Set Apart to Serve

EVANGELICAL DEACONESSES IN ST. LOUIS
1889–2005
Between 1889 and 1949, the Evangelical Deaconess Society of St. Louis consecrated almost 200 deaconesses. Although there were a number of deaconess institutions in the Evangelical Synod of North America and the later Evangelical and Reformed Church, the St. Louis motherhouse was the denominations’ largest deaconess community. Focusing on the deaconess sisterhood and drawing on materials in the Deaconess Archives, this exhibit provides a brief overview of a significant ministry in the history of St. Louis and the United Church of Christ.

**About the Deaconess Archives**

Ruth Weltge Rasche (1918–2010), wife of former Deaconess Hospital President Carl C. Rasche, created and maintained the Deaconess Archives until 1997. Ms. Rasche’s books and articles, including *The Deaconess Heritage: One Hundred Years of Caring, Healing and Teaching*, and “The Deaconess Sisters: Pioneer Professional Women” in *Hidden Histories in the United Church of Christ*, are significant contributions towards preserving deaconess history.

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**The Deaconess Motto**

What do I wish? I wish to serve.

Whom do I wish to serve?  
The Lord, in his poor and needy ones.

And what is my reward?  
I do not serve either for reward or for thanks, but out of gratitude and love; my reward is that I may do this!

And if I perish in doing it?  
“If I perish, I perish,” said Queen Esther, who knew not him, for love of whom I would perish; but he will not let me perish.

And if I grow Old?  
Still shall my heart keep fresh as a palm tree, and the Lord shall satisfy me with grace and mercy.

I go in peace and free from care.

**Wilhelm Löhe**  
Founder of the deaconess community in Neuendettelsau, Bavaria
THE EARLY CHURCH

“I commend you to our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.” — Romans 16:1-2 (NRSV)

The word diakonia (from the Greek verb diakoneo, “to serve”) and its variants are common in the New Testament. In Matthew 20:26, for example, Jesus says, “...but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant [diakonos].” Phoebe, however, is the only woman in the scriptures to be addressed with the title “deacon” (earlier translations used the word “deaconess”).

By the third century, the ecclesiastical office of deaconess (diakonissa) had fully developed in eastern parts of the Roman Empire. The duties and status of deaconesses varied with place and time. In general, however, deaconesses were responsible for caring for the poor, sick and forgotten, especially among women. In culture where the sexes were segregated, deaconesses had the unique ability to minister and evangelize households that male clergy could not enter.

Deaconesses were generally unmarried women or widows living together in communities. When the Roman Empire legalized Christianity in 313, deaconesses became integrated into the growing monastic movement. By 1000, the transformation of the deaconess as minister in the world to cloistered nun was complete.

THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

When the Protestant reformers closed convents and monasteries in the 16th century, younger nuns were encouraged to marry. Although some Reformed and Lutheran territories attempted to re-establish the office, the apostolic model of the deaconess re-emerged first in Catholic France. St. Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) and St. Louise de Marillac (1591-1660) founded the Daughters of Charity in 1633 in response to the poverty they encountered in Paris. Women living in community took vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and service to the poor. De Paul described them not as a religious order, but as a “secular family” whose members should go into the streets to serve—ideas that were later incorporated into the Protestant deaconess motherhouse.
DEACONESSES IN 19TH-CENTURY GERMANY

War and industrialization brought poverty and misery to the German population in the early 19th century. In response, religious organizations founded institutions and ministries to help relieve their suffering. Among these was Theodor Fliedner (1800 – 1864), a Lutheran pastor in Kaiserswerth near Düsseldorf. Inspired by the ministries and activism of women in Holland and England, Fliedner established a series of charitable institutions between 1833 – 1854, including a half-way house for former women prisoners, a kindergarten, a nursing school, an orphanage and a mental hospital. He also established hospitals in Jerusalem, Constantinople (now Istanbul) and Alexandria.

To staff these institutions, Fliedner re-introduced the office of deaconess and trained sisters to work as nurses, teachers and social workers. Kaiserswerth deaconesses remained unmarried, took vows, wore special clothing (called “garb”), lived together in the motherhouse, addressed each other as “sister” and met several times a day for communal prayer. Sisters were obligated to the motherhouse, which determined where and in what field they were to work. Although deaconesses worked in various professions, all were trained as nurses first. Fliedner’s Kaiserswerth motherhouse became a model for the deaconess movement that quickly spread to other countries and denominations. When Fliedner died in 1864, 30 motherhouses and 1600 deaconesses existed in more than 400 fields of labor. Florence Nightingale, founder of the International Red Cross, received her only professional nursing training from the Kaiserswerth sisters.

The Lutheran pastor Wilhelm Löhe (1808–1872) also established a deaconess community near his church in Neuendettelsau, Bavaria in 1854. Like those in Kaiserswerth, Neuendettelsau deaconesses worked in hospitals and other institutions. Today, both Kaiserswerth and Neuendettelsau continue to have large deaconess communities.

DEACONESSES COME TO AMERICA

Lutheran Pastor William Passavant (1821–1894) consecrated the first deaconess in the United States in 1850 after visiting Kaiserswerth. By 1889, Episcopal and Methodist denominations had also established deaconess organizations.
FOUNDING OF THE DEACONESS SOCIETY

The need for a deaconess community in St. Louis was acknowledged as early as 1857, when the Rev. Louis Nollau, pastor of St. Peter’s German Evangelical Church, established Good Samaritan Hospital. Impetus for forming a deaconess society did not crystallize however until March 5, 1888, when the Rev. Henry Walser of St. Luke’s German Evangelical Church brought Holy Communion to an ill female parishioner. Upon arriving at her home, he discovered she was being cared for by a Roman Catholic Sister of Mercy. Walser later asked his colleagues at a St. Louis Evangelical Pastors Association meeting, “Why can’t we train the young women of our churches to care for the poor and the sick as do the deaconess sisters of Germany?”

Enthusiastic response to Pastor Walser’s plea led to the organization of the Evangelischer Diakonissen Verein von St. Louis (Evangelical Deaconess Society of St. Louis) at St. Peter’s Church on March 18, 1889. Sixty men and ten women became charter members. The Society's constitution required a board of directors to be composed of four clergymen, four laymen, and—unusual for the day—four women. Although principally an organization of the German Evangelical Synod of North America, board membership was open to members of any Protestant denomination. The purposes of the Society were:

To nurse the sick and to exercise care for the poor and aged by deaconesses, i.e. theoretically and practically trained Christian nurses.

To found and support a deaconess home where deaconesses shall be educated and trained, and from which they shall be sent as nurses, and where sick and aged under circumstances, provided by bylaws, may be admitted and receive attendance.

The society looked to Kaiserswerth as a model for its motherhouse and training program.
FIRST DEACONESSES AND DEACONESS HOME

The Society was fortunate that Katherine Haack, a widowed charter member of the Society, and her adopted daughter, Lydia Daries, had previously been trained in deaconess methods by Episcopal Sisters of the Good Shepherd at St. Luke’s Hospital in St. Louis. Both women were consecrated deaconesses on August 18, 1889 at St. Peter’s Church. On the same day, the first Evangelical Deaconess Home and Hospital at 2119 Eugenia Street, near Union Station, was dedicated. The Society acquired the large house through the generosity of Mrs. Mebus, a widowed member of St. Peter’s Church. The home’s renovation and furnishings were funded by women’s organizations in German Evangelical congregations throughout the St. Louis area. Probationers (students) were admitted beginning in 1890. Like the denomination of which they were a part, the Deaconess Society and the sisterhood operated primarily in German until WWI.

The Evangelical Deaconess Home and Hospital’s general management was carried out by the Home Committee of the Society’s board of directors. Katherine Haack was appointed Sister Superior (Oberschwester) and given day-to-day supervision of the home and its deaconesses. Beginning in 1897, the Rev. Frederick P. Jens was appointed as the home’s superintendent and administrator, a change that led to controversy and the resignations of Katherine Haack, Lydia Daries and five other deaconesses. Magdalene Gerhold was named Sister Superior, who with Jens, quickly set about to rebuild the sisterhood.

GROWTH AND EXPANSION

The growth of the motherhouse and the demand for medical care prompted the society to purchase larger facilities at 4117 West Belle Place in 1893. The former school house had room for 15 sisters and 40 patients. It was expanded several times to accommodate the growing sisterhood and the increasing demand for hospital care.
CALL AND VOCATION

Deaconesses stressed first and foremost that theirs was a divine calling and a religious vocation in obedience to Christ and in response to the needs of humanity.

“The Lord must do the calling (1) thru His Word; (2) thru His instruments (pastors, teachers, etc.) and (3) thru the inner and outward guidance of life.” — Principles of Deaconess Work

PHYSICAL QUALIFICATIONS

Candidates for deaconess were single women or childless widows, 18 to 40 years old, of “blameless reputation” and with a positive outlook on life. A grammar school education, a certificate of good health from a physician, and written permission from parents were further requirements.

“As a rule it may be said on this point that a young woman who is far over thirty years of age, would hardly be fit for the deaconess work, as she seldom and only under great difficulties learns to adapt herself to her new vocation.” — Principles of Deaconess Work

SPIRITUAL QUALIFICATIONS

- Evidence of conversion—an experience of the saving and redeeming love of Christ that brings a change of heart.

“Daily [conversion] must be renewed, however, in repentance and faith, and is a distinct process for itself, of which we are fully consciousness.” — Principles of Deaconess Work

- Obedience—
  - To the Word of God through the reading and contemplation of the Scriptures
  - To the regulations of the church, including observance of its rites and customs
  - To the rules of the motherhouse

- Love of God and fellow humans

- An active private prayer life and the ability to lead others in prayer
Qualifications, training, and consecration

PROBATION

Once accepted, the candidate became a probationer for a period of four to six years. During this time she received technical training as a nurse, learned the rules and routines of the motherhouse, and was given religious instruction by the pastor of the home. It was also a time for personal reflection and discernment about her vocation.

“The high ideal and example for every deaconess should be Jesus, and Jesus alone; and the more she takes Him as her example, the less will she be disappointed in her expectations.”
—Principles of Deaconess Work

CONSECRATION

Upon completion of her training, the probationer—in conversation with the deaconess sisters and the chaplain—would decide whether to take the final step of consecration. Her consecration was preceded by several intense weeks of reading, prayer and reflection. During the rite of consecration, the deaconess pledged vows of obedience, willingness and faithfulness and was consecrated by the laying on of hands by the presiding minister.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MOTHERHOUSE

The motherhouse was a key concept in the Kaiserswerth model of deaconess work. It was the community to which the deaconess belonged and held allegiance. She spent her probation there, trained there, and it was where her duties and station was determined. If the deaconess was sent to live and work in another location, she returned to the motherhouse periodically for rest and to reconnect to her community. It served as her permanent home where she was guaranteed care in sickness, old age and until death, if she so desired.

“...whenever she becomes temporarily ill or unable to attend to her work, the mother-house is always her home. In like manner a deaconess may look forward to the mother-house as her home in old age, where she can spend the evening of her life, because she realizes herself to be like a daughter of the Home.” —Principles of Deaconess Work
The last Sunday in Jan. 1907, I heard the call of my Lord and Master during a sermon preached by Rev. Otto Press in my home church in Sedalia, Mo. His text was “Laborers in the Vineyard,” Matt. 20:1–16. I tried to excuse myself, thinking that I was not strong enough physically to undertake a special work as a Deaconess. The following Sun. the Pastor reminded me of the promise the Lord gives to the weak, by using 2 Cor. 12:9 as his text. But still I was not convinced. I prayed that the Lord should guide me & decided to speak to my pastor about it at my first opportunity.

During the week, I went to visit a Sunday School scholar that was sick. Lo & behold: Rev. Press was also there. I felt it to be an answer to my prayer to give me such a good chance to speak to him which I did on our way home. Naturally he encouraged me although I know he was surprised.

The next step I felt, was to tell my parents, they were pleased and wished me God’s blessing. But my sister said, “If you stand it three months you will do well.” That was about what all my friends seemed to think, so it was very little encouragement I received. Some busy months followed, even took some private lessons in German grammar from the Pastor’s wife. Bye & bye, July 12th arrived, the day when I left my home, where I had spent 28 years of my life to go to the Deaconess Home & Hospital in St. Louis.

Written by Sister Anna Goetze about 1940
Rules and regulations

Rules of the motherhouse, circa 1915

Hospital regulations at the turn of the 20th century

Rules for visitors, 1902

Terms of admission, 1899

Rules for patients, 1907
Deaconesses took vows, were addressed as “sister,” wore special clothing, remained single, and lived simply and together in community—all characteristics typical of Roman Catholic orders. Deaconesses, however, emphasized the practical reasons for their way of life and were theologically grounded in the Protestant Reformation.

**DEACONESS VOWS**

Roman Catholic sisters took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Deaconess pledged vows of obedience, willingness and faithfulness:

- **Obedience**—the subordination of one’s own will to the rules of the motherhouse and to one’s superiors. Obedience had to be voluntary but never blind, and each deaconess had the right to question an order if her conscious demanded it.

- **Willingness**—the desire to serve others and the greater good of the motherhouse as opposed to one’s own wants.

- **Faithfulness**—to the will of God and to one’s own work. Faithfulness required perseverance in the face of difficulties and a dedication to a life of service in imitation of Christ and according to the rules of the motherhouse.

Deaconess vows were grounded in the baptismal vow and demanded nothing more than what could be required of any Christian. At consecration, the vows bound the sister to the motherhouse as long as she remained a deaconess.
DEACONESS GARB

Like the Roman Catholic sister’s habit, the deaconesses’ mode of dress (called a “garb”) was a visual expression of their calling. Deaconesses emphasized the practicality of the garb to their work:

- It avoided luxury, whims of fashion, and saved time, money and thought.
- It symbolized the spiritual relationship of the sisters and diminished individual differences of class or wealth.
- It was a “recommendation and protection” that identified the deaconess and allowed her to work “unmolested” when in public.
- It reminded the deaconess of her calling, and that she should act accordingly.

The Evangelical Deaconess garb was originally modeled after that of the Kaiserswerth deaconesses but modified over time. When the standard nurse’s uniform was adopted in 1926, the deaconess pin became the primary means of deaconess identification.

“As a confession of the vocation of its wearer, the garb is also a confession of the Lord whom she serves.” – Principles of Deaconess Work

CELIBACY

Deaconesses affirmed the Reformation view that marriage was itself a vocation and that celibacy was no better or worse. However, they also emphasized that single women had more time to dedicate themselves to ministry and that celibacy had its own calling and nobility. Practically speaking, it was impossible for a married woman to participate in deaconess work because of its demands.

“... a deaconess has the right to leave her vocation and to accept a proposal of marriage, if she believes it to be God’s will. But she should only take such a step with a good conscience, if she was not actuated by the ‘desire to please the man’...[and] take heed that she be not more prompted by flesh and blood than by the Lord.” – Principles of Deaconess Work

VOCATION FOR LIFE

While Roman Catholic sisters’ vows were thought to be binding for life, deaconesses were free to return to private life whenever they wanted, and many did. However, deaconesses were encouraged to view their vocation as a life-long calling and to resist the temptation to marry, return to their parents, or take a secular job.

“The vow of a deaconess is binding only so long as the Lord does not clearly and distinctly show her another way. If circumstances arise in which she is confronted with the question of leaving the work, then she will earnestly examine herself in regard to her vow of faithfulness as what may be the will of God in that case...” – Principles of Deaconess Work
TRAINING

When the first St. Louis Deaconess Home was established in 1889, hospitals were often filthy and chaotic places served by untrained staff. Deaconesses were medically trained and could follow the doctor’s instructions to provide reliable, consistent and disciplined nursing care. As medical technology advanced, deaconesses also became nursing specialists and medical technicians. The sisters quickly gained a reputation for operating a sanitary and orderly hospital environment. Deaconess Hospital was open to all persons regardless of creed or ability to pay.

Deaconesses were more than medical professionals. Theirs was also a ministry of charity and mercy that provided care for the soul as well as the body. Sisters ministered spiritually to patients by praying for and with them, reading scripture, listening, sharing hymns, or by simply being present.

“As the deaconess assists the physician in attending to the care of the body, so she is primarily the servant of Him who has said: ‘I am Jehovah that healeth thee’ (Ex. 15:26); and for that reason she is also the official assistant of the pastor in the care of the soul.” —Principles of Deaconess Work

WORKING

At the end of the 19th century, hospitals were considered places of last resort. Although the deaconesses provided hospital care, private duty nursing dominated their work in the early years. In-home care often required deaconesses to cook, clean, and supervise children, as well as give 24-hour nursing care. In the hospital, 12-hour works days were common. Working in close quarters around infectious disease could be dangerous in the days before vaccines, sterile procedures, and modern medicines. Records show that some sisters contracted typhoid fever. Several deaconesses were hospitalized during the 1917–1918 flu epidemic.

“The deaconess must not be afraid to nurse a smallpox or typhoid-fever patient, or where there is danger of contagion. In such cases very much depends upon being inwardly prepared, that is, by thinking often that one might be called to such a case at any time, and also by commending one’s ways trustfully unto the Lord.” —Principles of Deaconess Work

Sisters assisting in the operating room, 1900
Sister Clara Weltge in the lab, ca. 1950
A deaconess in her room, 1909
SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

Deaconesses were given spiritual formation through instruction, prayer, reflection and communal living. Private morning and evening prayer, daily communal prayer, at least a half hour of daily meditation and reflection, and frequent reception of Holy Communion were considered essential. The Superintendent, an ordained pastor, acted as spiritual director and gave religious instruction.

Learning to live in community was a spiritual exercise as well as a practical necessity. The probation period was both a time of learning the life of the community, as well as a period of testing. Living in community involved deferring one’s own will to one’s superiors, the rules of the motherhouse, and the needs of the community as a whole. Loving one’s neighbor and being able to address faults and wrongs sensitively and lovingly were especially important. Deaconesses could only be absent from the motherhouse by permission of the Sister Superior and the Superintendent.

COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS

A sister received no pay outside of a small stipend to cover personal items. Living expenses and health care were provided, however, as long as she remained a deaconess. The motherhouse was the deaconess’s home in health and sickness—and if she desired—through retirement and until death. Deaconesses received one month of vacation annually. Beginning in 1911, the Society provided a small farm in (at the time) rural Sappington as a retreat away from the rigors of institutional life. A sisters’ plot was established in St. Peter’s Cemetery for deaconess burials.

MANAGEMENT AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Overall management was through the Evangelical Deaconess Society Board of Directors’ House Committee. The Superintendent acted as the home and hospital’s business manager and pastor. The Sister Superior (later called Executive Deaconess) managed internal affairs among the sisters, and supervised the nursing staff. Society members paid membership dues, providing basic financial support for the home and hospital. Other significant support came from area congregations and individual donations. Beginning in 1899, gifts from grateful patients went into the Deaconess Support Fund to support the sisters’ health care and retirement.

Sister Philippina Buehn leaving for an in-home assignment, ca. 1900
Sister Bertha Grollmus taking an electrocardiogram, ca. 1953
Sisters arriving for relaxation at the farm, 1920s
“No school can compare with nursing in emphasizing and developing all feminine powers and qualities. No other calling makes such unlimited demands on feminine ability, and none, therefore, is so valuable for the special training of the sister, as nursing....This kind of preparation seems indispensable, even though she may afterward be chosen for some other branch of the work, because in no other way can her physical and mental powers be so thoroughly disciplined as by nursing.” — The Deaconess Motherhouse in Its Relation to the Deaconess Work

Although all deaconesses entering the St. Louis motherhouse were trained as nurses, other types of work besides nursing were open to them.

**PARISH DEACONESSES**

Parish deaconess responsibilities included Christian education, social work and home visitation. Sisters from the St. Louis motherhouse served St. Peter’s and St. James Churches and Caroline Mission in St. Louis, and churches in East St. Louis, Kansas City, Chicago and Rochester, N.Y. Parish workers were recalled to the motherhouse when the demand for nurses and nursing instructors grew in the 1930s.

**MISSIONARIES**

Five sisters brought their nursing skills to the missionary field:

- Sister Rosadel Albert, Honduras, 1947 – 1956
- Sister Minnie Gadt, India, 1926 – 1968
- Sister Alma Jungerman, India, 1932 – 1942
- Sister Mary Lou Mitchell, Ecuador, 1952 – 1954
- Sister Hulda Sturm, Honduras, 1926 – 1928

**PLACES OF WORK**

In addition to hospitals, deaconesses worked in homes for the aged in Rochester, N.Y.; Belleville and Bensenville, Ill.; Dorseyville (Pittsburgh), Pennsylvania; and St. Louis. Deaconesses sisters also served at Evangelical children’s homes in St. Louis and Hoyleton, Illinois.
Sisters were nurses, parish workers & missionaries

OTHER EVANGELICAL DEACONESS SOCIETIES

The Federation of Evangelical Deaconess Associations was founded in 1909 to provide a means of cooperation between Evangelical Synod deaconess organizations. The St. Louis Motherhouse continued to be instrumental in training deaconesses for these and other denominational institutions. Although many deaconess hospitals are no longer in operation or have merged with other institutions, the “Deaconess” name still survives in many locations.
For several decades after Deaconess Hospital was established, demand for deaconess nurses and hospital rooms outstripped the supply. The Evangelical Deaconess Society bought and converted a vacant school building at West Belle Place and Sarah Street in 1893 and built a sisters’ home adjacently. The hospital expanded in 1897 and several more times before moving to newly constructed quarters on Oakland Avenue near Hampton Avenue in 1930. Sisters lived on one floor of the new hospital and in rented quarters until a new sisters’ home was completed in 1942. The Deaconess School (later College) of Nursing for lay women was established in 1942.

The membership of the St. Louis sisterhood peaked in 1937 with 144 deaconesses. Although the number of women entering the sisterhood declined rapidly after that, enrollment in the nursing school grew rapidly after its founding in 1942. Despite an intensive effort, deaconess recruitment ended in the mid-1950s when it was determined that young women desired nursing as a career but no longer wanted to live as deaconesses. In 1949, Irma Williamson became the last deaconess to be consecrated. Deaconess sisters continued to teach in the nursing school and work in the hospital until retirement. Sister Marie Lee, the last surviving St. Louis deaconess, died on Feb. 25, 2010 at the age of 100.

Rapid changes in the hospital industry and the Medicare system led Deaconess Hospital to merge in 1995 with Incarnate Word Hospital, located at Grand Boulevard and Lafayette Avenue and operated by the Sisters of Charity of San Antonio. Deaconess-Incarnate Health System was sold to Tenant Corp., a for-profit hospital corporation in 1997, and the facility was renamed Forest Park Hospital. After struggling financially under several different owners, the hospital was sold to the St. Louis Zoo in 2012 and the complex razed in 2014.

The Deaconess College of Nursing was included in the sale of the hospital to Tenant Corp. DeVry purchased the school in 2005, and it continues its educational mission as the Chamberlain College of Nursing.
CONTINUING THE DEACONESS MISSION

The Evangelical Deaconesses of St. Louis brought an enormous amount of faith, skill, talent, energy and leadership to their calling. They deaconesses were instrumental in creating a major urban hospital, founding an educational institution for the nursing profession, and bringing the Church’s ministry to countless individuals. The St. Louis sisterhood was honored in a 1989 United Church of Christ General Conference resolution that “gratefully acknowledge[d] the legacy of the Deaconess Sisters whose gifts and grace have abundantly enriched the life of the whole church.”

Although the hospital and all its sisters are now gone, the deaconess tradition lives on in several continuing organizations.

The Deaconess Foundation

The Deaconess Foundation was established in 1972 to support the hospital’s charitable work and medical mission. Bolstered by funds from the hospital’s sale, the foundation offers grants to organizations that promote health care, wellness, and assistance to children living in poverty.

Deaconess Faith Community Nurse Ministries

Deaconess Faith Community Nurse Ministries (known as Deaconess Parish Nurse Ministries until 2014) was established in 1990. The organization supports the work of nursing professionals in congregations and other organizations in providing health education and counseling, advocacy, referrals, and support to the community. Its offices are located on the Eden Seminary Campus.
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DEACONESS VOCATION IN WOMEN’S LIVES

When the St. Louis sisterhood was founded in 1889, women were almost entirely confined to family roles. Married women rarely worked outside the home. Single women might be permitted to work, but only in “suitable” jobs, such as domestic cooks and housekeepers. This was especially true in German immigrant households, which tended to be conservative and traditional.

The deaconess vocation offered women the opportunity to receive an education and achieve a profession away from the control of a husband or family. In this sense they were “liberated” women who enjoyed freedom and independence, albeit within the protective community of the motherhouse. Although ordination was closed to women, the deaconess office was also a religious vocation and a recognized ministry of the church with significant importance.

“Their life-style and work are part of the women’s movement of modern times. They are the pioneer professional women of the church.” — “The Deaconess Sisters: Pioneer Professional Women”

“There is a spirit of obedience, willingness and faithfulness, has been felt at every level of the church’s life and far beyond.” — The Deaconess Heritage.

THE DECLINE OF THE ST. LOUIS SISTERHOOD

While the St. Louis sisterhood grew rapidly in its early years, its numbers declined rapidly after 1937. Four major factors worked in combination against the Society’s recruiting efforts.

The expanding role of women

The Women’s Movement, which gave women the right to vote and rapidly expanded their roles in society, had an immense impact on the deaconess movement. As women gained access to and acceptance in formerly male-only professions, attraction to the deaconess life decreased. Women desiring a vocation in the church also began to find other options in the 1930s, when they...
were admitted to Evangelical and Reformed seminaries for the first time. The denomination began ordaining women in 1949.

Challenges of the deaconess way of life

Deaconess life had two personal challenges: communal living in obedience to the motherhouse and celibacy. From the beginning, many women discovered these requirements to be either undesirable or impossible to live by. Of the 510 women that entered the program as probationers, more than a third (191) were consecrated. Of those that left before consecration, the main reasons were dissatisfaction (15%) and marriage (14%), according to a survey conducted by the sisterhood. Of the 124 sisters who resigned after consecration, a third (42) left to be married. Slightly more than a third of consecrated sisters (67) remained in the mother-house until retirement or death.

Exclusive focus on nursing

The St. Louis sisterhood focused almost exclusively on nursing, with only a few deaconesses entering other types of work. The growth of hospitals and the availability of nursing education in secular institutions gave women other options. Sisterhoods in other denominations also declined, but those that survived did so partially because of the variety of work options available.

Denominational recognition and culture

The deaconess office was officially recognized by the Evangelical Synod of North America in 1921 and a rite for consecration included in its liturgical books. However, when the Evangelical Synod merged with the Reformed Church in 1934, deaconesses lost their official standing and only regained it in 1952. The rite for the consecration of a deaconess was not included in the Evangelical and Reformed Book of Worship, and deaconesses were not listed in yearbooks until 1952. These factors belie the denomination's hesitancy to support the deaconess office. In the context of Protestantism, deaconesses traditions such as vows, celibacy and special garb were sometimes held in suspicion as being counter to spirit of the Reformation.

Deaconess sisters modeling period garbs, ca. 1980
The deaconess movement found particular resonance among German-American Protestants and still survives in several mainline denominations. Most existing deaconess communities are members of the Diakonia World Federation, an international ecumenical organization for diaconal work.

THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
The Evangelical Synod of North America was not the only United Church of Christ (UCC) predecessor denomination to have deaconesses. The (German) Reformed Church established deaconess work in 1892. Deaconess operated homes and hospitals in Cleveland; Buffalo, N.Y.; Alliance, Oh.; and Allentown, Penn., and they were also involved in parish work. The Congregational Churches established deaconess work in Oak Park, Ill. in 1900, although the movement never gained strength. Deaconesses are no longer consecrated in the UCC, but both women and men act in diaconal roles as commissioned lay ministers.

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Augustus Muhlenberg, a descendent of American Lutheran patriarch Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, established the first Episcopal deaconess community in 1853 in New York. The office was first recognized by the church in 1889, by which time houses had also been organized in Baltimore and Philadelphia. The movement peaked in 1929 with 224 deaconesses. Deaconesses were allowed to marry beginning in 1964. The last deaconess house closed in 1970. Influenced by the Oxford Movement, Episcopal deaconesses tended more closely to resemble Roman Catholic sisterhoods.

LUTHERAN CHURCHES
The first denomination to bring deaconesses to the United States, German and Scandinavian Lutheran denominations that are now part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) established motherhouses in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Omaha. The last Lutheran motherhouse, in Philadelphia, closed in 1996. ELCA deaconesses continue to work in a variety of ministries, but are no longer required to live in community and may marry.
The Lutheran Synodical Conference, which included the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), began deaconess work in 1919 with a training school in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. The training school and its branches were consolidated in 1935 as the Lutheran Deaconess Association (LDA) at Valparaiso University, a pan-Lutheran school with a large LCMS constituency.

Doctrinal issues related to LDA’s ties to other Lutheran denominations led the LCMS to create the Concordia Deaconess Conference in 1980 and establish deaconess programs at Concordia University, River Forest, Illinois, and Concordia Seminary in St. Louis.

**METHODISTS**

Methodists deaconesses began working in 1888 and were particularly active in parishes in inner-city churches and settlement houses. Methodist sisters were ethnically diverse. The African Methodist Episcopal Church established a motherhouse in 1901, and the Methodist Episcopal Church opened a training school for African-American women in the late 19th century. The movement’s strongest support, however, was among German Methodists, who founded homes of their own in Brooklyn, Chicago, Louisville and St. Paul. The Evangelical United Brethren, which became part of the United Methodist Church in 1966, also supported deaconess work.

Denominational size, openness to women in leadership, focus on inner-city mission, and insistence on the English language were factors that led to the numerical success of Methodist deaconesses, which numbered 1200 in 1903.

**OTHER PROTESTANTS**

General Conference Mennonites established a deaconess home and hospital in Newton, Kansas in 1900. Mennonite deaconesses were active until the 1940s. German Baptists established deaconess work along the Kaiserswerth model in 1897 in New York and other cities. Presbyterians in some places accepted deaconesses, although a motherhouse was never established.
Sr. Pauline Becker, 1908 – 1986  
Addieville, Illinois  
Consecrated May 27, 1934

Sr. Frieda Bergstraesser 1895 – 1928  
Stillwater, Oklahoma  
Consecrated May 28, 1922

Sr. Lydia Biekert 1884 – 1912  
Nashua, Iowa  
Consecrated 1911

Sr. Ida Bieri 1900 – 1988  
California, Missouri  
Consecrated May 28, 1929

Sr. Charlotte Boekhaus 1870 – 1952  
Ursa, Illinois  
Consecrated 1898

Sr. Olga Borgmann 1889 – 1956  
Levasy, Missouri  
Consecrated April 25, 1920

Sr. Philippine Buehn 1865 – 1920  
Consecrated 1892

Sr. Irene Crusius 1899 – 1943  
So. Germantown, Wisconsin  
Consecrated May 28, 1922

Sr. Adelia Dickmann 1894 – 1957  
Kiel, Wisconsin  
Consecrated May 24, 1925
Those who lived out their lives in the deaconess vocation

Sr. Olivia Drusch
1903 – 1989
Hermann, Missouri
Consecrated May 31, 1931

Sr. Mary Feutz
1875 – 1960
Olney, Illinois
Consecrated October 1901

Sr. Philippina Fuchs
1872 – 1949
Chillicothe, Ohio
May 25, 1913

Sr. Hilda Echelmeier
1881 – 1961
Concordia, Missouri
Consecrated May 1, 1904

Sr. Minna Flottmann
1876 – 1944
Consecrated 1914

Sr. Olinde Fuhr
1891 – 1953
Defiance, Missouri
Consecrated May 18, 1919

Sr. Frieda Eckoff
1898 – 1988
Nokomis, Illinois
Consecrated April 13, 1921

Sr. Emma Fruechte
1888 – 1974
Eitzen, Minnesota
Consecrated 1911

Sr. Minnie Gadt
1896 – 1981
Lexington, Missouri
Consecrated May 27, 1923
Life-sisters

Sr. Magdalena Gerhold
1893 – 1959
Tower Hill, Illinois
Consecrated February 19, 1893

Sr. Anna Goetze
1878 – 1952
Sedalia, Missouri
Consecrated May 21, 1911

Sr. Bertha Grollmus
1897 – 1991
East Hamilton, Ohio
Consecrated May 27, 1923

Sr. Selma Hess
1895 – 1977
Jefferson City, Missouri
Consecrated May 21, 1927

Sr. Frieda Hoffmeister
1905 – 1989
Gordonville, Missouri
Consecrated May 22, 1932

Sr. Sophie Hubeli
1874 – 1948
St. Louis, Missouri
Consecrated 1907

Sr. Elsie Jungerman
1903 – 1998
Odessa, Missouri
Consecrated May 27, 1934

Sr. Velma Kampschmidt
1905 – 1991
Higginsville, Missouri
Consecrated June 3, 1928

Sr. Katherine Keck
1870 – 1960
Millstadt, Illinois
Consecrated May 25, 1905
Those who lived out their lives in the deaconess vocation

Sr. Therese Kettelhut
1878 – 1961
Freelandville, Indiana
Consecrated 1904

Sr. Marie Korte
1903 – 1989
Irvington, Illinois
Consecrated May 21, 1933

Sr. Florentine Kramme
1901 – 1987
Oermann, Missouri
Consecrated May 20, 1928

Sr. Mary Anna Kramme
1899 – 2000
Oermann, Missouri
Consecrated May 21, 1923

Sr. Elisabeth Kunze
1891 – 1983
California, Missouri
Consecrated April 25, 1920

Sr. Marie Lee
1910 – 2010
Latham, Illinois
Consecrated May 22, 1932

Sr. Anna Lenger
1884 – 1983
Thompson, Nebraska
Consecrated March 22, 1914

Sr. Ella Loew
1889 – 1983
Leavenworth, Kansas
Consecrated March 22, 1914

Sr. Elizabeth Lotz
1902 – 1995
Kassel, Hessen, Germany
Consecrated May 20, 1928
Life-sisters

Sr. Henrietta Lutten
1890 – 1986
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Consecrated 1928

Sr. Mathilde Matthes
1885 – 1969
Creve Coeur, Missouri
Consecrated June 6, 1915

Sr. Hilda Mark
1902 – 1963
Hamilton, Ohio
Consecrated May 24, 1925

Sr. Johanna Nollau
1888 – 1968
Sappington, Missouri
Consecrated April 25, 1920

Sr. Kate Nottrott
1905 – 1993
St. Louis, Missouri
Consecrated May 26, 1929

Sr. Maria Oehler
1874 – 1929
Stratman, Missouri
Consecrated 1902

Sr. Lydia Pahmeier
1905 – 1977
Chamois, Missouri
Consecrated May 26, 1929

Sr. Caroline Pepmeier
1878 – 1950
Freelandville, Indiana
Consecrated 1904

Sr. Naomi Pielemeier
1906 – 2001
Freelandville, Indiana
Consecrated May 28, 1939
Those who lived out their lives in the deaconess vocation

Sr. Flora Pletz  
1901 – 1993  
Owensville, Missouri  
Consecrated May 21, 1927

Sr. Martha Roglin  
1879 – 1960  
Dittmer, Missouri  
Consecrated May 18, 1919

Sr. Anna Pohllmann  
1866 – 1942  
New Albin, Iowa  
Consecrated 1903

Sr. Elizabeth Schaefer  
1887 – 1979  
Denver, Colorado  
Consecrated May 25, 1924

Sr. Maria Schenk  
1891 – 1917  
Rock Island, Illinois  
Consecrated June 6, 1915

Sr. Helen Schneider  
1913 – 1985  
St. Louis, Missouri  
Consecrated May 22, 1938

Sr. Gertrude Poth  
1909 – 2007  
St. Louis, Missouri  
Consecrated May 27, 1934

Sr. Alvina Scheid  
1882 – 1955  
Freeburg, Illinois  
Consecrated May 23, 1909

Sr. Beata Schick  
1881 – 1941  
Grant Park, Illinois  
Consecrated 1904
Life-sisters

Sr. Christine Schwarz
1877 – 1972
Rochester, New York
Consecrated August 2, 1903

Sr. Carolina Soehlig
1883 – 1946
Jackson, Missouri
Consecrated May 31, 1908

Sr. Clara Stoenner
1896 – 1976
Bay, Missouri
Consecrated May 28, 1922

Sr. Edna Stoenner
1894 – 1984
Bay, Missouri
Consecrated May 6, 1917

Sr. Katharina Streib
1871 – 1939
Cottleville, Missouri
Consecrated 1902

Sr. Anna Ullrich
1893 – 1980
Austin, Texas
Consecrated May 28, 1922

Sr. Hulda Weise
1915 – 1991
Little Rock, Arkansas
Consecrated May 28, 1944

Sr. Elsa Weiss
1894 – 1975
Hamilton, Ohio
Consecrated May 20, 1928

Sr. Clara Weltge
1888 – 1984
Hoberg, Missouri
Consecrated May 28, 1922
Those who lived out their lives in the deaconess vocation

Sr. Loretta Wohlschlaeger
1899 – 1968
Jefferson Barracks, Missouri
Consecrated May 25, 1924

Sr. Verlia Woltemath
1892 – 1967
Warrenton, Missouri
Consecrated May 6, 1917

Sr. Amanda Wulff
1899 – 1977
Warrenton, Missouri
Consecrated May 26, 1929

Sr. Frieda Ziegler
1905 – 1996
Edwardsville, Illinois
Consecrated May 20, 1929

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely; and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

PAUL’S LETTER TO THE HEBREWS 12:1–2 (NRSV)
Sisters Superior of the St. Louis Sisterhood

1889 – 1897
Sr. Katherine Haack

1897 – 1943
Sr. Magdelene Gerhold

1943 – 1954
Sr. Olivia Drusch

1954 – 1973
Sr. Frieda Ziegler

Other deaconesses, with year of consecration

Rosadel Albert, 1946
Catherine Alexander, 1935
Martha Artus, 1946
Mildene Baird, 1935
Esther Baker, 1945
Emma Barth, 1944
Audrey Baumgartner, 1944
Ruth Beek, 1938
Hazel Benning, 1935
Catherine Bergesch, 1938
Paulina Bergstrasser, 1920
Anna Bischel, 1911
Melba Bischoff, 1939
Sophie Brunner, 1892
Johann Burschmann, 1911
Maroske Charlotte, 1936
Beatrice Childers, 1937
Louise Conzelman, 1934
Helene Dallmer, 1938
Lydia Daries, 1889
Dorothy Demey, 1938
Helen Demey, 1941
Nelda Diestelkamp, 1938
Maria Duersken, 1913
Anna Ehrle, 1932
Emilie Eich, 1905
Elisie Engelke, 1937
Lina Ernst, 1907
Doris Euno, 1944
Alma Faris, 1936
Loreda Feucht, 1940
Roma Fischer, 1938
Bertha Frederich, 1905
Mildred Frick, 1935
Theresa Fuertst, 1940
Elizabeth Geiger, 1940
Selma Gerdeman, 1935
Ella Gerding, 1936
Catherine Haack, 1889
Ferol Habbe, 1935
Wilhelmina Hahn, 1918
Pauline Hallmann, 1914
Anna Hampel, 1934
Irene Hanebutt, 1945
Arloj Hestenberg, 1937
Ellen High, 1936
Elise Hirschler, 1911
Gertrude Hohlt, 1936
Florence Holderle, 1921
Bertha Huntmann, 1925
Doris Hupp, 1946
Norma Johannotsettal, 1936
Lena Johnson, 1922
Johanna Jung, 1938
Alma Juengerman, 1926
Pearl Kaiser, 1938
Thelma Katterjohn, 1937
Marie Keller, 1929
Selma Kelm, 1940
Kathryn Ketttman, 1940
Velma Kiser, 1937
Emilie Knapp, 1919
Erna Koberstein, 1933
Eunice Koehler, 1944
Gretchen Kopp, 1937
Irmia Korte, 1941
Elma Kramme, 1938
Clara Kuhlenhoeter, 1907
Verna Lachtrup, 1941
Johannetta Lix, 1893
Norma Luker, 1939
Hilda Mall, 1908
Alma Marcus, 1933
Emma Martzke, 1919
Emma Marzahn, 1918
Amalie Matthes, 1905
Louise Mayer, 1929
Anna Meier, 1909
Eugenia Merhtens, 1934
Cleola Meyer, 1938
Henrietta Meyer, 1927
Edna Michel, 1934
Mary Lou Mitchell, 1939
Frieda Muenstermann, 1924
Hilda Muenstermann, 1931
Johanna Niewohner, 1902
Anna Nissel, 1908
Hulda Nollau, 1921
Maria Nottrott, 1919
Theodora Nullmeyer, 1945
Frieda Petzoldt, 1939
Mildred Raabe, 1936
Emilie Rabius, 1927
Katherine Rompf, 1935
Irene Saeger, 1946
Dolores Sawade, 1939
Clara Schaefer, 1933
Dorothy Scherrrer, 1941
Irma Schottach, 1932
Florence Schmidt, 1936
Maria Schmidt, 1944
Ema Scholze, 1924
Ruth Senger, 1935
Teh Chen Shih, 1929
Dorothy Sipp, 1937
Cornelia Sieveking, 1925
Frieda Sievert, 1904
Mida Smith, 1940
Isabell Soechting, 1938
Marie Sprick, 1927
Enda Stoll, 1939
Mildred Stremme, 1938
Elvera Stuecken, 1933
Hulda Sturm, 1920
Georgia Timens, 1940
Margaret Van Dyck, 1933
Wilma Vogel, 1937
Maria Wedel, 1911
Marie Wellpott, 1892
Irma Williamson, 1949
Agnes Wohlfel, 1937
Anna Wohlwend, 1935
Anna Wolf, 1903
Kathryn Wood, 1940
Edna Zeiser, 1936

1889 – 1897
Sr. Katherine Haack

1897 – 1943
Sr. Magdelene Gerhold

1943 – 1954
Sr. Olivia Drusch

1954 – 1973
Sr. Frieda Ziegler
Superintendents / administrators and chaplains, 1898–2005

Chaplains were originally also superintendents and business managers for the Deaconess Home and Hospital. Chaplain and Hospital Administrator positions were separated in 1956.

**SUPERINTENDENTS (1898–1956)**
- 1898–1939 The Rev. Frederick Jens
- 1940–1948 The Rev. Paul Zwilling
- 1949–1956 The Rev. Carl Rasche

**HOSPITAL ADMINISTRATORS / PRESIDENTS (1956–1997)**

**CHAPLAINS (1956–2005)**

Deaconess chapels
Top left: ca. 1905, West Belle Place
Bottom left, ca. 1920, West Belle Place
Top right: 1956, Oakland Avenue
Photographs and document images are drawn from materials located in the Deaconess Archives. Other information for the exhibit was drawn from the following sources.


Billingsly, Linda M. Tenet Is Announcing Name Changes for all Deaconess Hospitals.” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, May 20, 1999, 4


