

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

The Deaconess Revival of the 1960's in the New Zealand Anglican Church

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This Paper is a summary of a Research Essay written by Geoffrey; he has expanded that research into an Occasional Paper described in this section of this website, as follows:

Paper Two:

Title: **Anglican Deaconesses in New Zealand: The 1960s Revival**

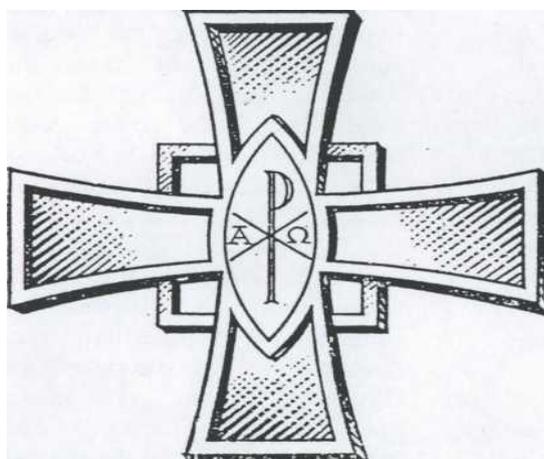
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Description: Tells the story of the revival of the Deaconess Order in the Anglican Church in the 1960s. While in the long term this was unsuccessful, the revival contributed to the church's understanding of ministry and to the ordination of women as deacons and priests in the 1970s. Attention is given to a number of women who as deacons and priests gave significant leadership to the recognition of women's ministry in the church.



Until the first women were ordained to the priesthood in 1977, there had been only 'one existing ordained ministry for women, in the sense of being the only order of ministry in the Anglican Communion to which women are admitted by episcopal imposition of hands.'¹ That was the Order of Deaconess. An ancient Order, deaconesses disappeared from church

life in the Western Church between the tenth and twelfth centuries, as the conventual life for women displaced deaconesses. However, the Anglo-Catholic movement of the 19th century revived interest in the Diaconal Order for women. The Order was officially revived in 1862, when the Bishop of London, Bishop Tait, laid hands on Elizabeth Ferard. Within twenty

years, deaconess training institutions were operating. The English Church produced a number of deaconesses, but confusion remained about their status (ordained or commissioned?) and their function (contemplative, church-serving or community-facing?).

One of the English deaconesses, Sister Edith, was persuaded by Bishop Julius to come to Christchurch, and set up a Deaconess Community there.

Established in 1895, this became the House of the Sacred Name, and moved more in a conventual direction.

The deaconesses preferred to be called 'sisters' by about 1914. However, the ministry of deaconess had been transplanted to a New Zealand context. Deaconesses operated in various ways in the dioceses of Waiapu and Auckland. Some had been trained and ordained in England, others in Melbourne or New Zealand. Among those still remembered for their work are Joan Spencer-Smith, Esther Brand, Deaconess Doyle, Elsie Smith, Mclva Finney, Olive Ault and Heni Park. However, the Order never grew very much. Deaconesses operated in only a few areas. Yet they did immensely valuable work in parishes, hospitals, Māori communities, schools, and among the homeless and sick. Financial support was hard to find, proper recognition even harder. Lack of clarity about their role and function hampered the Order's development. In fact, the Anglican Church in New Zealand gave deaconesses no canonical recognition until 1964. Nor was there canonical ordination procedure, or even an established training Centre. The initiative to revive the Order of Deaconesses came from the Diocese of Christchurch, in particular from Archdeacon Sam Woods, senior Hospital Chaplain. He raised funds for the venture, and encouraged the Head Deaconess of the Guildford Diocese, Glenys Lewis, to come out

to New Zealand. She saw (and found) a vocation for herself in New Zealand, establishing a central training Centre, and securing full recognition and support from a reluctant Church. The Christchurch Diocesan Synod gave her financial backing and Bishop A. K. Warren commissioned her for the task of promoting women's ministry in the Anglican Church throughout the country. This she did, with great energy and zeal, between June 1963 and November 1964. She visited every Bishop, every diocese, and thousands of women, men, and children. In doing this work, she raised the Church's awareness of how little use it was making of its women in ministry, and of how little status it gave them. In 1964, after vigorous campaigning from Glenys Lewis, Dean Allan Pyatt and a number of women, General Synod was persuaded to authorise the Order of Deaconesses, and to establish a canonical form and manner of ordination for deaconesses - defeating an attempt to replace the word 'ordination' by the much less specific 'commissioned.'

Bishop Eric Gowing saw a role for Deaconesses in the Auckland Diocese, albeit initially as filling gaps in the ministry of men. He wrote: 'If we are to train Deaconesses, a Deaconess House and a Head Deaconess will be necessary.'² The Auckland Diocesan Synod, in 1965, set up a Board of Management to establish and maintain a Deaconess Training House. The chosen venue was the old Deanery, on the corner of St Stephens Avenue and Brighton Road, Parnell. It was opened for its new function in February 1966, with Glenys Lewis as Head Deaconess. Among the first students there were Sidney Koreneff, already studying at St Johns College, Heather Brunton, and Margaret Tilley. Later, they were joined by Joan Bindon, Jean Brookes, and Wendy Cranston. The women were able to attend lectures at St Johns College, and very quickly proved their academic mettle there. But they were expected

as well to follow a strictly disciplined life at Deaconess House, which included its own forms of training. They wore full-length navy-blue cassocks and a blue veil for taking part in church services. Their everyday wear included a blue dress, and a Deaconess Cross.

Once ordained as deaconesses, the women entered parish ministry. They had to negotiate their role or accept whatever the (all-male) clergy deemed to be fitting work for them. Their duties included taking charge of Sunday School, coordinating women's groups, pastoral visiting, Bible study, preaching, administering the chalice, hospital chaplaincy, and administrative work. Wherever they went, they encountered difficulties of acceptance, and confusion about their role and function. Not every Bishop who ordained them approved of this form of women's ministry. But they were pioneers in women's ordained ministry. Whether they knew it at the time or not, they were preparing the ground for the ordination of women to the priesthood.

It was soon realised that there was little difference between the duties of a Deaconess, and a Deacon. But there certainly was a difference in the way they were treated. An article in the Howick Parish News (Heather Brunton was ordained Deaconess in Howick at the end of 1967) explained this difference thus: 'when the Deacon will, almost automatically, go forward to the priesthood, but the Deaconess will not ... Whereas a woman may be a senior member of a parish staff, her length of service quite impressive and her wealth of experience considerable, but she would still be a Deaconess, and not in charge of a parish.'³ The difference between Deaconess and Deacon was formally dissolved by General Synod in 1970. Statute 298 simply declared that 'Deaconess' included 'Deacon'. To her surprise, Wendy Cranston was ordained Deacon in 1971 by Bishop Gowing, rather than 'Deaconess'. Although the latter term survived in use for

several years more, it was by then doomed to extinction.

In the late 1960's, public perceptions of the role of women were changing. The Presbyterian Church ordained its first woman minister, Margaret Reid Martin, in 1965. In the Anglican Church, the strictures upon the ministry of Deaconesses made them, and many others, realise that theirs would always be a limited ministry. They had proved themselves in every way to be as capable as men, yet they perceived that they were being denied equality of status and role, for reasons that no longer seemed valid. As St John's College assumed more responsibility for the theological and pastoral training of women, the role of Deaconess House changed. The strict community style of life held little appeal, and in 1970, the House moved to the Community of the Holy Name premises in Arney Road. It functioned more as hostel, than as monastic community, but retained a Head Deaconess until 1979. Glenys Lewis relinquished that role at the end of 1971 and was succeeded by Heather Brunton. By 1970, Glenys Lewis had undergone a total change in her attitude to the ordination of women to the priesthood. She seconded a motion in the Auckland Synod that 'this Synod approves in principle the ordination of women to the priesthood.' She had come to believe that the Church was unable to find a distinctive function for the diaconate.

Most of the former deaconesses were among the first women to be priested (in 1977 and 1978). Although the Order of Deaconess had been promoted as being 'separate and distinctive,' it could not lose the stigma of inferiority and subservience that had also been experienced by deaconesses of other denominations. Once deaconesses began doing the same work as curates; once deaconesses became deacons; once people realised that women could do all the work of ordained men, then the reasons for

withholding the priesthood from women melted away. The dynamic of social change overtook the Church. The Ministry of Deaconesses, that had seemed a workable

model in 1966 was clearly outmoded by 1970. It faded away, with few apparent regrets. However, the struggle to find an acceptable role for a permanent diaconate still continues.

Endnotes

¹ Glenys Lewis: The Diaconate for Women, p.8.

² Auckland Diocesan Year Book, 1964.

³ Howick Parish News, 13 November 1967