, New Zealand and later in the West Indies, the successor orders all came into being through the inspiration of women by women. Servant leadership has been described as one in which "the servant shows" (Richards & Hoeldtke, 1980: 107), a style of leadership that uses example rather than command, and is a theological process that particularly suits women's manner of working. The deaconesses' process was to sit down and do everything together. Whether it was teaching sewing or Bible study, it was this that made them such powerful evangelists amongst people who were, in whatever way, deprived.

Perhaps the most direct link with **Acts 6** was that the deaconesses were set apart to work with the people at the margins. The seven in the **Acts** account were ordained to minister to the members of the community who were 'outsiders'. In their overseas work, the

deaconesses were sent to work among people who were missing out in some way. This often meant women, but much of this work with women was intended to impact on the families of these women and girls.

It seems unlikely that Stephenson would have rationalised his activities by reference to the 'seven', but he was using the same process to deal with a similar problem. He had seen the need to work with women and he used women to meet the need, much as the early disciples used Greeks to meet the need of the Greeks. The deaconesses took his vision out with them, responding to needs he had not envisaged. There is no record of what prompted Sister Evelyn Oats to go to South Africa, but it seems certain that there was something she used to convince Stephenson that she should go. Each of the other fields of work demonstrate this response to a demonstrated need.

It is possible to see the deaconesses transferring the inspiration, moving the process on a step as they moved out from the centre toward the furthest margins. Their ministry shows a pattern of teaching those they could reach and then choosing some to teach the community in their place. Their core message is what demonstrates their theological particularity. By way of their proclamation in action and the teaching of leaders they presented the message of **Mark** "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45). They taught how to serve others in response to a Jesus who gave his life as a service.

Much of the theology that has tended to make diaconal ministry unattractive has grown out of the interpretation of the 'footwashing' narrative as urging those who feel called to '*diakonia*' to do some form of menial service. This, as an end in itself, lacks intellectual credence. The history of the deaconesses' ministry can teach the Church that there is much more to this concept. Through the window of their story, we can see that the washing of others' feet can be more about raising them to stand with you than bringing yourself down to kneel before them.

If there was an aberration, it was from other people's image of the concept of deaconess, the Martha image still much admired by some male ministers and women of power. This was a representation of the deaconess as an untrained, God-fearing woman, who looked after the indigent of the neighbourhood on the Church's behalf. As an inspiration, the deaconesses provided a role model of educated, trained and caring

people who would lead through example, at the core of whose ministry was a desire to share their most valued possession with others – their faith.

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