

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The Deaconess Program—An Expansion of Concordia's Mission

By Paul A. Zimmerman

The St. Louis Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in July authorized the Board for Higher Education “to direct Concordia College, River Forest, Illinois to establish a full deaconess training program on its campus by the fall of 1980.” By taking this action the Synod expanded the mission of Concordia to educate professional church workers. Long known for its training of teachers of Christian schools, directors of Christian Education, and church musicians, Concordia recently added a pre-seminary program, as well as a social work program. Thus, the deaconess program comes as a logical addition to the mission of the college.

There are those who ask, What is a deaconess? Actually it is an office in the church that dates back to the early Apostolic times. In Romans 16:1 Paul speaks highly of “Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae.” Apparently this office was a logical complement to the office of deacon. It was part of the church's response to the needs of the sick, the poor, and the imprisoned. From Paul's manner of speaking it is apparent that Phoebe was a woman of means and prominence who was devotion her energies to this special ministry. Paul also refers to deaconesses in I Timothy 3:11 where they are required to have personal qualifications equal to those of the deacons.

The office of deaconess flourished in the ancient church in the third and fourth centuries. Deaconesses cared for the sick, for widows and orphans.

They instructed women catechumens and assisted in the baptism of women. They also served in other ways. However, the office fell into decline until it was revived in the nineteenth century. A German pastor, T. Fliedner established the first Protestant Community of Deaconesses in 1836. J.K.W. Loehe also established a deaconess “motherhouse” at Neuendettelsau in 1854. This is the

same Loehe who in 1846 founded a theological school at Fort Wayne, Indiana, now Concordia [Theological] Seminary.

The deaconess movement in Europe spread to England and to the United States. Deaconesses became active in the Lutheran Church, the Church of England, the Church of Scotland, as well as among the Methodists, Baptists, Mennonites, and others.

In America W.A. Passavant introduced the deaconess movement in Pittsburgh in connection with a hospital. Various other deaconess associations were formed in the 1880s. In 1919 the Lutheran Deaconess Association of the Evangelical Synodical Conference of North America was founded at Fort Wayne, Indiana. In this century Lutheran deaconesses have been trained at various locations including Fort Wayne, Indiana, Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, Hot Springs, South Dakota, Watertown, Wisconsin and Valparaiso, Indiana.

In 1959 the LCMS recognized the importance of providing for the education of deaconesses in its colleges by authorizing a pre-deaconess program at the synodical junior college level. Now twenty years later the Synod has decided to offer the full deaconess program at River Forest. Deaconesses are already placed for LCMS service under the supervision of Synod's Board of Assignments.

Deaconesses today still serve in the spirit of the Apostolic days. The are in which they minister includes nursing, social welfare, institutional work, foreign missions, and assisting parish pastors. The office provides a rich opportunity for young women to serve their Lord and His people.

The Synod did not in its action speak negatively of the Lutheran Deaconess Association or of its program at Valparaiso University. It did provide an option for those women who desire to prepare for the deaconess office in Synod's schools. This is consistent with the manner of educating Synod's other workers. It is to be hoped that this new emphasis on the importance of an ancient office will result in renewed interest. The office of deaconess has much to offer to our church today. Concordia will work hard to fulfill this sacred responsibility. We believe

this expanded mission of Concordia will be a blessing upon all concerned. Please join us in praying for its success.

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