

# *The Anglican Historical Society of New Zealand* *Te Rōpu Hītori o te Hāhi Mīhinare ki Aotearoa*

## *First Steps in Theological Education for Women*

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In 1874, the General Synod of the Church of the Province of New Zealand established a Board of Theological Studies (BTS) to provide 'a uniform and recognized standard of literary and theological proficiency' for Anglicans. There were four grades of exams, the first two of which were open to all, including women, and were intended to raise the standard of Sunday School teaching. The two advanced grades were for those preparing for ordination. The BTS appointed examiners and arranged examinations in scripture in English and the original languages, exegesis, theology, ecclesiastical history, moral philosophy, Anglican formularies and laws. The teaching was done in theological colleges including St John's College in Auckland, Selwyn College in Dunedin, and College House in Christchurch, and by individual tuition or in small classes offered by some of the clergy. Although they could not attend the colleges which were for male students only, a number of women passed the first two grades. Among them were several members of the small deaconess community founded in Christchurch in 1893 by **Sister Edith (Mellish)** a deaconess from England. Her deaconesses were expected to reach Grade II in the BTS exams, with Sister Edith herself doing much of the teaching.

In 1910 the General Synod authorised the BTS to issue certificates and diplomas. A pass in Grade IV resulted in the award of the diploma Licentiate in Theology (LTh). In 1929 a **Miss G. M. Henn** of Wellington passed Grade III and in 1934 and 1935 completed Grade IV. She seems to have been the first woman to have achieved an LTh. Why did she do this study?

In May 1931 **Joan Spencer-Smith** arrived in Christchurch, invited by Bishop West Watson to set up a deaconess training institution. This remarkable English woman had studied theology at honours level for the diploma of student in theology conferred by the



Joan Spencer-Smith  
Anglican Deaconess  
(1895-1965)

Archbishop of Canterbury in 1915. Two years later, she gained the archbishop's licence to teach theology and during the 1920s was tutor for the London Diocesan Board of Women's Work. In Christchurch she founded St Faith's House of Sacred Learning where she and local clergy gave courses leading to one-year and two-year certificates. She herself taught Old Testament and doctrine. The principal of College House, the local Anglican theological college, sent male theological students to her for some of their lectures and in the 1940s she lectured on the Old Testament at College House. St Faith's also offered short courses and devotional training for lay people, as well as hospitality for visitors, including missionaries on furlough.

The first deaconess trained by Spencer-Smith was ordained in April 1932, and in November the following year she herself was ordained and licensed as head deaconess. Spencer-Smith appears to have been the first woman teacher of theology in New Zealand. A woman of some wealth, she offered her services on a voluntary basis and when the depression meant that the

diocese could no longer offer women bursaries for deaconess training Spencer-Smith met the expenses herself. In spite of this, there were few applicants for training and St Faith's closed in 1943. Two years later the house, which had been given to the church by the poet Ursula Bethell in 1935, was sold. In accordance with Bethell's

wishes the interest from the proceeds was used to fund women seeking deaconess and further theological training in England, but I do not know how many women took advantage of this. In 1947 for health and family reasons Spencer-Smith returned to England where she died in 1965.