

## **'By love and by labour' by Rachel Tombs on 13 October 2019 at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand.**

Today will be a little bit different. I have tried to distil my dissertation into a short reflection, it was tricky to do.

A deaconess is a woman who is called, trained and ordained to work in church ministry. In the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa NZ between 1901-1974, 175 deaconesses served at home and overseas. They took leadership roles across Christian education, Māori mission, the community life of a parish and organisations like PSSA and YWCA. And to make sure everyone is on the same page, they are kind of like Presbyterian nuns, not exactly but a lot of similarities.

Sister Gladys is a famous name in Knox Church. Serving in this congregation from 1952-1966 when she 'retired' but only notionally and she continued to live out her ministry here for 30 years until she passed away. She was in good company too, with fifty-eight deaconesses having worked in Dunedin in their service. Through interviews I enjoyed stories about Sister Gladys, as well as Sister Maisie Queale, Sister Catherine Little, Sister Marion Campbell, Sister Dorothy Harvey and Sister Anna Kirkwood.

Within our church history deaconesses have been identified as 'a silent service'. One interpretation of this silence is related to the expectation for good church ladies to work hard without a making fuss, which they did. In Christian narratives quiet obedience is a trait commonly assigned to women.

Another interpretation of the title silent service is related to deaconesses being excluded from decision making processes in the church, having no say. Women were not permitted to be elders in the church until 1954, so for most of the deaconess movement they were not able to vote or contribute in general assembly. Some deaconesses weren't even allowed in their parish session meetings, given a chair to sit outside.

Thirdly the silent service could be interpreted as the relative lack of the deaconess story in our existing written Presbyterian history. In New Zealand, Church historians have often overlooked women's stories and feminist historians have tended to underplay the role of the church in women's history.

The purpose of my research was to put the voices of deaconesses to the front of the narrative in order to challenge this 'silent' characterization. I wanted to show that by accepting a call to a life of service, deaconesses were not resigned to being exploited and

underappreciated servants. Their vocation was to serve God and the church, but they still exercised authority and leadership in a public way.

The deaconess story has implications beyond the church. It is a story that matters much more widely than the institution alone.

There is a story about women attaining higher education and the persistent unevenness of provision in this area. Deaconesses were women in higher education, their course focused on Theology and social service work. Deaconesses can be linked to an increase in women receiving Bachelors of Divinity, with Sister Nora Calvert, a New Zealand first. The experience of ministry students was quite different to deaconess college students. Deaconesses were taught by volunteers, ministry students by prestigious professors. Eventually deaconesses were totally integrated into the men's classes. However, despite receiving the same education, men left their training with two distinct privileges, the capacity to administer the sacraments, and a much higher pay rate. Their student residential life was different too. I'm sure you can guess who was expected to do household chores and who was provided for by maids.

There is a story about care as paid work, why it matters and how it has changed over time. Deaconesses brought the 'humanity to care', and they were embodiments of 'hands on social care'. Unfortunately this was a skill which was expected of them, rather than adequately acknowledged or respected.

For deaconesses care was not limited to their workplace. The lines between their work and home life were blurred they were expected to care all of the time. Care became a part of their identity and the work required, particularly in maintaining social relationships, was rendered inviable. In the 1960s, 'social work' emerged as a secular profession, community care was increasingly contracted out and the church was limited in responding to social need. Deaconesses were doing the work of looking after people, when ministers had too much on their plates and government programmes were not personal.

There is a story about women's liberation. They were pioneers. Women who were called to work for the church. Very few of them ever chose the conventional domestic path of marriage and children. Instead they remained independent and autonomous. Progress was not linear and the gains were not always balanced. While it was an opportunity for women to take leadership in their community, it was not equally open to everyone. Almost all of the deaconesses were Pākehā women, who grew up in Christian homes and had the benefits of a good secondary education. The dissertation is primarily focused on gender and my conclusions argue that deaconesses occupied an uncertain place as both

a part of the patriarchal culture of the church and a challenge to it. They were in-between new and old understandings of gender.

When I read Psalm 66 I felt a similar pull in two directions. Verses 1-9 are praising and celebrating. Then at verse 10 the mood changes. There is a recognition that not everything has been easy. That there have been difficulties along the way.

I enjoyed thinking about the deaconesses speaking the words to psalm 66. These were women who truly loved God and were so motivated to do the work of God. Mission was about responding to need in practical and spiritual ways. Women became deaconesses as they felt called to share the transformative power of their God. I can imagine them saying the phrases at the opening of the psalm and truly meaning it.

But they were tested. Some of those tests I've already alluded to. In 1974 it was a series of those challenges colliding which led to the closure of the deaconess movement.

In Luke Jesus is the carer for 10 people who are sick. This reading provided another illustration for me to how the deaconesses lived in the light of Jesus. Regardless of who the person was or where they had come from, they could provide healing, or provide care.

Only one of those healed returns to thank Jesus and he says 'were there not ten cleansed, where are the nine?'

We must give acknowledgements to those who care for us. We must return to them and let them know how we appreciate it. Say thank you for those who care for you, even when they do it in love, it is still work done.

Caring for each other is something God has called us to do. It connects us to one another. And consistently some people, especially women, carry this burden more than others. During their time it was the deaconesses that took on the majority of this work in the church. For that we have a lot to be thankful for.

Deaconesses worked hard for most of their lives, and often into retirement. Social service work was tiring, it involved both emotional and physical labour. Rarely did their living conditions, status and pay reflect the skill and diligence required to continually engage in such work. At the centre of their work was care. The lack of recognition and compensation for care work is inextricably linked to long held assumptions that position care as the responsibility of women. The gendered limitations of their labour does not equate to a simple dismissal of deaconess as subordinates in a patriarchal church. They were specially trained church workers, who operated largely independently within diverse social contexts. The Deaconess Movement had its own newsletter, association,

and traditions. To understand the labour of deaconesses is to recognise that; their role reflected a gendered stereotype of women as domestic nurturers and simultaneously allowed them to autonomy and influence as community leaders.

Love was the underlying motivator for deaconesses. Deaconesses were called to do social work as a practical means of expressing their faith. Deaconesses were distinct from other social workers as their spirituality interwove in everything they did. City Mission was founded on the principles of the gospel, deaconesses extended and enlivened the gospel message explicitly or, as was increasingly the case, implicitly. It was because of this love grounded in their faith that the perimeters between work and life dissolved for deaconesses. Being a deaconess was more than a job, for many it was an identity. They were totally immersed in their work which seeped into their social lives and their leisure time. This had significant drawbacks in heightening expectations for uncompensated work, but it was also a strength. Their commitment to the role allowed deaconesses to bring a deeply personal touch to church mission and welfare provision.

So in summary, when I looked closely at the lives of deaconesses it did not seem to me to be about women who were simply obedient. The deaconess motto 'by love serve' is certainly true, but it also required an amendment to acknowledge in serving they were working: By love and by labour.

Let us pray. God, May we seek to follow their example, looking for ways to serve you in love without shying from hard work grounded in social relationships. Taking care of those who are sick, elderly, young, marginalized. As a community may all be cared for. And may we recognize those who provide such care. Amen.

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