

History of Deaconesses and Parish Nurses

Diakonia is the Greek word for service. *Diakonia* is the serving, caregiving, and healing arm of the Church -- caring for the whole person. *Diakonia* was Christ's service of walking among the people, healing diseases and forgiving sins. Following the Servant Christ, the early church took up the task of caring for and visiting the sick.

Early Church

Healing was an integral part of the church's ministry from the beginning. Phoebe is named in the New Testament as the first deaconess, and she is noted for opening her home to the sick and needy (Rom. 16:1-2). But Phoebe wasn't the only person to do this. As the church grew, many wealthy widows and matrons established places of comfort for those who were ill.

St. Fabiola, a fourth century widow, the daughter of a rich Roman patrician, committed herself to Christ, selling her possessions and using her wealth to build homes to care for the sick and the poor. Other deaconesses, like St. Olympias and St. Sophia, are mentioned in early church history as caregivers of many.

Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, much of the church's healing ministry was carried out by religious orders. From inside cloistered walls, Hildegard of Bingen included medicine, mysticism, and prayer in her ministry.

By the time of the Renaissance, medicine had become a science. Christian healing was largely ignored. However, the 19th century saw resurgence in the recognition of the connection between faith and health, leading to church-established hospitals.

Renewal of deaconesses and nursing

In the early 1800's, a German pastor, Theodore Fliedner of Kaiserswerth, was influential in developing a modern form of the diaconate. He established houses for people who were ill, developmentally disabled, transitioning from prison, or in any other need. He gathered women – deaconesses – to provide the care.

The idea of women providing health care spread quickly. Florence Nightingale spent some time studying the Kaiserswerth model. Her recognition of the connection between faith and healing did much to advance the professional aspect of nursing.

Coming to America

The church's deaconesses (nurses) were sent to other countries to open new institutions for those in need. A Lutheran Pastor, William Passavant, sent deaconesses to work in the Pittsburgh suburbs. Their "Pittsburgh Infirmary" was later named Passavant Hospital.

"Deaconess" hospitals were started all over the country, and not only by Lutherans. Many protestant denominations trained women for modern nursing, to staff their own deaconess

hospitals. In fact, the Lutheran Deaconess Association began as a training program for nurses at Lutheran Hospital, in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Deaconess ministry and nursing were initially linked. Women served and lived in the institutions that provided their training, but they were free to leave when they wanted. Not all nurses became deaconesses. Eventually, not all deaconesses became nurses.

Parish Nursing

In 1881, Lutheran General Hospital was opened in Chicago, staffed by deaconess nurses. It was here that parish nursing began, but it would take nearly a century to be named.

In 1940 Granger Westberg first experienced the power of faith at the hospital bedside when he served as chaplain. He saw the connection between physical well-being and spiritual health. His concept of wholistic healthcare developed over the next 40 years.

In 1983, Dr. Westberg proposed an experimental program to six Chicago congregations, using nurses as caregivers and trainers in these faith communities. Parish nursing was on its way! Today, hundreds of congregations have parish nurses, in many different denominations. Ongoing training and organizations are being formed in cities all over America to promote the ministry of parish nurses.

Deaconess ministry

In the earliest days of American diaconates, all deaconesses were given nursing training. By the 1940's, responding to the church's needs, deaconesses expanded their training to meet requests for service from congregations, schools, social service agencies, nursing homes, and overseas missions. Flexible education allowed women to specialize in many forms of human care, including nursing, education, counseling, social work, music, etc., to bring the Gospel to a variety of settings.

Some deaconesses are parish nurses, like Kati Kluckman-Ault, Brenda Bauer, and Lynne Senkarik. They support congregational ministries.

Some deaconesses are hospital nurses, like Nancy Mickan, Nita Cunningham, and Janet Conrady. They serve in medical centers.

Paula Mickan, a deaconess nurse, has an exciting new role in crisis response, serving with a helicopter medical team.

Lydia Volz is a parish nurse but not a deaconess. Through her work with the LDA Board, Lydia lifts up the connection between parish nurses and deaconesses.

Deaconesses and parish nurses belong together. Could God be calling YOU to one – or the other – or both?