A Deaconess Blueprint for the Revival of Global Methodism

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I'M GOING TO BEGIN THIS chapter by breaking a cardinal rule for historians cited by our colleague, Martin Wellings, in an article for a book ruminating on the future of the British Methodist church. Here's what Martin said: "Historians tend not to be builders of grand systems and purveyors of sweeping generalizations, much less predictors of the future in the light of the past."[1] Martin then proceeded to break this cardinal rule himself, so I am joining good company! I am not going to *predict* the future; rather, I will map a way forward for the revival of global Methodism in light of a movement from the past with remarkable promise and fortitude that, tragically, was never realized. I am speaking of the Methodist deaconess movement. So with a nod to my PhD training in practical theology, I will push the "So what?" question of the historical narrative to provide a glance at a grand system for the revival of global Methodism. The thesis to be advanced in this lecture is simple: the Methodist deaconess movement provided a blueprint with five core elements that—if put into practice with a twenty-first-century spin—have the potential to spark a revival in global Methodism. By "revival," I mean "an improvement in the condition or strength

1 Martin Wellings, "'A Time to Be Born and a Time to Die'? A Historian's Perspective on the Future of Methodism," in *Methodism and the Future: Facing the Challenge*, ed. Jane Craske and Clive Marsh (London: Cassell, 1999), 149.

of something." My thesis is simple. The putting it into practice will be the tough part.

A journalist in 1898 provided this synopsis of what a deaconess does on any given day:

> In the morning she will, perchance, visit a sick man, grumpy and ungrateful, recovering, it may be, from the results of a debauch. It is hers to speak comfortable words to him, to dress his wounds if he have any, and to pave the way for a reconciliation with his wife. . . . Perchance it is a widow she visits in the afternoon, accustomed to earn her scanty crusts as charwoman. Then it is as often as not a case of going down on her knees—not to pray, at least not just now, but to scrub the room out. Or, it may be, a weak mother needs fresh air. Then our Deaconess becomes nursemaid to the infant, and the ailing mother has a day in the country or a ride on a farm. To paper a room, nurse a fever case, make it up between lovers, conduct a service, fire a prayer-meeting, expound the Scriptures, advise in family crises—these are the items that make up a Deaconess' work. A bit of a judge, a bit of a lawyer, a skilled nurse, a preacher, and above all a lover of her kind—all this must a Deaconess be; and it is not easy to find such a combination.[2]

While nearly all Protestant denominations—from Lutheran to Baptist, Episcopal to Congregational—sponsored some iteration of the deaconess movement, its most vigorous success materialized within the Wesleyan family. The deaconess movement caught on in Methodism in the mid-1880s, particularly in Britain and the United States, and scores of Methodist women signed on for one or two years of a theological education combined with practical training before entering into full-time church work as teachers, nurses, evangelists, missionaries, house-to-house visitors, or Bible teachers. The deaconess movement hit its high mark around 1910. In American Methodism, the pertinent statistic in this regard was the peak enrollment of 256

2 "Much the Same in America," *Highways and Hedges: The Children's Advocate* 127 (July 1898): 164.

students at Lucy Rider Meyer's Chicago Training School.[3] From that high mark, enrollment eventually decreased to a trickle. The deaconess movement in Methodism continues today more than a century later, albeit as a shell of its former glory, with, for example, 161 active deaconesses in the UMC in the United States. Only in the Philippines does the deaconess movement continue to thrive, with approximately 440 active deaconesses.[4]

So what was a deaconess? Deaconess proponent and Methodist Episcopal Church bishop, James Thoburn, offered this description of a deaconess in 1890: "a Christian woman who is providentially disentangled from all other matters and can give all her time and talent to the Christian church. She offers herself to the church without any reservation. If she be given food and clothing and work, she will give all her energies in return. She does not stipulate in what direction she will work."[5] Although deaconesses were single women, they were not lifers who made an indissoluble vow, like Roman Catholic nuns, neither were they part-time volunteers who came and went one day a week while juggling family commitments. Deaconesses lived full-time among the people to whom they ministered. "We are in the heart of our work," wrote a deaconess in Salford, England. "The people we want to help live all around us. They pass our doors in their clattering 'wooden shoon,' at a quarter to six every morning; we hear their loud laughter, and alas!

3 Isabelle Horton, *High Adventure: Life of Lucy Rider Meyer* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), 315.

4 I am grateful to Cristina Mañabat and Sheila Binuya for this statistic. For more on deaconesses in the Philippines, see Liwliwa Robledo, "Gender, Religion and Social Change: A Study of Philippine Methodist Deaconesses, 1903–1978 (PhD diss., The Iliff School of Theology and University of Denver, 1996), and Amelita Grace G. Cajiuat and Liwliwa Tubayan Robledo, "The Impact of Deaconesses in the Life of the United Methodist Church in the Philippines," accessed February 21, 2022, https://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/what-we-do/service-and-advocacy/deaconess-and-home-missioner-office/news-resources/cajiuatrobeldo.pdf.

5 James Thoburn, "Deaconesses and the Church," *The Message* 5, no. 9 (September 1890): 6.

sometimes their drunken cries late at night."[6] As such, the work of a deaconess never ended.

Plus, the work was grueling and often heartbreaking. Scenarios of human misery filled the pages of Elizabeth Ann Pitts's diary in 1900 during her London rounds shortly after she arrived at Mewburn House, the initial training institute for the Wesley Deaconess Order:

> The next was Mrs. Cooper, she seemed to be worn down with work, having 9 children, the baby only 7 weeks old, so I did not think it wise to hinder her from thronging duties, so after expressing my sympathy offered a few words in prayer, she appeared very thankful. . . . The next place was Mrs. Arrowsmith No 69, it is a sad poverty stricken home, her husband gets work now & then at the docks, the eldest child was kept in because she had not any boots to wear, the second child is suffering from ulcerated bowels, also Whooping Cough; the Mother with infant in arms looked weighed down with care.[7]

Not surprisingly, the strain on deaconesses showed up in illness or exhaustion so much so that Thomas Bowman Stephenson, founder of the Wesley Deaconess Order in England, was asked, "Why do so many of your Deaconesses break down in health?" He responded that such a question "reveals at once the fact that the querist is ignorant of the strain under which the worker, at any rate among the slum population, often lives."[8]

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6 "Deaconess Work in Salford," *Highway and Hedges: The Children's Advocate* 86 (February 1895): 38.

7 Elizabeth Ann Pitts Diary, John Rylands Library. "The conditions under which they worked are hard to realize now. There was little or no national medical service, no maternity service, no pre-natal or child welfare clinics or district nurses. There was no financial aid from the State during sickness, unemployment or old age. The Sisters met a level of destitution which we do not know to-day." Wesley Deaconess Order pamphlet, n.d., 6, Wesley Historical Society, The Oxford Centre for Methodism and Church History.

8 "In Perils Oft. By a Wesley Deaconess," *Flying Leaves* 73 (February 1908): 201.

To compound the difficulties, Methodist deaconesses worked within an indifferent, even hostile Church that treated them like a third species, neither clergy nor laity. They were consecrated to the office of deaconess, yet what did the term *office* mean? What it meant in reality was that deaconesses were *not* clergy. They were not ordained as were male clergy, even though the consecration of a deaconess happened during a formal, ordination-type service. As did the clergyman's ordination, the deaconess consecration service took place in the church; both included prayers and hymns, both asked questions of the candidates, and both gave a charge to these servants of the Church to be faithful to their calling. Both involved clergy, even bishops, laying hands on the candidate with the trinitarian invocation. Yet the same ecclesial investiture consecrated a deaconess, while it ordained a clergyman.[9]

At the same time, being an officer of the Church meant that deaconesses were *not* laity either. Like pastors but unlike laity, women received a divine call to become a deaconess. No call, no deaconess. Like pastors but unlike laity, the deaconesses had to complete a course of study in theological education. In the American Methodist Church, for instance, the deaconess course of study nearly duplicated that for ministerial candidates; it included biblical studies, church history, logic, doctrine, ethics, psychology, biography, Christian education, and church government. The only courses assigned to clergy and not deaconesses were the preparation and delivery of sermons and church administration.[10]

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9 For a lengthy discussion of whether deaconesses in the early church were ordained, see Henry Wheeler, *Deaconesses Ancient and Modern* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1889), 78–102. In subsequent chapters, he presented information on the deaconesses in Germany, England, and the United States. Curiously, he did not mention Moravian deaconesses, who *were* ordained. See Beverly Prior Smaby, "'Only Brothers Should Be Accepted into This Proposed Council': Restricting Women's Leadership in Moravian Bethlehem," in *Pietism in Germany and North America 1680–1820*, ed. Jonathan Strom, Hartmut Lehmann, James Van Horn Melton (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 135.

10 Gerald McCulloh, *Ministerial Education in the American Methodist Movement* (Nashville: United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry,

Nevertheless, deaconesses remained in limbo as to their church office; they were neither clergy nor laity. Fast forward seventy-five years. In a 1970 study of deaconesses in the United Methodist Church, a comment by a deaconess made clear that their limbo status remained in effect: "As a deaconess, a woman is no longer a full human being . . . she's accepted as a kind of maiden aunt, to be pitied, or step-daughter, to be looked after—but from her the church expects little."

So why look to the deaconess movement for a blueprint for the revival of global Methodism? This is a valid question, one I asked myself countless times after—in an unguarded moment of optimism—assigning myself this paper topic months ago. I have longed to change it, but there it was, and I could not turn back. And to be honest, I am glad I did not, because from the margins, the misunderstood, the alienated—rather than those in the center of power—have often come the ideas that show us a way forward to revival. Such was the deaconess movement. It occupied, for a time, a countercultural outpost on the margins that was increasingly less attended to by the institutional church as the church became more bourgeois and respectable. This is not to say that the deaconess movement was without its flaws and shortcomings. Not at all. They could be condescending to the poor, expecting them to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps if they only applied themselves. They were stuck in nineteenth-century revivalism, as if that approach was the only one for evangelism. There is more on that topic, but that is for another paper topic. For this chapter, we will consider five core elements of the deaconess movement that I believe can spark revival today in global Methodism.

1. Unite Knowledge and Vital Piety

> A great longing possessed me to know Christ as a living, bright reality. . . . Early and late I sought for this happy experience, wrestling and praying for hours. . . . There followed soul struggles, and it seemed that God had hidden His Face from me. For 18

1980), 12.

> months I scarcely smiled. [Then after reading Hannah Whitall Smith's bestselling book, *The Christian's Secret to a Happy Life*] . . . the mists cleared and the scales fell from my eyes. I saw that my efforts and soul chastening had been in vain, and that I had simply to surrender myself and my doubts to Christ.[11]

So wrote Sister Thirza Masters, who was raised, along with her thirteen siblings, in the Wesleyan Methodist Church in England.

Deaconesses experienced a definite, thorough conversion. Most were raised in Christian homes and in the Methodist Church, thus they were surrounded from birth in a Christian environment. Still, a moment happened when God became real to them in a new, intimately personal way. Deaconesses also experienced a definite call to serve God in full-time ministry. These calls were transformative and life changing. Louise Semple altered direction completely from pursuing her artistic talent to being consecrated a deaconess on December 2, 1895, due to God's call: "When I became convinced that the call was from the Lord, I could only say, 'Here am I, send me' and I never for a moment regretted the decision."[12] Similarly, Louise Golder, whose brother, Christian, advocated for deaconesses in the German Methodist Church in the United States, described her call with these words: "The more I prayed about it, the more my inner joy and impulse grew and was so strong that I felt, if I didn't obey the voice, I would be going against God's will."[13] As Sister Dora Stephenson of the Wesley Deaconess Order expressed it, the call for a deaconess acts as a "definite and prayerful covenant with God to do the work to which she believes He has called her."[14]

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11 Thirza Masters, "Lives of Wesley Deaconesses. Sister Thirza Masters," *Flying Leaves* 23 (November 1903): 168.

12 *The Message and Deaconess Advocate* (January 1895): 10; quoted in Mary Agnes Dougherty, *My Calling to Fulfill: Deaconesses in the United Methodist Tradition* (New York: Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries, 1997), 2.

13 Personal testimony of Louise Golder, consecrated 1893; quoted in Dougherty, *My Calling to Fulfill*, 2.

14 Sister Dora Stephenson, "What Is a Deaconess?" *Highways and Hedges: The Children's Advocate* 95 (December 1895): 219.

This profound Christian experience was then balanced by learning and training for the work. Once she answered the call, the would-be deaconess enrolled in a training school. Especially rigorous was the academic study of the Bible. At Lucy Rider Meyer's Chicago Training School, for at least an hour every morning, five days a week, deaconesses-in-training studied both the content and context of all sixty-six books of the Bible along with biblical history and geography of the ancient world; they even memorized maps and diagrams of principal cities and localities. They learned as well how to develop Bible lessons that included maps, charts, and simple drawings intended to reinforce the teachings. Such teaching tools proved invaluable as deaconesses taught the Bible in churches and industrial schools and as they visited, Bible in hand, in homes and tenements.

In the second year at the Chicago Training School, the required reading thickened academically, focusing on the life of Christ. The book assigned was Cunningham Geikie's *The Life and Words of Christ*, an encyclopedic tome referencing ancient authors like Josephus and Papius as well as leading contemporary biblical scholars from Johann Gottfried Eichorn and Ernest Renan to Constantin von Tischendorf. The corresponding bibliographic notes included Latin, Greek, and Hebrew citations. Geikie's book also introduced, albeit briefly, the basics of gospel criticism, particularly the dating of the fourth Gospel. Although biblical languages were not required at deaconess training schools as they were at theological seminaries, the Chicago Training School curriculum offered multiple elective courses in New Testament Greek that would give "the student a sufficient working knowledge of the principles of the Greek language to enable her to read the New Testament in the original."[15]

15 Isabelle Horton, *The Builders: A Story of Faith and Works* (Chicago: The Deaconess Advocate, 1910), 202. For instance, according to the 1895–96 Boston University School of Theology catalogue, the study of both Greek and Hebrew languages were required, not elective, courses. *Boston University School of Theology Quadrennial Report to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Boston: Boston University School of Theology, 1896), 7.

Along with academic courses, the training school integrated practical work as the other major component of its curriculum. Particularly in the United States, training schools originated in high-density, urban locations such as Chicago, Boston, New York City, and St. Louis, where students had multiple choices in practical work. They worked in city missions, the jail, juvenile court, city hospitals, the workhouse, rescue missions, the old folks' home (now called nursing home), Travelers' Aid ministry to care for runaway children and unchaperoned girls, and settlement houses.[16] Even in the rural setting of Wesley Deaconess College in Ilkley, West Yorkshire, students visited in the community one afternoon a week on Wednesdays. "Shortly before one o'clock every Wednesday," wrote a student, "we wend our way, a blue-cloaked band, to the station. The afternoon is spent in Bradford, and the surrounding villages. Meetings are conducted, and sick people visited, thus affording a foretaste of the work awaiting us in the future."[17]

Knowledge and *vital piety*. Are these words alive today? In these same lands, loosely referred to as the West, where the deaconess movement once flourished, vital piety—as in conversion and consecration of one's life—is rarely mentioned in many Methodist contexts today. *If* such talk ever happens, it's potentially embarrassing. There's a pregnant silence when we look down at our feet and hope for someone else to say something in response. We've become thoroughly Bushnellian, as in Horace Bushnell, the Congregational pastor and theologian, who exercised a significant influence in this direction during the mid-nineteenth century. He criticized "emotional revivalists" for their insistence on the "radical breach-making character" of conversion

16 Similarly, at Chicago Training School, deaconesses spread out into the city to work in a wide variety of organizations and churches. "A pamphlet from the same period described how students served internships under pastors and relief agencies, visiting criminal courts and tenement houses, studying prostitution, alcoholism, and public health issues." Dana Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 156.

17 "A Student's View of College Life. By a Student," *Flying Leaves* 109 (May 1911): 73.

and advocated instead for an imperceptible growth into the Christian life, where "the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise."[18] Bushnell's perspective on conversion, recently described as "organic," relied on a steady, long-haul Christian influence at home and church rather than a speedy, spectacular one.[19] Mainline Protestant seminaries jumped on Bushnell's ideas and advanced a curriculum with religious education, replacing evangelism as "the new paradigm for ministry" for an educated clergy.[20] What appears now is that even religious education in the church also has been marginalized, so the question is, Where and when does conversation about conversion, consecration, or a call to ministry ever happen? Even to initiate these kinds of conversations, which were profoundly alive amid the deaconesses, could provide a spark toward revival in global Methodism.

2. Live Simply, Even Communally

> Deaconess work and the mode in which Deaconesses live is a protest against the utilitarian standard which pervades all our civilization. The poor appreciate it. It is a revelation to them that here are women who are working for the love of Christ, and who know something of the limitations of poverty as well as the people among whom they labor. "He became poor for our sakes." It is a voice in this modern age, saying to the multitude, there is

18 Martin Marty, *Protestantism in the United States: Righteous Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 192. See Horace Bushnell, *Discourses on Christian Nurture* (Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, 1847). David I. Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy: Boy Scouts, the YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870–1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 23.

19 Catherine L. Albanese, "Horace Bushnell among the Metaphysicians," *Church History* 79, no. 3 (September 2010): 616.

20 Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 343.

> something more precious than dollars and cents. There is a wealth of life more to be desired than silver and gold.[21]

Methodism in the late nineteenth century became increasingly middle class in outlook, architecture, and even in location. In 1877, a Chicago minister described its bourgeois ascent: "Methodism is in transition; moving up out of poverty into wealth; out of obscurity into notoriety; out of her plain garb into the latest fashions; out of the log-cabin into the white house; out of the old camp-grounds into the 'Ocean Groves' and the 'Lake Bluffs'; out of the plain old meeting house into the grand new church with organ and quartet-choir, and all with the ornamentation of a heavy mortgage."[22]

Deaconesses embodied—literally, as we shall see in a moment—the opposite. Detaching themselves from material goods, they stood against materialism by living and dressing simply. At the Chicago Training School, for instance, a group formed called the Do Without Band, and they looked constantly "for opportunities to *do without* for Jesus's sake."[23] What did deaconesses do without? First, they did without a salary. Living without an income silenced accusations that they worked for pay or that the deaconess movement cost the church money that was better spent elsewhere. "Money is . . . crystallized power," wrote Lucy Rider Meyer, "and God's children should hold it sacred for God's work, using only so much of it for their own comfort and adornment as will make them better workers for God."[24]

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21 Addie G. Wardle, comp., *A Report on Deaconess Work* (Chicago: Methodist Deaconess Association, 1908), 11.

22 W. H. Burns, "Methodism in Transition," *Northwestern Christian Advocate*, August 22, 1877, 6. For a similar story in Great Britain, see Clive Field, "The Social Structure of English Methodism, Eighteenth to Twentieth Centuries," in *British Journal of Sociology* 28, no. 2 (June 1977): 199; Henry Rack, "Wesleyan Methodism 1849–1902," in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, ed. Rupert Davies, A. Raymond George, and Gordon Rupp (London: Epworth Press, 1983), 3:127; Anthony Armstrong, *The Church of England, Methodists and Society, 1700–1850* (London: University of London Press, 1973), 207.

23 Horton, *The Builders*, 96.

24 Lucy Rider Meyer, *Deaconesses, Biblical, Early Church, European, American, With the Story of The Chicago Training School, For City, Home and Foreign*

They also did without a closet full, even a drawer full, of clothing. Consider the deaconess uniform. As with all clothing, it acted as a visible form of communication; like a sign, it provided information and orientation.[25] The deaconess uniform imparted the message to the church and to their critics that deaconesses undertook their work with intention and dedication enough to forego luxuries and frivolities. The uniform also communicated to the poor among whom they worked that the deaconesses chose to serve God among them in the simplest of ways. Meyer spoke forcefully about what it would be like for a poor woman "dressed in calico" to be visited by a woman wearing "even a plush cloak." Such a contrast in clothes precluded any possibility of honest sympathy between them due to the glaring wealth differences as represented by their respective clothing. "The rustle of a silk dress is worse than the rattle of musketry for driving poor people out from the reach of helpful Christian influences," Meyer decried. "But our serge dresses and plain bonnets show us willing to 'become all things to all *women*, that we may win some.' "[26]

Still more, deaconesses did without a home and family of their own. They viewed themselves as mothers of humanity and relinquished, as long as they were in the deaconess order, the role of wife and mother to their own children. Instead, they acquired a sisterhood, a company of like-minded women. Many deaconesses, especially in the United States, lived in a deaconess home. Not only was it more economical, but also the deaconess home provided a sacred place set apart from the world to which deaconesses returned after a long day of visiting in overcrowded tenements or nursing the infirmed. As a community, they gathered to eat, discuss the day's events, share each

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Missions, and The Chicago Deaconess Home, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The Message Publishing Company, 1889), 236.

25 Alison Lurie writes, "Today, as semiotics becomes fashionable, sociologists tell us that fashion too is a language of signs, a nonverbal system of communication." Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (New York: Random House, 1981), 3. See also Nathan Joseph, *Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication through Clothing* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 49.

26 Meyer, *Deaconesses*, 236.

other's burdens, worship together, and pray over the difficult situations they tended to throughout the day. In this home, deaconesses lived communally as family. For British Methodist deaconesses who lived more on their own, the annual weeklong convocation became the high point of the year when they met with those who understood their work as no one else did. They spoke in longing terms of the convocation as breathing new life into their work and giving them strength to return and resume the work.

The esprit de corps among deaconesses, whether in daily communal living or the annual convocation, enabled these women who had relinquished home and family, modern clothes and conveniences, to persevere in simplicity, economy, and purpose. They did not view themselves as separate individuals but as a sisterhood, even across national boundaries and different denominational communities. One illustration encapsulates this powerful, communal connection internationally: Sister Mina Fliedner, at the Kaiserswerth Motherhouse in Düsseldorf, Germany, was asked if she had a message of greetings for the Wesley Deaconess Order's Annual Convocation of 1904. " 'No,' she said. 'I think I can send them no message, as I do not know them well enough, but you may tell them that I love them all in the Lord Jesus, and that while their Convocation is meeting, I shall be praying for them night and day.' . . . Two days afterwards, Sister Mina was found in her room, dead, on her knees. She had passed away in the very act of prayer."[27]

All of this speaks so powerfully to global Methodism today, and the possibilities of connection are magnified exponentially with social media and our advanced communication tools. The simple yet profound act of praying for each other across national and international boundaries is a way to spark a revival in global Methodism. And what about doing without for Jesus's sake so that resources can be shared for God's work throughout global Methodism?

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27 "A Pathetic Incident," *Flying Leaves* 32 (June 1904): 85.

3. Unify Evangelism and Humanitarianism

Sister Elise Searle, a deaconess who was elected by popular vote to the Board of Guardians in Norwich, engaged in political lobbying to make substantive changes to improve the food served to residents at the workhouse and to increase the supply of towels at the local hospital. "These details may seem very trivial to an outsider," Searle stated, "but they mean a great deal to the respectable poor, many of whom, through sickness and adversity, are forced to shelter their declining days in our workhouses."[28] Simultaneously, she engaged in evangelism with the people applying to the Board of Guardians for welfare aid. As recipients waited in line to submit their aid applications, Sister Searle would slip out of the board meeting and lead the people in a familiar hymn before talking to them about Jesus. In other words, she united evangelism and humanitarianism in order to reach people both physically and spiritually.

No matter the work, whether as nurse, teacher, daycare worker, class leader, Sunday school teacher, house-to-house visitor, or probation officer, the deaconess viewed it as an opportunity for evangelism. As Thomas Bowman Stephenson thundered, the Wesley Deaconess Order is "a 'soul-converting' agency. It must employ to the full all social influences and expedients, but in all, its object must be 'soul-winning.' "[29] From across the water, Lucy Rider Meyer responded as vociferously:

> Would you have everybody interested in the evangelistic work? Jesus would. A work for which God the Father spared not his own Son may well claim *the intensest energies of every one of us*, until it is done. But what my art, my literary pursuits, my society? May I not live for them? No, no, no! In a world full of souls with eternal life or death just before them—souls every one of whom has cost the heart's blood of a God to redeem—no one has a right to live for art, or for literature, or for science, or society, or wealth. . . .

28 Elise Searle, "Notes from Norwich," *Highways and Hedges: The Children's Advocate* (June 1895): 119.

29 William Bradfield, *The Life of the Reverend Thomas Bowman Stephenson, B.A., LL.D., D.D.* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1913), 424.

> All these things God intends as means and means alone—not an end—not to live for. We may use them just as long as they . . . can be used directly in furthering God's work. . . . To amass money that one may simply have it—O foolish one. "This night shall thy soul be required of thee." It is to lie down, after all, in an empty coffin.[30]

The integration of evangelism and humanitarianism showed up in the service to bring British Methodist deaconesses into the order. A short statement read by the president of the conference listed various kinds of work that deaconesses might be called to undertake, including preaching, teaching, feeding, nursing, visiting, and rescuing. Then the president declared that "in all this you must be true evangelists of our Lord Jesus Christ translating your Gospel into the language of personal service, that it may be the better understood, not reckoning your ministry complete till those who you serve can say, Now we believe . . ."[31] In other words, service and evangelism—together—helped people see the gospel at work and believe it.

This holistic approach emerged across the deaconess movement in American Methodism. Mary Agnes Dougherty's dissertation, one of the first comprehensive studies done on the topic, tracks the career profiles of 509 graduates from the Chicago Training School. Using her statistics, the number of deaconess evangelists (eighty-eight) equaled the number of deaconess nurses (eighty-seven).[32] This parity in itself demonstrates the twofold commitment to evangelism and humanitarianism. In her interpretation of the data, Dougherty admits that deaconesses attended to the spiritual and physical simultaneously, so that in fact both evangelism and humanitarianism were requisite deaconess labors. She expressed the opinion that the attention to spiritual needs, often through evangelism, distinguished the deaconess movement from the

30 Lucy Rider Meyer, "Deaconesses and the Need," *The Message* 5 (1890): 9. Emphasis added.

31 "The Order of Service for the Ordination of Deaconesses" (London: Methodist Publishing House, n.d.), 12.

32 Mary Agnes Dougherty, "The Methodist Deaconess, 1885–1918: A Study in Religious Feminism" (PhD diss. University of California, Davis, 1979), 102.

settlement house movement, two movements that were otherwise very similar. Her statistics continue. The highest number in any category were deaconess visitors (381).[33] This statistic also demonstrates the intertwining of evangelism and humanitarianism because the deaconess visitor evangelized as she cooked a light meal for an invalid, swept the floor, or looked after a child while a mother rested. Meyer explained that the deaconess visitor rejoiced "in little children rescued, souls saved, and the 'sweetness and light' of the gospel penetrating homes and hearts."[34]

The bifurcation of evangelism and humanitarianism is alive and well today. In many Methodist contexts, the very word *evangelism*—the "e" word—raises hackles or at least discomfort. As a local church evangelism committee member commented, "The word *evangelism* kind of unnerves me and I think it unnerves a lot of people. . . . When you say 'evangelism,' people think Holy Roller."[35] The focus on humanitarianism to the neglect of evangelism comes up every time I teach an introduction to evangelism class. Again this spring, the hesitancy to evangelize showed up when a well-meaning, earnest student asked the question, "If the T-shirt I'm wearing when I helped with clean-up after Hurricane Harvey had my church's logo on it, was that evangelism? Did I have to say anything about Jesus or the gospel? Didn't the church's name speak for itself and identify me as a Christian engaged in hurricane relief work?"

According to Robert Wuthnow, an American sociologist of religion who conducted a comprehensive study of American churches in 2010, there are powerful "social pressures to emphasize service rather than evangelism."[36] Nevertheless, as a church leader in Wuthnow's study commented, "Evangelism is part of the Christian faith. It might be intrusive and it might step on the toes of some folks who don't think

33 Dougherty, "The Methodist Deaconess," 102.

34 Meyer, *Deaconesses*, 71.

35 Ronald J. Sider, Philip N. Olson, and Heidi Rolland Unruh, *Churches That Make a Difference: Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 64.

36 Robert Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 242.

it's right, but it's there and we have to recognize that it's there."[37] Certainly the deaconesses did, and for them, attending to evangelism and humanitarianism was a seamless venture.

4. Move Out beyond the Church Walls

> One great advantage of systematic woman's work, is that it can undertake pieces of work which are outside the ordinary sweep of the Church's activity. There are important classes of the community, which, by the hard demands of modern society, are practically excluded from anything like regular attendance at the House of God. Such are the police, the railway men, and the firemen. If the demands of the modern social system are to be met, such men must surrender much of the happy freedom of the Sabbath holiday. In such circumstances, how is their religious life and sympathy to be maintained?[38]

How indeed? Enter the deaconess who recognized the conundrum and managed it by offering a simple religious service so that these public servants had the opportunity to worship on a regular basis. As the deaconess described it, we "shall go to them, not wait for them to come; it shall suit the convenience of *their* work; not demand that it shall bend to ours; it shall provide for them religious services and influences which shall fit into the corners and crannies of *their* lives."[39]

For that reason, for firefighters who had to "man" the station to be ready in case of a fire, the deaconesses came to the station and held services there for them.

Here are other examples, initiated and staffed by deaconesses, that provided religious encounters outside the church walls and at times and places convenient to those being reached:

For female factory workers in Liverpool, a deaconess opened a dining room in the basement of the Liverpool Mission Hall, where on their

37 Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith*, 241–42.

38 *Highways and Hedges: The Children's Advocate* 129 (September 1898): 212.

39 *Highways and Hedges: The Children's Advocate* 129 (September 1898): 212.

lunch break they could eat and rest inside rather than out in the elements and make tea with the hot water provided. The deaconess joined them on occasion to sing with them and talk about Jesus.[40]

For ballerinas performing at the local theater, a deaconess arranged permission to meet with them in their dressing area, where she hosted a nice tea. After tea, she led them in singing hymns followed by a short talk. Being behind the scenes where the ballerinas spend so much of their time gave the deaconess a better understanding of their life and work.[41]

For children in Rotherhithe, one of the poorest areas in London, a deaconess was concerned about the children, so she launched "activities for them, including 'play' hours and guilds for both boys and girls where they could use books and games and see lantern shows." She also served more than 2,500 breakfasts to school-aged children who would otherwise go without breakfast to school.[42]

For young women—fifteen years of age and older—who labored in Nottingham warehouses and factories, the deaconess organized a weekly evening gathering intended simply to bring joy and light into lives filled during the workday with "long, grey, monotonous drudgery." She cleared the schoolroom of desks and chairs and filled it with lights, table games, music, and singing and sewing. She noticed that some of the girls looked pale from their factory work, so she started a Rambling Club and took them on countryside hikes every other week: "One gets to know and understand them better, for it gives the opportunity of a chat about their homes and factory life. . . . We are hoping this year to take a few excursions by train, and even hope for a glimpse of the sea, many of them not having yet seen it."[43]

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40 "Some Wesley Deaconesses and Their Work," *Flying Leaves* 98 (May 1910): 77.

41 "A Letter from Leeds," *Flying Leaves* 70 (November 1907): 154.

42 Dorothy E. Graham, *Saved to Serve: The Story of the Wesley Deaconess Order, 1890–1978* (Werrington, UK: Methodist Publishing House, 2002), 37.

43 Lena Harbord, "Girls' Clubs," *Highways and Hedges: The Children's Advocate* 121 (January 1898): 19–20.

For people waiting in line to apply for relief aid, as I mentioned earlier, Sister Elise Searle slipped out of the Board of Guardians' meeting to lead the applicants in hymns like "Jesu, lover of my soul" or "Safe in the arms of Jesus": "Between the hymns I have a little homely talk with them, about the Jesus to whom we have been singing, and it is delightful to see some of the sin-hardened faces relax, and a new light dawn in the dim eyes, as we speak and sing of the love of our Savior."[44]

For construction workers far from home while building a London hospital, a deaconess held a dinner-hour service: "For nearly two years, they have held a simple meeting—talking to the men, singing to them, praying with them."[45]

For young women working in a large woolen mill in Bradford, the deaconess came at dinner time with hymn sheets to hold a brief service. Some sixty to seventy girls sat on improvised seats to sing, hear a short talk, and pray until the bell rang. Then, "the machinery starts; the girls take their places at the looms, and all is clatter and noise."[46]

For travelers in a busy railway station, "from seven each morning till late in the evening, she [a deaconess] is here to lead the blind, to help the lame, to advise the wandering, to comfort the sick, to protect girls and women, and to speak, as opportunity offers, a word for Jesus."[47]

Today these outreach ministries might be labeled "fresh expressions." Since the 2004 Mission Shaped Church report from a working group of the Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Council, a growing movement of practitioners and pioneers have formed Fresh Expressions of Church in the United Kingdom, across Europe, and in North America. These ministries revolve around the belief "that God is already at work in the world. Fresh Expressions reimagine how the

44 Elise Searle, "A Unique Congregation," *Highways and Hedges: The Children's Advocate* 91 (July 1895): 136.

45 "A Dinner-Hour Service," *Highways and Hedges: The Children's Advocate* 131 (November 1898): 260.

46 "The White-Striped Veil," *Flying Leaves* 54 (May 1906): 71.

47 "The Mission Field at Home and Abroad: Notanda," *Highways and Hedges: The Children's Advocate* 118 (October 1897): 232.

Body of Christ can live and work in diverse and changing contexts."[48] This was what deaconesses engaged in more than a century earlier. Deaconesses were acute observers of those who were not currently making it to church for whatever reason, and in response, they moved beyond the church walls to set up sacred places for people to worship in a courthouse waiting room, a fire station, or a railway station. At the same time, however, not so fresh were the services put on by the deaconesses because they were revivalism repeated ad nauseam, relying solely on gospel hymns followed by an evangelistic talk. Nonetheless, they were there among the poor and working class, making visible the church beyond its walls.

5. Share Knowledge and Experience across a Global Network

The badge of the Wesley Deaconess Order encapsulates this final core element, the generous and free sharing of knowledge and experience, what today we might call *intellectual property*. On the reverse side of the badge were three words—"For Jesus's sake"; this was the motto of Lucy Rider Meyer's Chicago Training School. In these words, the American Methodist deaconess movement was represented on the badge. Also, in the dove, the deaconess work at Kaiserswerth near Düsseldorf, Germany, was represented on the badge.[49] Three different deaconess communities, three different nations, two different languages, two different ecclesial traditions, and all on one small badge. Truly, the quintessential representation of sharing knowledge and experience across a global network.

In 1836, a quiet revival of the ancient female diaconate of the early church began when Pastor Theodore Fleidner opened Kaiserswerth, a deaconess Motherhouse with a wide-ranging outreach to meet the community's needs. Kaiserswerth became the model and inspiration for

48 Fresh Expressions, "What Is a Fresh Expression?," September 10, 2018, http://freshexpressions.org.uk/about/what-is-a-fresh-expression/.

49 "True," *Flying Leaves* 33 (July–August 1904): 102.

many around the world. Florence Nightingale came to Kaiserswerth in 1850 to learn nursing. Many American Methodist deaconess proponents, including Bishop Matthew Simpson, Jane Bancroft Robinson, Bishop James Thoburn, and Lucy Meyer Rider, spent time at Kaiserswerth. Even more enamored with Kaiserswerth was Thomas Bowman Stephenson, who emulated it in myriad ways as he set up the Wesley Deaconess Order.

The influence and sharing of knowledge and experience crisscrossed the continents in an easy and generous exchange without any concern for plagiarism or extended footnotes to cite sources. This was not an issue; any idea, writing, or document was freely exchanged. Here are some examples:

- The service for the recognition of deaconesses used by the Wesley Deaconess Order was taken, with some modifications, from that used at Kaiserswerth.[50]
- *Flying Leaves*, the title of the Wesley Deaconess Order monthly journal, was the English translation of the Kaiserswerth journal, *Fliegende Blätter*.[51]
- British and American Methodist deaconesses followed the daily Bible reading plan set up by Kaiserswerth. That meant that in 1906 "twelve hundred Deaconesses at Kaiserswerth, the Methodist Episcopal Deaconesses of America, and the Wesley Deaconess Order, with many Associates and friends,

50 "A Recognition Service," *Highways and Hedges: The Children's Advocate, The Organ of the Children's Home* 57 (September 1892): 178.

51 Bradfield, *The Life*, 407. In turn, Theodore Fleidner, founder of Kaiserswerth, copied the title from Emmanuel Wichern of Rauhe Haus, who, along with his mother, "gave to the world the first example of the 'Family System' in its redemptive power. The leaves flew far and wide, and, lodging here and there and yonder, gave this germinant thought to other minds, and, in a word, revolutionized the world's ideas as to the method of training the children of want and woe. If our modest 'Leaves' can fly as far and far, and can do for our Deaconess work what its German cousin has done for salvation work amongst the children, it will have justified and adorned its title." "Why the Title, *Flying Leaves*?," *Flying Leaves* 3 (January 1902): 5.

are all united in such a spirit of faith and prayer and meditation as will be produced when we daily tread together the same sacred path of Bible Reading."[52]

- Deaconess periodicals freely published articles from each other without concern for copyright or plagiarism. Stephenson issued this statement in acknowledgment of this free exchange: "We are glad that Mrs. Meyer feels free to reproduce in its pages, occasional paragraphs from *Highways and Hedges*; and we are still more glad to know that we are welcome to use anything from *The Message* which may be useful and opportune for our purpose."[53]

Deaconesses recognized that "we're all in this deaconess thing together so let's do all we can to make each other better." Feel free to use our consecration service and adapt it for your context. Feel free to use whatever articles we've written that you think might help secure support and enthusiasm for the movement. Feel free to come stay in our deaconess home when you're in town. And all of this sharing was before the telephone, email, internet, cell phone, Twitter, and Instagram. They communicated between continents regularly and openly so that the work of God through deaconesses everywhere would be strengthened and encouraged. Again, imagine such a spirit of sharing knowledge and experience characterizing the global network of Methodism.

These, then, are five core elements we garner from the Methodist deaconess movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

Unite knowledge and vital piety
Live simply, even communally
Unify evangelism and humanitarianism
Move out beyond the church walls

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52 "Our Bible Reading Table for 1906," *Flying Leaves* 50 (January 1906): 14.

53 "Our American Sisters," *Highways and Hedges: The Children's Advocate, The Organ of the Children's Home* 60 (December 1892): 234.

Share knowledge and experience across a global network

These elements supply a much-needed blueprint toward a revival in global Methodism today.

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