

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

The Reverend Elinor Glenys Lewis (1911-2002)

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Glenys Lewis made a significant contribution to the ministry of women in the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia.

Born in Wales in 1911, Glenys Lewis trained in England as a nurse and midwife, but poor health stopped her fulfilling her desire to be a medical missionary in China and forced her to give up hospital nursing. In 1942 Glenys, who had been bought up as a Baptist, was confirmed in the Church of England. Subsequently she spent two years training at St Christopher's College, a women's theological college which trained women for full-time work in the Church of England, and then worked from 1946 to 1948 in the parish of Holy Trinity, Marylebone, London. Post-war conditions were difficult, as was her position as a female pastoral worker. She was excluded from all leadership, even of the Sunday School, and not allowed to enter the sanctuary or to wash the communion vessels.

Following her introduction to the Diaconess Order Glenys felt called to this ministry, even though the Order was struggling to survive with very few recruits. As she had already trained at St Christopher's, she was required to do only six months at Gilmore House, to absorb the 'diaconess ethos.' She was ordained a diaconess in 1949 and immediately appointed to the dual role of head diaconess of the Guilford diocese and secretary of the Diocesan Council for Women's Ministry in the Church. The diocese was unable (or unwilling) to fund this dual position, but the money was funded privately and eventually the diocese took over the funding. For ten years in Guilford, Diaconess Lewis was responsible for the overall care of about thirty

women who worked for the church full-time. They included deaconesses, Church Army sisters, moral welfare workers, Sunday School organizers and other diocesan appointments. As head diaconess she frequently accepted invitations to preach and was the only woman allowed to occupy the pulpit, all others having to speak from the chancel steps.

In 1959 Archdeacon Sam Woods, then senior Anglican hospital chaplain in Christchurch, New Zealand, contacted Glenys about the possibility of her joining him as he was keen to involve a woman in the work. As a state registered nurse and a diaconess she was imminently qualified for such work, but, as in Guilford, the standing committee was initially unable to finance the venture. Sam Woods however managed to raise enough money to pay the fare and a stipend for the first three months. Glenys arrived in Christchurch on New Year's Day, 1960 and worked for two and a half years in hospital chaplaincy, although at the time she could not be called chaplain, only 'assistant to the chaplain.' At the end of her life, she looked back on this as the most satisfying, enjoyable and worthwhile work of her career. In 1962 she was co-opted on to the Diocesan Council for Women's Ministry in the Church, chaired by Sam Woods and with a largely male membership. The Council wanted to recruit women to the Order of Diaconesses and to establish a provincial house for their training. Little was known about the diaconess order in New Zealand although there had been sporadic

bursts of interest and short-lived diocesan schemes in Waiapu, Christchurch and Auckland. There was much confusion about their status and role of a deaconess, and it is not surprising that few women offered themselves for this ministry. The Council believed that a provincial deaconess house would remedy this situation and decided to ask the diocesan synod for a grant with which to employ someone to visit the seven dioceses, publicizing this form of women's ministry and so stirring the church into action.

Deaconess Lewis was invited to address the synod at its meeting in October 1962, something which she believed no woman had done previously. Synod approved the necessary funds, the seven diocesan bishops gave their permission, and Glenys accepted the position of traveling advocate for the Order of Deaconesses. From June 1963 to November 1964, she travelled all over the country, from Hokianga in the north to Bluff in the south, promoting interest in women's ministry. A brochure that she distributed informed women about three types of church work open to them: as sisters in a religious community, as lay women workers, including Church Army sisters, and as deaconesses. During her 'road show' Glenys addressed four synods, preached in five cathedrals and a number of churches, addressed over 300 meetings, and spoke to over 22,000 people. At this time, it was almost unheard of for a woman to preach in an Anglican church, and not every vicar invited her to preach, but a number did, and these occasions often made headlines in the local newspaper.

Glenys believed that one of her most significant contributions to women's ministry and to the church occurred in 1964, at the General Synod held in Auckland. The synod was asked to accept a 'Form and Manner of Making of Deaconesses', based on the English form (Canterbury and York) that had been used till then when needed in New Zealand. Glenys saw a draft of the proposed new

form, prepared by a committee, and was horrified to realize that every reference to 'ordination' had been removed. This represented a significant 'downgrading' of the deaconess's status, a commissioning rather than an ordination. Some speedy work behind the scenes resulted in the synod's accepting an alternative draft, in which the word 'ordained' had been reinstated, thus safeguarding the canonical status of the Order of Deaconesses. The responsibilities of the deaconess were also somewhat broader than those in the English form, as she was 'to read Morning and Evening Prayer, the Litany and the Orders for Prime and Compline' and to be 'the Administrant [of the communion chalice] in Church in cases of necessity by reason of her office' and also 'to preach if licensed thereto by the Bishop himself.'

In 1965 Glenys returned to Britain for a much-needed holiday and while she was there received an invitation from the Bishop of Auckland, Eric Gowing, to return to his diocese as head deaconess and warden of a proposed new deaconess house. This house was to be a diocesan house rather than a provincial one, although other dioceses were able to send students for training. Once again, no money was available from the standing committee, but the bishop succeeded in raising funds privately and deaconess house opened in February 1966 with Deaconess Lewis in charge. Three days earlier she had been admitted as head deaconess of the Auckland diocese at a service in St Mary's Cathedral. The house was the Old Deanery on the corner of St Stephens Avenue and Brighton Road, Parnell, built in 1875 for Bishop Selwyn.

During the next four years Glenys was responsible for a small number of student deaconesses who were training mainly for parish work, administrative work, and hospital chaplaincy. They took theology courses at St John's Theological College and had further lectures and training in spiritual life and discipline

at deaconess house. Six women completed their training and were ordained but the whole question of a separate ordained order for women only was coming under increasing scrutiny and the Church was beginning to consider the ordination of women to the priesthood.

At the end of 1969 Deaconess House closed. The one deaconess in training moved to become a residential student at St John's College where the following year two more women joined her. General Synod in 1970, following a Lambeth Conference resolution of 1968, decided to open the diaconate to both women and men and passed a statute declaring that 'Deacon' includes 'Deaconess.' Making the Order of the Diaconate fully inclusive effectively ended the legal basis for the Order of Deaconesses, although it was not until 1986 that the term 'Deaconess' was deleted from the canons. Deaconesses were deemed to be deacons without any further ordination, and most were subsequently ordained as priests. In November 1971 Wendy Cranston, who had begun her training intending to be a deaconess, was ordained deacon by Bishop Gowing. No more deaconesses were ordained in New Zealand. Deaconess Lewis spent two years, 1970-71, as head deaconess and in charge of the Hostel of the Holy Name, a hostel for young women secondary and tertiary students. At the end of 1971 she retired and returned to Christchurch to live, but her ministry was not yet over.

During her New Zealand tour in 1963-4 and in her first years at Deaconess House, Glenys had refused to discuss the ordination of women to the priesthood, partly because she thought it was so threatening to male clergy. In time however she came to believe that the Church was unable to find a distinctive function for a permanent diaconate, and once women were ordained as deacons she saw the next step, priesting of

women, as both logical and desirable. At the Auckland Synod in 1971 she experienced a 'crowning moment' as she seconded the motion: 'That this synod approves in principle the ordination of women to the priesthood.' Following the necessary legislation, the first women priests were ordained in Advent 1977, in the dioceses of Auckland and Waipatu. The following year Glenys Lewis was ordained as a priest in the diocese of Christchurch, although when she was first asked by the bishop to let her name go forward, she refused thinking that she had finished her ministry. For a couple of years after ordination she worked in a relieving role in parishes and in hospital chaplaincy and found a fullness and completeness in her priestly ministry before she retired permanently.

In 1989 Glenys attended the first national conference of ordained Anglican women, held in Hamilton, and gave a lively talk on the story of the Deaconess Order. She concluded by saying, 'Isn't the Holy Spirit galloping along! In 1962 there were five deaconesses and in 1989 - look at you! Priests! 124 - it is breathtaking!' In the Queen's Birthday Honours of 1993 Glenys was awarded the honour of Commander of the British Empire (CBE). The eighty-two-year-old priest received this award from the Governor-General, Dame Catherine Tizard in October of that year.

In 1999, her memoirs were published under the title 'Kept by the Power.' This was a reference to her strong faith in the presence of Christ in her life as a faithful companion, a living reality.

The Reverend Glenys Lewis died in November 2002, just a few days before a service in Christchurch Cathedral to celebrate the 25th anniversary of women to the priesthood. In her long life she had contributed to women's ministry in the church as a lay worker, a deaconess, a deacon, and a priest.

Bibliography

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