

“Give Her of the Fruit of Her Hands”:

An Ancient Order and Abiding House for the Deaconesses

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“Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates” Proverbs 31: 31 (New King James Version). This concluding verse of a long hymn of praise of a capable woman found in Proverbs 31:10-31 portrays a hardworking, business-savvy, capable woman who runs an estate, while exemplifying the ideal household virtues of being a noble wife and a mother. I want to steer clear of the oft-raised question over this passage whether women have it all. The focus of my article is confined to how church women organize themselves as communities in order to fulfill their high calling of making this world a better home for everyone born. The closing verse in the Proverbs, with its imperative and blessing, is timeless for individual women as well missional and ecclesial communities of women. The corporate and communal expressions of resilient faith of the latter call for a long overdue praise-response from the Church: Give them the fruits of their hands. Let their works praise them in the business centers of the community.

As communities of lay women organized for mission, the organization of the United Methodist Women and the deaconess movement embody shared and storied journeys of faith and overlapping struggles. In their organized efforts at being women engaged in mission, their recorded histories show journeys more often undertaken on jagged and zigzag roads than smooth and even paths. Often in their co-journeying, the two groups were *making* their respective roads by *walking* them. This interconnected and interlinked journeying was made possible by their being committed to their core mission and core identity as lay women organized for mission.

In this paper, I seek to explore selected stages in the storied journeys of faith, along these interconnected and interlinked roads, and overlapping struggles in the checkered history of mergers and structural changes in the denomination. Through specific examples from the Deaconess movement and those of United Methodist Women and its parent bodies, I aim to explore how these lay women negotiated the question of “public” and “private spheres,” gradually shattered the myth of this dichotomy, and made inroads into the public square by their practices of Christianity which addressed systems of injustice.

While undergoing structural changes themselves, as distinct women’s groups, they had to fight against patriarchy often within the Church in their co-journeys, in order to fulfil their core mission, and commitment, and live out their missional identity and charge.

With further selected examples of women who have embodied overlapping ministries, both as deaconesses and members of United Methodist Women or its parent organizations, I will explore how these two categories of lay women’s organizations mutually enriched each other, co-constructed themselves, while retaining their respective and distinct core commitments.

Isabella Thoburn, one of the first female missionaries sent by the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, is an exemplar of these two roles: a Methodist woman and a deaconess. It is an earlier instance of crossing over categories of lay sisterhoods to create a vocational *hybridity* in order to maximize one’s role in ministry.¹ From then on, such a combination

¹ I have used the term *hybridity* in this article as a mixture of two or more categories of vocations here. I have not used it in the post-colonial sense of hybridity of identities put forth by post-colonial theorists.

has not been new to either of the organizations, namely the predecessor organizations of the United Methodist Women and the deaconess movement.

The role of United Methodist Women in social justice issues constitutes a key narrative, especially in addressing the issue of racial justice. In fact, the Charter for Racial Justice Policy is a gift to the Church by the United Methodist Women. The continued struggle of the United Methodist Women to work at intersectional feminism from a multiple-situatedness is a frontier experience and education, and a rich praxis for theological reflection, yet to be fully explored.

Started as mission from the margins, women's work *for* women and children, the two women's organizations are at the cross-roads of receiving and incorporating insights from the margins here and around the world in this third millennium: An age of the laity. As lay women's organizations, the United Methodist Women and the deaconess movement are yet to fully tap into the rich growth of World Christianity. Dana Robert lifts up the growing reality of the world church that its face is female, and the worldwide growth of Christianity today is a "woman's movement" with women taking a "leading part in what is probably the greatest expansion of Christianity since the conversion of Europe."²

In their respective struggles within the Church for autonomy such as lay women's admittance to the General Conference and fighting for clergy women's rights, the collective identities of the United Methodist Women and the deaconess movement have evolved from symbiotic relationships to interdependent entities in a tactic inclusion of men within the Church for their respective membership. While United Methodist ministers, male and female, in local churches are members of the local United Methodist Women, lay male missionaries are consecrated as members of the Deaconess and Lay Missioner movement.³ Though this article refers to United Methodist Women as a lay women's organization, it recognizes the ordained male and female clergy who are its members. In the same fashion, though the article refers to deaconess as a lay women's movement, it acknowledges the inclusion of the category of male home missionaries,⁴ and its updated version, home missionaries. Both these predominantly lay women's movements have a firm undergirding of their biblical and theological roots, while the deaconess/lay missioner "office," strives to reclaim the ancient *order* of deaconess within the Church. It is time to continue a dialogic conversation within the Church about reclaiming of the order of deaconesses/home missionaries as persons consecrated for life, given their persistence and survival from the Apostolic times, and their co-journeying with the United Methodist Women for more than 125 years.

The Official Recognition by the General Conference 1888

The official recognition of the office of deaconess came in the 1888 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church as the result of two petitions: one, from the Rock River Conference, and

² Dana Robert, *Joy to the World!: Mission in the Age of Global Christianity* (New York: Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 2010), 45.

³ Betty J. Letzig, former Executive Secretary for Deaconess Program Office and Mission Personnel Services, discusses in her unpublished paper on 4-7-1994 that in the 1950s, the Woman's Division of Christian Service began to commission and assign lay men and later, couples as Home Missionaries in order to fill the need for strong male role models for the boys and youth in the institutions. In 1988, the General Board of Global Ministries discontinued this category of persons. Missionaries were commissioned and assigned either for the National or World Divisions. Later the category of "lay missionaries" was introduced for lay men. Also, see an extensive study of the Home Missionaries and their relationship to the deaconesses, and their structural placements in Barbara E. Campbell's *The Deaconess Movement 1964-1989: A Report* (New York: Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries, 1990). See page 12 where Campbell mentions that the new category "Lay Missioners" appears in the 1990 *Prayer Calendar*.

⁴ When the United Brethren merged with the Methodist Church in 1968, the former had Home Missionaries, both lay and ordained, men and women. Now the category of Home Missioners includes only lay men.

another from the Bengal Conference in India. The latter came from Bishop James Thoburn, missionary to India, with an expressed need for deaconesses to be given authority to administer sacraments especially in the “zenanas,” secluded areas where only women could engage in mission to women. The General Conference approved the establishment of a deaconess office with no authority to administer sacraments. The relationship between female missionary societies and the beginnings of deaconess movement within Methodism precedes this official recognition which I will discuss later in this paper.

While approving the category of deaconesses, the 1888 General Conference refused to seat elected female lay delegates. Another contradiction is the approval of the fulltime lay vocation for women as deaconesses, while warding off ordination of women with rights to administer sacraments. In the midst of these contradictions, women had to live out their vocations within the church. The 1880 ME General Conference not only voted against the ordination of women but also decided to revoke all the local preachers’ licenses granted to women since 1869.⁵ The key vocational outlets for women left in this period were mostly being missionaries, deaconesses and Bible Women. The last category was more predominant outside the U.S. Being pastors’ wives as a calling is not within the focus of this paper.

Biblical and Ancient Order

As for the deaconesses, their vocation is a reclamation of an order from the apostolic times. A prayer used in the consecration of the deaconesses, taken from *the Apostolic Constitution* uses the term “office of the Deaconesses,” and the same prayer invokes the God who “didst ordain women to be keepers” of God’s holy gates.

“O Eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the creator of man and of woman, who didst replenish with thy Spirit Miriam and Deborah and Hannah and Huldah; and who didst not disdain that thy only begotten Son should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony and in the temple didst ordain women to be keepers of thy holy gates—do thou now also look down upon these thy servants who are to be set apart to the Office of Deaconesses and grant them the Holy Spirit that they may worthily discharge the work which is committed to them to thy glory to the praise of thy Christ, with whom glory and adoration be to thee and to the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.”⁶

While the Apostolic Constitution retains the language of ordination of deaconess, Methodist Episcopal Church used the word “consecration.” God ordaining women in biblical times and the Church not being willing to embrace the word at this point in history is more than a matter of

⁵ General Conference *Journal*, (25 May 1880), 316. *The Christian Advocate* 55/24 (June 10, 1880): 377.

⁶ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*. 1896. Ed. Bishop Andrews. NY: Eaton & Mains. Cincinnati: Curts & Jennings. Appendix. 55. Pages 363-367. This prayer on page 365 is based on “The Form of Prayer for the Ordination of a Deaconess” given below which is found in the Constitution of Bartholomew in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, Book viii. Section 3..xx. “O Eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and of woman, who replenished with the Spirit, Miriam and Deborah, and Anna, and Huldah, who did not disdain that Your only begotten Son should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony and in the temple, ordained women to be keepers of Your holy gates.do Thou now also look down upon this Your servant, who is to be ordained to the office of a deaconess, grant her Your Holy Spirit, and “cleanse her from all the filthiness of flesh and spirit” 2 Corinthians 7: 1 that she may worthily discharge the work which is committed to her to Your glory, and to the praise of your Christ, with whom glory and adoration be to you and the Holy Spirit forever. Amen”

semantics. It is a struggle to create space within language for the emerging experiences and correlated rights of women's leadership in the church. Deaconess Isabelle Horton resonates with the idea of deaconess being an order when she points out that the deaconesses were not ordained by the church, and "they are ordered by God, and that makes them an order."⁷

Interestingly enough, an account of the approval of the vocation of the deaconess in 1988 General Conference, as recorded in the *General Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1792-1896* uses the language of "order." "The Committee on Missions to whom were referred various papers relating to the *order* of deaconesses, reported in favor of establishing such an *order* in the Church, and the report was adopted and the necessary paragraphs relating to the deaconesses order to be inserted in the *Discipline*. This class of workers had been employed by our missionaries in Germany with great successes and a successful beginning has been recently made in the same direction in this country"⁸ (emphases mine).

The period covering 1880s and 1890s is marked predominantly by debates and discussions around deaconesses in the Methodist Episcopal Church (both MEC and MEC South). The language used to describe the vocation of the deaconess was around being "set apart" or "consecrated," even though some spoke of deaconesses as ordained.⁹ Since women nurtured in Victorian ideals were yet making new space in the use of language for women's mission work, they spoke about motherhood, home, and family. These women "carried family symbols into the world, making the world their home all of humanity their family," and even "claimed the right to do some global housecleaning."¹⁰ The option available to describe the new category called deaconess as an order was to go "back into the future" to the ancient church and the Roman Catholic Church. Some Protestant denominations did it.¹¹

With reference to offices such as class leaders, stewards, and Sunday School Superintendents at the local church level, the challenge of expansive language was addressed by the 1880 General Conference. Its decision removed the exclusive use of pronouns such as "he, his, and him" for such offices.¹² While the question of lay women and gender was addressed in this General Conference, it took almost a century to officially include inclusive language for God. For a rigorous discussion of gender and language, in general, the Church had to wait till the 1970s. Inclusive language for God and expansive language for humanity is still an incomplete task. For the expansive language needed for the category of the workers deaconesses and home missionaries, it demands a will to go back into the future.

An attendant issue is a structural issue. That is, where to house the deaconesses or place the deaconesses in the structural chart of the denomination, if they become an "order." The beginning point of this first professional lay women's organization was riddled with the issue of whether to house them in the Church or within the Woman's Home Missionary Society. Later in this paper, I will

⁷ *Deaconess Advocate* (January 1898), 6.

⁸ *General Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1792-1896*, Prepared by Rev. Lewis Curtis (Eaton & Mains: New York, 1900), 211.

⁹ Susan Hill Lindley, *You Have Stept Out of Your Place: A History of Women and Religion in America* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 133. See also Rosemary Skinner Keller's "Lay Women in the Protestant Tradition" in *Women and Religion in America*, vol. 1, eds. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982): 277-281.

¹⁰ Joanne Carlson Brown, "Protestant Women and Social Reform" in *IN Our Own Voices: Four Centuries of American Women's Religious Writings*, eds. (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 256.

¹¹ See "Cannons on the Order of Deaconesses Church of England July 1964" in *The Deaconess: A Service of Women in the World*, World Council of Churches, Studies, no. 4 (Geneva: WCC, 1966), 78-79.

¹² *The Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1880*. Appendix 22. Pages 409-10.

discuss this, in relation to the current situation. The issue of naming the category of the lay professional women and that of placing them within a denominational structure (board or agency) are not new.

Overlapping & Intercultural Origins of Deaconess Movement

As for the origin of the Methodist deaconesses, Frances J. Baker, in her *The Story of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1869-1895*, points out that the presence of deaconesses/ Bible Women goes way back to 1871. Dana Robert states that the use of local (native) deaconesses on the mission field by the Methodist women missionaries goes back to 1871. Referring to the employment of deaconesses by the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society in Foochow, China, Robert says, "Among Methodists in Foochow, the indigenous 'Bible Women' was ...considered a revival of the ancient order of deaconess."¹³ The impact of these Bible Women or deaconesses in preaching the gospel in the Foochow Conference was so great that in summing up their ministry, Baker says, "While these women were not ordained to preach the gospel, they seem to have been foreordained to do it."¹⁴

The narratives of the United Methodist Women's predecessor organizations especially, the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society and the Woman's Home Missionary Society in the Methodist Episcopal Church lift up collective and combined efforts regarding the origins of deaconess movement as well as housing it within the lay women's organization instead of placing it in the general church. The *Minutes* of the Board meeting of the Woman's Home Missionary Society 1911 records the presence of the representative of the Methodist Deaconess Association, and the clarification offered by Miss Robertson, the General Field Secretary of the Association, in addressing a prevalent misperception that the "deaconess work of American Methodism arose independently of the Woman's Home Missionary Society, and that its origin and development are not due to many individuals, but to one only, and consequently that one individual is entitled to direct and shape the deaconess work of the Church." In fact, this was on the first item for consideration on the agenda. The *Minutes* goes on to say that Miss Robertson stated that the "Deaconess Association had practically been in the field long before the date 1888 when the work of the Woman's Missionary Society Deaconess was started, and that so many minds had been at work on this great subject that no one person had the right to claim its origin and development." She claimed that the work of the Association was directed by Local Board, and they under other Boards, and so on. Miss Robertson gave the name of the present officers of the Association and claimed that such an assertion was unjust to a large body of loyal workers.¹⁵ Jane Bancroft was the superintendent of the Deaconess Department at this time. Priscilla Pope-Levison has dealt with this unjust assertion of one leader as the originator and shaper of the deaconess movement versus a band of loyal workers on the ground who helped start the movement in her article, "A 'Thirty Year War and More': Exposing Complexities in the Methodist Deaconess Movement." Pope-Levison rightly points out that the origins of the Methodist deaconess movement cannot be reduced to "one leader, one labor" in the figure of Lucy Rider Meyer, since Methodist lay women's collective and organizational efforts through the Woman's Home Missionary Society for the birthing and shaping of this movement cannot be ignored in writing the deaconess narrative. Pope-Levison singles out an instance of differing interpretations of the 1888 General Conference decision housing the deaconess office. Lucy Rider Meyer interpreted that

¹³ Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 157.

¹⁴ Frances J. Baker, *The Story of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1869-1895*, (Cincinnati: Cranston & Curtis, 1896), 305.

¹⁵ *Minutes*, WHMS 1910-1913, vol. 11, (April 10, 1912), 154-155. Drew Archives.

it should be in the general church, according to “the Church Plan,” whereas Jane Bancroft Robinson, the new head of the Deaconess Bureau of the Woman’s Home Missionary Society, countered the argument saying that the deaconess movement was started by the Woman’s Home Missionary Society, and that was where it belonged.¹⁶

Housing Question

The “structural question” is often a corollary to the “lay-women question” in the church. The housing question relates to where a lay women’s organization should be lodged in the denominational structural chart. Should it be an autonomous agency or be part of the male-dominated general mission board of the Church? Housing the work of the deaconesses within the general church (its mission board), or in one of the United Methodist Women’s autonomous predecessor organizations has sometimes used up a great deal of energy and discussion. Suffice it to say that the history of the predecessor organizations of the UMW shows the collective and intercultural origin of the deaconess movement, even though some of the historians have not fully grasped and recorded the collective roots of female organizations. The first steps to start the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church (WFMS) in 1869 and the “first steps to inaugurate deaconess work under the Woman’s Home Missionary Society” (WHMS) took place in Tremont Street Church, Boston.¹⁷ In both the cases, the lay women’s work had started before these official dates of recognition by the Church. WHMS reported directly to the General Conference. The Deaconess work found a house in the WHMS, and the WHMS found a means to perfect and absorb its own work relating to its Bureau of Local Work.¹⁸ An earlier instance of mutuality in mission!

As for the interdependent membership growth of the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the deaconess movement, Jane Bancroft Robinson, the Secretary of the Bureau for Deaconess Work, even showed documented evidence to prove that the WHMS flourished where they had deaconess work. She reported saying, “for many years, it was said that the Woman’s Home Missionary Society would not be able to maintain the work with which it began, and also have the care of the Deaconess Work, but statistics clearly prove that the Society has made the most marked advances in those Conferences in which it has maintained its Deaconess Homes, and the least of all the advances Conferences in which there are Deaconess Homes **not** associated with the Society¹⁹”(emphasis mine). The WHMS was willing to spend half of its work on the deaconess ministries and the expenses of the latter were met locally. Such was the local expression of volunteers organized for mission in its connectional link to the national membership organization.

Renegotiated Private and Public Spheres

The predecessor organizations of United Methodist Women negotiated autonomy and made space and created a climate for lay female leadership in the church for the sake of meeting the growing

¹⁶ Priscilla Pope-Levison “A ‘Thirty Year War and More’: Exposing Complexities in the Methodist Deaconess Movement” *Methodist History*, 47.2 (January 2009), 106.

¹⁷ Ruth Esther Meeker in *Six Decades of Service 1880-1940: A History of the Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Continuing Corporation of The Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1969), 91.

¹⁸ Meeker refers to the WHMS perfecting and absorbing the endeavors of the Bureau of Local Work. See *Six Decades of Service*, p. 91.

¹⁹ See Jane Bancroft Robinson’s “Report of the Bureau for Deaconess Work” in the *Annual Report of the General Board of Managers of the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Year 1902-1903*, (Cincinnati: Western Methodist Book Concerns Press, 1903), 153.

needs of women and children. The private sphere of women underwent a redefinition in their organized mission work with women and children. The recruitment of single female missionaries in 1869 by the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the MEC and later by the Woman's Home Missionary Society was something unprecedented in the denomination. So was their sheer number.

The mission strategy of the Societies involved a language based on the extension of the private sphere, *women's work for women*. It became a slogan. The women had already transcended what I would call female professional lay mystic that only male leadership could lead the Church. By answering the call of God within the Methodist Church, the deaconesses met a deep felt need in the church and communities. By raising a historic query about lay ministry, "...if God sent a St. Hilda to Methodism *what would we do with her?*," Lucy Rider Meyer had left the church with a prophetic question to think about and live with.²⁰ Methodist Deaconesses answered their call by becoming founders and administrators of hospitals, schools, colleges, community and neighborhood centers, and industrial homes and embodied witnesses to the cutting edge ministries of the day.

Lucy Rider Meyer described the deaconess' call in terms of home, the maternal, and the known. Meyer says, "The world wants mothering. Mother love has its part to do in winning the world for Christ as well as father-wisdom and guidance. The deaconess movement puts the mother into the church. It supplies the feminine element so greatly needed in the Protestant Church, and thus is rooted deep in the very heart of humanity's needs."²¹ The feminine element expressed itself as the organization continues to define itself and by the various undertakings of the practitioners: a nurse, social worker, parish worker, teacher, administrator etc., The deaconesses made it to a "new public sphere" by expanding their private spheres.²²

The image of a deaconess working within women's "natural sphere" and the assurance that those who advocated for the "Protestant orders" of deaconesses do not advocate nunneries and independence from men were acceptable to the cultural expectations within Methodism, and less of a threat to patriarchal leadership in the church. As expressed by one of the writers for *Ladies Repository*, Susanna M.D. Fry, the work of the deaconesses was not "separate and independent of men," but in "conjunction with the ecclesiastical power." As "active orders," the deaconesses would work as in a "family circle where men and women are mutually dependent."²³ She goes on to spell out the specialized skills needed for the deaconesses saying, "We need not only need amateur charity ladies, but an organized force trained in those ministering functions which have their roots in woman's nature. Why may *we* not have trained women in our prisons, penitentiaries, asylums, poor houses, reformatories, and hospitals...?"²⁴

While leaders were assuring the public mind that the private sphere is well preserved by these lay workers, the deaconesses circumvented patriarchy, gained an official, professional status within the church, and used their specialized skills in establishing hospitals and training institutions that trained both deaconesses and missionaries. Often the church which reacts negatively to feminist stances may respond positively to "maternal feminism." The best of the interrelated identities of WFHM and the deaconess work morphed in one single personhood of Isabella Thoburn, one of the first two missionaries sent by the WFHM to India. She helped found the Isabella Thoburn College in India and

²⁰ Lucy Rider Meyer, *The Message and the Deaconess Advocate*, 11, no. 12 (December 1895): 8. *The Message and the Deaconess Advocate*, 11, no. 11 (November 1895): 3-4.

²¹ Isabelle Horton, *The Burden of the City* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1904), 145.

²² Catherine M. Prelinger and Rosemary Keller, "The Function of Female Bonding" in *Women in New Worlds*, vol. 2, eds. Rosemary Skinner Keller, Louise L. Queen, and Hilah F. Thomas (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1982), 336.

²³ Susanna M.D. Fry, "Ancient and Modern Deaconesses" *Ladies Repository* 32 (February 1872): 109-112. P. 111.

²⁴ Susanna M.D. Fry, "Ancient and Modern Deaconesses" *Ladies Repository* 33 (October 1872): 241-245. P. 245.

deaconess training schools in Cincinnati and Boston to educate women for service. The work of the deaconesses was rooted in community and lived experiences of women, children, and the marginalized. Praxis played a key role in their education and training. As seen earlier, she has harnessed vocational hybridity for the sake of a more effective and relevant ministry in the emerging context in her cross-cultural mission.

Deaconesses, Field Notes, and the Social Gospel

Accompanying activism has undergirded many deaconesses as key players in the Social Gospel movement from below, though these deaconesses have not been recognized as such by acclaimed theologians in the field.

The deaconesses are one of the first to document their work based on the quotidian on-the-ground realities of their lived urban experiences and ministries among the people whom they served. Under “Field Notes,” Isabelle E. Horton has captured the vitality of mission grounded in the daily experiences of the crowded city dwellers: God’s living people in living conditions interacting with each other. The *Deaconess Advocate* carried a section called “Field Notes” which gave a detailed account of the everyday life and ministry of the deaconesses. Horton’s *The Burden of the City* confronts the issue of addressing root cause of problems and advocates a bottom-up approach. In this book, under “Field Notes” with a sub title “Where Sun Never Shines,” Horton leads the readers to one particular frame in the living conditions of five children with a sick father lying on a bed with mattress green with mold.²⁵ Capturing the voice of the oldest girl who says, “Mother is out washing,” Horton fits the frame of this narrative into the larger frame of the systemic urban problem which charity alone cannot address. She summarizes the narrative with a call to address structures and systems saying, “The health commission, the landlord question, the pauperizing influence of alms-giving, faculty education, labor and wage problems---all are concerned in the condition of things in this one cellar.”²⁶

While all the deaconesses have not been geared towards this vision of intersecting urban issues and the corresponding impact on curricular reformulation, many shed pioneer light on grappling with urban mission. Susan Hill Lindley says that in the ensuing decades when the social gospel became a dominant force, lay women did not have male leaders’ access to ordained ministry and teaching in theological seminaries but the lay female workers set out to “gather data systematically and to ally themselves with urban reformers. Results of the women’s experiences in the form of new social methods and theories were incorporated in the deaconess training schools, just as sociology began to find a place in some male Protestant seminaries.”²⁷ Dougherty calls the deaconesses “significant agents of applied Christianity and early exponents of the social gospel “because of their being “analysts of society” and setting out to solving urban problems through politics, prevention, and establishing institutions.”²⁸ The deaconesses’ plodding work at field notes, gathering data systematically for their transformative missional engagement, and solving problems with an eye towards system change is a gift from the margins to the church.

Urban mission is more than ever a missional challenge now. It is estimated that currently more than fifty percent of the global population and almost fifty-eight percent of the world’s Christians live in

²⁵ Horton, *The Burden of the City*, 133-134.

²⁶ Ibid, 135.

²⁷ Susan Hill Lindley, *You Have Stept Out of Your Place: A History of Women and Religion in America* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996): 138, 144.

²⁸ Mary Agnes Dougherty, “The Social Gospel According to Phoebe” in *Women In New Worlds*, eds. Hilah Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1981), 208-215.

urbanized areas. It is also estimated that in 2050, between 75-80 percent of the world's population will live in urban settings. This includes the majority of Christians.²⁹

Using stories from the edges and looking at on-the-ground realities and utilizing them for transformative educational purposes has been part of the emancipatory and conscientizing role of constituency education of the United Methodist Women and their predecessor organizations. In her book, *Women and the Kingdom: Fifty years of Kingdom building by the Women of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South 1878-1928*, Mabel Katherine Howell enumerates how the Woman's Missionary Council prepared and provided a "manual on social service" as a guide to every auxiliary which was asked to "appoint a social service committee, whose duty it was to lead in study and investigation, keeping the entire auxiliary informed concerning local conditions." Howell goes on to say that issues such as "housing, the status of women, the liquor traffic, legalized vice, lynching, public schools, Negro homes, and public institutions for dependents and delinquents" were studied, and women "learned the meaning of social legislation" and endorsed or protested many bills in Congress and in their respective state legislatures. W.A. Newell, the Council Superintendent of Social Service, wrote in 1925, quoting a woman saying, "The Southern Methodist women lead all other Church groups in social insight and methods."³⁰ Seeds of transformative education were systematically and laboriously sown by the Woman's Missionary Council for an effective and relevant lay formation among the constituency.

Another noteworthy resource is *States Laws on Race and Color* by Pauli Murray. Commissioned by the Woman's Division of Christian Service, predecessor of UMW National Office, Pauli Murray, a young black lawyer, undertook the writing of this 800-page book. Thelma Stevens, then head of the section of Christian Social Relations, who was instrumental in envisioning such a work, says, "It was a first compilation of its kind ever prepared in the U.S."³¹ The resource had been initially intended to investigate whether the Woman's Division related mission institutions practiced segregation due to the law or to the customs of the respective states. The document, however, had an impact far beyond the original intention and expectation. The survey revealed that segregation was practiced even when no law warranted it. Based on the documentation, the Woman's Division adopted the first Charter of Racial Policies in 1952; the second Charter in 1962 broadened the scope of the racial justice commitment. In 1980, the Women's Division took a petition to the General Conference and the latter approved the Charter on Racial Justice Policies as the Charter of the United Methodist Church.³²

Transformation for lay formation found its educational expression through advocacy resources, Mission Education, Reading Program, National Seminars, and United Methodist Seminar Program on National and International Affairs. Through these educational avenues, a major shift in understanding has been set in motion. That is, mission as transmission of mere services to transformation of peoples' lives, mere individual salvation to flourishing of communities, and mere

²⁹ Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim, eds. *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ*, vol. 2. (Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International, 2010), 43.

³⁰ Mable Katharine Howell, *Women and the Kingdom: Fifty Years of Kingdom Building by the Women of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South 1878-1928* (Nashville, TN: Cokesbury Press, 1928), 231-232.

³¹ Thelma Stevens, *Legacy for the Future: The History of Christian Social Relations in the Women's Division of Christian Service, 1940-1968* (New York: Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church, 1978), 61.

³² Women's Division and the Woman's Division denote the same national office of the United Methodist and Methodist Women respectively. The change from Woman's Division to Women's Division came into effect in 1968 at the formation of the United Methodist Church.

depositing of information to bringing about transformation. All these above programs are still an integral part of the United Methodist Women.

As for the mission studies texts, they are a gift to the Church. On the 25th anniversary (1940-1965) preparation of the merger of the three different branches of Methodism, and the union of several organizations of women within these, the leaders of Methodist Women were given training in the self-understanding of their own heritage. In that event, a fitting self- description of the lay formation of Methodist Women was articulated. "The Schools of Missions and Christian Service of the Woman's Division have produced a missionary-educated, spiritually-nurtured, socially-conscious Methodist woman, equaled...by no other Christian church."³³

Intersectionality of race and gender

However, the concept of femininity and women sanctifying the private sphere should not be applied to all women. The mystic of femininity and private sphere is race-inflected. African American and poor immigrant women had toiled along with their men side by side, be it farms, fields, or crowded urban settings. The "heathen" within the United States often included blacks, mountaineers, rural people, and immigrants.³⁴ The role of intersections of race, class, gender and other differences was made more visible, as women struggled to live into sisterhoods by crossing boundaries that separated them, as the women's societies sought to bridge the gaps.

Working within the various communities, women leaders themselves realized the need of redefining universalizing sisterhood due to the changing landscape and cultural insights. Secular and religious voices challenged universal sisterhood. In *Sister Outside: Essays and Speeches*, Audre Lorde refers to the then existing "pretense to a homogeneity of expression covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist."³⁵

Vocational Hybridity

Deaconesses and missionaries are "ambassadors of good will and reconciliation throughout the world," as defined by the self-understanding of the Woman's Division on the event of the 25th anniversary of the union of the Methodist organizations in 1965."³⁶

Amongst these, the missionary deaconesses embodied vocational hybridity. That is, being missionaries as well as deaconesses. Isabella Thoburn, as mentioned earlier, combined more than one role. She was one of the first single female missionaries sent by the WFMS and the founder of the first women's college in Asia, Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow, India. A deaconess, she helped open the deaconess home in Cincinnati and a deaconess training school in Boston. She called up or privileged one vocational identity over the other, as the context demanded. Martha Drummer, trained in the New England Deaconess School, Boston, was one of the first black deaconesses sent out in 1906 as a missionary to Angola by the WFMS of the Methodist Episcopal Church.³⁷ She was a deaconess nurse. Anna Hall, another black deaconess, sent out as a missionary to Liberia, was, also, trained in Boston. Both these women, like Isabella Thoburn, did not

³³ Taken from "Our Heritage: Methodist Women": September 1963. P. 12. It is a historical presentation to which all conference presidents and treasurers were invited to formulate the 25th Anniversary Goals for their respective conferences. I thank Barbara Campbell for sharing the transcript with me.

³⁴ Mary E. Frederickson, "Shaping a New Society" in *Women and New Worlds*, vol. 1, Hilah Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1981), 349.

³⁵ Audre Lorde, *Sisterhood Outside: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 79.

³⁶ "Our Heritage: Methodist Women": 25th Anniversary Preparation. Page. 12. Document shared by Barbara Campbell.

³⁷ Timeline: American Women in the United Methodist Tradition in *Telling Their Stories: The History of Women in the Local Church: A Resource Packet*. The General Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church (Madison, NJ: The General Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church, 1999), 7.

confine themselves to one homogenized category of lay vocation. Before going out as missionaries, both Drummer and Hall had worked together from Anna Hall's home, engaging in city mission and supervising Thayer girls studying in Thayer Industrial Home in Atlanta, Georgia.³⁸

Today one of the regional missionaries in Asia, Emma Cantor, is a deaconess. The plurality-in-one continues. Several women have been both members and leaders in the United Methodist Women and its predecessor organizations as well as being deaconesses. Their taking on of hybridized vocational identity, in service of transformative mission, challenges notions of one dimensional categories of lay identity.

Survival in the Midst of Mergers, Restructures and Co-opting forces

In climbing the height by zig-zag roads of constant restructures, the journey of the predecessor organization and that of the Deaconess have not been easy. In their respective histories, both these lay organizations have known loss of autonomy and identity through restructures imposed on them. Both have tenaciously stuck to their core mission and adapted themselves. But certain losses were inevitable.

- Deaconesses and their training schools were specialized educational centers for specialized ministries, distinct from those traditional theological seminaries which trained ministers. They were based more on the model of "alternative models of schooling" available at that time that trained "nurses, teachers, salesmen, and secretaries..."³⁹
- The Chicago Training School for City, Home and Foreign Missions 1885 by Lucy Jane Rider Meyer. Primarily prepared deaconesses. But prepared a "whole range of workers: deaconesses, home and foreign missionaries, Sunday school teachers, specialists in work with children and young people, pastors' assistants, temperance workers, evangelists, pastors' wives, and experts in the new field of 'home economy.'" In changing times, the training school could not confine itself to training only Christian lay workers.⁴⁰ The demand for ministerial training and lack of funds to sustain the training school resulted in the merger with Garrett Biblical Institute that later became Garrett Evangelical Seminary.
- The New England Deaconess Home and Training School founded in Boston in 1889 established by the New England Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Its merger with the Boston University School in 1917 was due to the "demands" of a "high scholastic standard" and the "advantages accruing more than offset any embarrassment."⁴¹
- The Scarritt Bible and Training School 1892 Kansas City, MO. Belle Harris Bennett. Jesse L. Cuninggim, the head of the institution negotiated a move of this institution to Nashville in 1924. While retaining the lay training and specialized training for the laity, he made possible a special arrangement with Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN.
- Thayer Industrial Home in Atlanta, Georgia opened its door in 1924 to the training of black deaconesses. In 1935, at the request of Willis King, President of Gammon Theological Seminary, the Woman's Home Missionary Society helped shape the newly started Woman's Department of Gammon. This department provided training to female lay workers at the local

³⁸ Ruth Esther Meeker, *Six Decades of Service 1880-1940: A History of The Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Continuing Corporation of The Woman's Home Missionary Society, 1969), 107, 108, and 113.

³⁹ Virginia Lieson Brereton in "Preparing Women for the Lord's Work" in *Women in New Worlds*, eds. Hilah F. Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 180.

⁴⁰ Brereton, "Preparing Women" p. 183.

⁴¹ Ibid, 194. See *New England Deaconess Association Annual Report 1917*.

churches such as deaconesses, social workers, pastor's assistants, and Christian educators.⁴²

Mergers are demises in some instances and survivals in other cases. Between the First World War and the year 1940, most of the training schools for women were either closed or were merged into other institutions thus sustaining loss of autonomy and identity as well.⁴³

In 1940 seventy nine national ministry projects including hospitals, settlement houses, schools, and community centers from the Woman's Home Missionary Society came under the administration of the Woman's Society of Christian Service (WSCS). Apart from these, seventy eight conference-level projects of mission work came under the Conference WSCS. Some of these national- and-conference level mission institutions were started and administered by the deaconesses, while being housed under the former WHMS.⁴⁴ There were other institutions that came from the Woman's Missionary Council of the MEC South and housed under the WSCS. At the time of this merger, there were 1,026 deaconesses.

- In 1964, under a major restructure, the Board of Mission Deaconess Program Office was moved from the Woman's Division to the National Division of the Board of Missions. In 1968, in the further mergers of the United Brethren and Methodist Church, the mission projects and institutions came under the administration of the National Division of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. The majority of the deaconesses had worked in programs and projects of the Woman's Division.⁴⁵
- In 1996 restructure, the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) eliminated National and World Divisions, and created Community and Institutional Ministries Programs.
- In the 2009 restructure, the Community and Institutional Ministries were moved from GBGM to the Women's Division. By this time, many of the Community Centers, Women's Residences, Residential Treatment Centers, and educational centers had aged with time, but finally were "home."

The Women's Division, which underwent a major restructure in 1964, was finally back home in 2012 with full autonomy, while retaining missional relationships with the General Board of Global Ministries.

Referring to the survival of the United Methodist Women as an organization, Women's Division in particular, Theresa Hoover, former Deputy General Secretary of the Women's Division, and the author of *With Unveiled Face*, describes their survival of being as that of a "successful mutant."⁴⁶ Regarding the survival of the deaconesses as a category of lay women, it is worth looking at Barbara Campbell's statement when she says, "Social pressures" of the last-quarter of the twentieth-century impacted both the deaconess movement and the Women's Division. She goes on to say, "The point to speculate is how changes affecting deaconesses would have been managed if the Commission on Deaconess Work had remained within the Women's Division for administration."⁴⁷ Reminds one of the housing struggle of the beginning days of deaconess

⁴² Meeker, 108.

⁴³ Brereton, 191

⁴⁴ Meeker, 398-402.

⁴⁵ Barbara Campbell, *Report*, 14.

⁴⁶ Theresa Hoover, *With Unveiled Face* (New York: Women's Division, GBGM, 1983), 21.

⁴⁷ Campbell, *Report*, 24.

movement: the “Church Plan” of Lucy Rider Meyer or the women’s plan put forth by the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the MEC?

Deaconesses and support from the female clergy

Lurking behind the flourishing of these two lay organizations in the midst of restructures, the deaconess movement and the predecessor organizations of the UMW, has been a key question: the ordination of women. Both the lay women’s organizations, the WSCS and the deaconesses, supported the full rights for clergy women. In fact, the action by the Woman’s Division of Christian Service resulted in over 2,000 petitions on full rights for female clergy to the General Conference of 1956.⁴⁸ As for the deaconess organization, Mary Lou Barnwell, General Secretary of the Commission on the Deaconesses Work of the Woman’s Division of Christian Service of the General Board of Missions of The Methodist Church, asserted that “references to recruitment of Deaconesses seems irrelevant to the subject of Clergy Rights for Women.” She went on to prove on the floor of the General Conference that female clergy full rights should “evoke no fear,” and of the “500 Deaconesses now active in The Methodist Church, all except 29 favor Full Clergy.” Barnwell said that only 27 had thought of possible consideration of assuming such relationship for themselves. She states, “...they are primarily those who are serving in certain rural areas which are now handicapped because of the lack of sufficient well-trained ministers. Ten of the 27 are already serving as Supply Pastors. In no way do we believe that the extension of Full Clergy Rights will affect the recruitment of Deaconesses.”⁴⁹

Ordination of women was a topic of conversation started in the 19th century itself, especially with regard to Anna Oliver (MEC), the first woman to get a Bachelor of Divinity degree in the U.S. (1876) and who was denied ordination in the MEC in 1880.⁵⁰ The discussion of women’s ordination was to be picked up with more rigor only in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1902 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in no polite language, J.B. McGehee said that he was opposed to recognizing the deaconesses since it was an unfortunate first step to “establishing a female hennery in the Church for hatching out female preachers.”⁵¹ While such a language was ruled out, and the Church has moved forward, with a number of female bishops leading the conferences, a perception expressed by lay female leaders is worth listening to and garner support for the deaconesses.

Betty Purkey, a former executive for the deaconess office, said in one of her interviews that the decline of the deaconess movement began in 1956, “when the Methodist General Conference approved the ordination of women. Later, in the 1960s, many no longer worked as closely with the institutions they had founded. When the church created the categories of lay workers and diaconal ministers in the 1970s, some women chose that option to have a “closer relationship to the annual conference.” But after the 1996 General Conference, the denomination’s top legislative body, eliminated the category of diaconal minister, the position of deaconess became the only recognized avenue of work for a lay woman who does not wish to become a deacon or elder.”⁵² In the same

⁴⁸ Georgia Harkness, *Women in Church and Society* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1971), 30.

⁴⁹ Journal of the 1956 General Conference of the Methodist Church, ed. Lud H. Estes (Nashville, Chicago, Cincinnati, New York: The Methodist Publishing House, 1956), 708.

⁵⁰ For an extensive treatment of this subject, see Kenneth E. Rowe’s “Evangelism and Social Reform in the Pastoral Ministry of Anna Oliver, 1868-1886” in *Spirituality & Social Responsibility: Vocational Vision of Women in the United Methodist Tradition*, ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993), 117-136.

⁵¹ John Patrick McDowell, *Social Gospel in the South: The Woman’s Home Mission Movement in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1886-1939* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University, 1982), 63.

⁵² Linda Bloom, “Deaconess Position Offers Alternative for Lay Woman” (New York: UMNS, December 14, 1998).

interview, Marian Styles McClintock, a deaconess, said that she had the freedom to do things that she could not do in the ordained ministry. Women still want to work beyond the deacon-elder paradigm within the deaconess movement.

As for the membership in lay women's organizations within the Church, Dana Robert lifts the fact in her book, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice*, that as the opportunities for lay women's leadership in international mission declined due to the mergers, Christian women in the west focused their energies on "women's rights" and "ordination."⁵³ In his discussion of the impact of the World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910, Brian Stanley says that Edinburgh contributed to the "decline" of the women's mission organizations as an "autonomous movement" in the 20th century.⁵⁴ Male and female clergy are members of the United Methodist Women. The United Methodist Women itself is an autonomous body directly reporting to the General Conference now. It is fitting that this lay women's organization which supported the female clergy ordination supports the order of deaconesses. It is time for the female clergy, along with their male counterparts, to support the lay sisterhood of deaconesses to reclaim their ancient "order" in their "set apart" ministry at this point in the United Methodist history.

Foregrounding lay category over essentialist identity as a structural necessity

Till the 1950s the deaconess movement comprised of only deaconesses, and then In 1952 General Conference, female home missionaries made a choice, either to transfer their category to that of deaconess or retain it as such. A complex situation arose when the Evangelical Union of Brethren (EUB) merged with the Methodist Church in 1968. The EUB had in its Home Missionary category of workers, men and women, single and married persons, lay and *ordained* (emphasis mine). The merger presented a dilemma in regard to Deaconesses and Home Missionaries in their respective histories.⁵⁵

During mergers and restructures, the Deaconesses negotiated their identity as a lay category. Negotiating through structural gaps and crevices, they foregrounded their lay identity over gender identity, and integrated into their movement the category of Home Missionaries which included lay men, also. It was a necessity for survival as a lay category for women in a Church which often privileged the order of ordained ministry as the only order. The deaconesses embraced the expanded lay category over their mere essentialist identity as lay *women* for the sake of vocational strength and historical necessity.

As for United Methodist Women, this lay woman's organization includes in its membership ordained United Methodist ministers, both male and female, at the local, district, and conference levels. Speaking of gender, these two women's organizations have demonstrated their willingness to go beyond their mere essentialist identities strategically as women's organizations, for the sake of vocation and mission, as they constructed their collective identities, while retaining their respective

⁵³ Dana Robert, *American Women in Mission*, 303-304.

⁵⁴ Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 10* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K: William B. Eerdmans Publication Company, 2009), 315.

⁵⁵ Mary Agnes Dougherty, *My Calling To Fulfill*, 248.

on-the-ground movements and networks. Both the organizations have been “strategic essentialists” in this sense, in their own respective contexts within the United Methodist Church.⁵⁶

Women with History

History was without such women for a long time. But the deaconesses have claimed their ancient order throughout in spite of interruptions and restructures. Women’s mission and ministries have made them visible in history. The deaconesses have offered a remarkable ministry as founders of national mission institutions, administrators of establishments, and heads of residential treatment centers, which are now under the administration of the United Methodist Women, National Office. Further, for the recruitment of “PQWs,” professionally qualified women, the deaconess movement relied on the predecessor organizations of the United Methodist Women for potential candidates.⁵⁷ The UMW is still a recruiting field for deaconesses.

History without lay women’s predominant mission work is as truncated as women without history. Let the deaconesses continue to dwell in their long abiding home: The United Methodist Women. The national mission institutions have come “fully home” to the United Methodist Women; so have the deaconesses. May they continue to dwell in this house with their long overdue title from the ancient Church: the order of deaconesses! “Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates” Proverbs 31: 31 (NKJV)

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⁵⁶ I have borrowed the term “strategic essentialism” from Serene Jones in *Feminist Theory And Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 59-60.

⁵⁷ Barbara Campbell, *Report*, 13.