An Introduction to Deaconesses and Their Work

This speech was given by Deaconess Rockrohr at the 1 September 2012 Open Day at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Tshwane (Pretoria), South Africa.

I greet you all on the name of Jesus Christ. May the Lord bless our time together so that we may be enriched and refreshed, strengthened for service to Him.

Many people ask the question, “What is a deaconess?” so we will begin at that point.

The deaconess is a Christian woman specially trained and dedicated to serving the Lord. She normally serves under the supervision and direction of the pastor, in those areas where a woman may properly serve. This can include works of mercy, always connected to the Gospel message.

The title “deaconess” comes to us from the Greek word diakoneo (servant) in the New Testament. It was first used to describe the attitude and service of a woman or man (deacon) and soon came to be understood as a title as well. The concept of service carried by the word “deaconess” is still useful today, and for those who bear the title “deaconess” it is also a reminder to them of the labor of love to which they have been called. A deaconess is a servant.

Let us read from Acts 6. “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’”

Acts 6 describes the first deacons, who supported the pastoral office in the area of mercy works so that the apostles could dedicate their time to prayer and the ministry of the Word. The book of Acts records the growth of the early church, and some of the challenges associated with that growth. There were many needs among these new Christians. This passage in Acts chapter 6 teaches us two things. First, that the primary work of the pastor must always be the ministry of the Word. Second, that it is good and right for the church to attend to the various needs of its people. The apostles did not say, “we must concern ourselves with preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ, so don’t bother us with complaints about physical hunger.” Instead, they said that both preaching the Good News and caring for the physical needs of the congregation were important, so they appointed deacons to see to the works of mercy.

In Romans 16:1-2 Paul calls Phoebe a deaconess, or servant, at the church in Cenchrea. Scholars believe Phoebe assisted Paul by delivering his letter to the Christians in Rome. The service of deaconesses continued to be noted throughout the Church’s history.
At this point we must make a careful distinction. Some churches today also have deacons, and in some churches the deacon is also trained and called to preach, lead public worship, and perhaps even administer the sacraments. We should not be confused by this current use of the title ‘deacon’ and make the leap to assume that a deaconess will also preach, lead public worship, or administer the sacraments. This is not work that the deaconess does.

The deaconess does not aspire to the Office of the Public Ministry (pastor) but rather desires to support and extend the work of the pastor through specific tasks. As such, the deaconess does NOT preach, lead public worship, administer the sacraments (Baptism, Holy Communion), or the office of the keys (confession/absolution). It is never the aim of the deaconess to cause confusion or division in the Church.

The deaconess focuses on works of mercy, spiritual care, and teaching the faith. She guides people to the pastor who offers Word and Sacrament.

Mercy work is a large part of the work of a deaconess, so let us look for a moment at the concept of mercy. Mercy in the Scriptures is always oriented toward (connected with) an action. It is never just an emotion.

In Exodus 34:6 we read, “The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.’” And also in Psalm 40:11, “As for you, O LORD, you will not restrain your mercy from me; your steadfast love and your faithfulness will ever preserve me!” In both of these passages mercy is described in context with the covenant faithfulness of the Lord.

A very strong example of mercy is seen in the Exodus narrative, beginning with the Lord rescuing His people from slavery in Egypt. He also gave water, quail and manna as food (Ex. 16:4-5, 12-13) during their time in the wilderness, their clothing and shoes did not wear out (Deut. 29:5), and they were brought to the land of Canaan that was promised in covenant to Abraham, even though they sinned many times. So we see that mercy is not just an attitude or an emotion, but mercy is seen in action.

Jesus also teaches us about mercy. Jesus said, “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). Jesus is speaking to believers, because no one can call God “Father” apart from faith. As believers, we have already received mercy from the Father, and these words were spoken in the context of a rich history of the Lord’s mercy and faithfulness to His people throughout the Old Testament. The command to “be merciful” describes action connected with attitude, and not merely emotion. “Be merciful” is a summary of all that Jesus said in Luke 6:27-35.

We have asked, ‘what is a deaconess’ and we have looked at mercy, which is one area where a deaconess specifically focuses her work. But, what exactly does a deaconess do?

The work of the deaconess should be properly matched to her gifts (skills, abilities) and the needs of the Church in the place where she serves. For this reason, the activities and tasks of a deaconess in one place may be very different from those of a deaconess in another place. Think of all of the work within the congregation, building up the community of faith; then think of all of the work outside the congregation, reaching out into the community to bring the Gospel and to bring help and hope in a hurting world. A deaconess can work in any of these areas except those that are reserved for the pastor. That is, she can do anything except preach, lead public worship, or administer the sacraments. Her service may include such things as:

- teaching women’s Bible class; providing training to women in other concerns such as literacy, child care, health, etc, from a Christian/Lutheran perspective; religious instruction of children, which might occur in settings such as Sunday School, religious instruction in school, assisting with confirmation instruction, or other similar venues;
visiting those who are sick or in hospital; care for the needy of the congregation or the community; ministry to women in prison; evangelism and outreach; work in the church’s social care programmes such as crèche, soup kitchen, women in crisis, HIV/AIDS teaching or intervention, etc.

This is a listing of examples of the type of work a deaconess may do, always to extend the Lord’s kingdom and the Gospel message, to encourage believers and to evangelize those who do not yet know Christ as Savior. Not every deaconess will do all of these tasks all of the time. Rather, she will serve in specific areas depending on the needs of the Church in the place where she serves. Her work will support the work of the pastor, and through her work people will be pointed to the pastor for Word and Sacrament.

The deaconess programme at LTS prepares women to serve the church as deaconesses in congregation, education and social ministry settings. There are two strands of deaconess training available. Women may study full-time in a two-year residential programme, or may enroll in a part-time programme with 2-week intensive courses twice per year, stretching over several years. Deaconess Deborah Rockrohr is the director of the residential programme, and Deaconess Grace Rao is the director of the part-time programme.

May the Lord Jesus bless your service in His Church,

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Further Resource:

A very interesting website about the history of deaconesses in the Church can be found at www.deaconesshistory.org