

Celebrating the Order!
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Can you imagine yourself ministering in a “Church on Wheels” – a church in a van that faithfully brought the message of the Gospel to isolated families along remote roads – despite mud holes and flat tires?! Or imagine ministering in a more traditional church setting, but being told one of your tasks – in addition to office work, helping with the children’s, women’s and young people’s groups, teaching Sunday School, Bible study and visiting – was to catch the resident mice in the old church building! Or how about welcoming new families to Canada at the port, doing survey work for extension congregations, leading Vacation Bible Schools, hospital visiting, directing summer camps, conducting church services, planning workshops, elders training...just imagine... Well, over the years many have imagined, have heard the Call to service, and in response have ministered as members of the “Order”.

Members of the “Order”, earlier called Deaconesses, (now “Diaconal Ministers”) are servants of Jesus Christ set apart by the authority of the church and accountable to the church. The word “diaconal” is a Greek word meaning servant ministry, and the Order has been, and continues to be, a community dedicated to servant ministry, both for the church and for its members.

The Order of Diaconal Ministries (originally known as the Order of Deaconesses) arose out of an expressed need for trained workers to serve in Canada as well as overseas. In 1897 the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society opened the Ewart Missionary Training Home. This school trained women for service overseas. Within a short time they realized that there was a similar need in Canada. Discussions began with the Presbytery of Toronto who agreed with the need and overtured the General Assembly of 1907, asking that the Church “designate” graduates embarking upon their ministry. The same year the Synod of Manitoba overtured the General Assembly asking that steps be taken to set apart an Order of women to be known as deaconesses. A committee was struck to consider appropriate action and report to the next Assembly. The Assembly of 1908 acted on the recommendations of the committee and established the Order of Deaconesses.

Since 1908 members of the “Order” have served the church of Jesus Christ in numerous ways. Some of the many names Deaconesses have been known by are: Congregational Deaconess, Missionary Deaconess-at-Large (area work), Young Women’s Secretary, Regional Secretary, Van Worker, Hospital Visitor, Port Worker, Inner City Worker, Institutional Worker, Overseas Missionary, Education Resource Person, Director of Christian Education, Area Educational Consultant, Regional Staff, Presbytery Deaconess, Youth Worker...to name just a few.

Over the years, changes to the name, structure and place of the Order have occurred. As these changes have developed, the Order has kept before it the primary call to servant ministry. The major changes have included the name change in which the words “Diaconal Ministries” were substituted for that of “Deaconesses”, in 1984. The name was changed to enable male graduates of Ewart College to be designated into the Order. In 1991 members in active service were made members of the courts of the church, with voice and vote. In that same year, Ewart and Knox Colleges were amalgamated. Training for Diaconal Ministry is now accomplished through Knox College, with the requirement for membership in the Order a M.Div. with specialization in Christian Education, pastoral care or social ministry. In addition, the General Assembly in 1992 approved special course requirements by which members of the Order could qualify for ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments. Following the name change to the Order of

Diaconal Ministries, members of the Order were increasingly referred to as Diaconal Ministers. In response to what was now common usage, the name for members of the Order was changed in 1994 to Diaconal Ministers.

From its establishment in 1908, the Order has made a difference in the lives of people. Through the servant ministry provided by Deaconesses and Diaconal Ministers, the wonder of God's sustaining love has been experienced in settings across this great land and across the world. Members of the Order have often served in the background, trudging it out in the backwoods, coordinating Sunday School in the basement. Though not always in the forefront, the Order has had – and continues to have – a steady impact on the life of the church and its people. Margaret Boyd, who served the church as a deaconess for many years, including as a van worker, recalled how a man in northern Saskatchewan said to her one day, "You may think you are not doing any good here, but the name of The Presbyterian Church in Canada printed on the side of your van tells people that the church does care."