



SCAN FOR AUDIO

Deacons and Deaconesses as Caregivers to the Sick and Needy

There is an interesting parallel between the work of deacons and deaconesses, and those who work in the nursing profession. Recounting the history of the nursing profession, Janice Rider Ellis and Celia Love Hartley state, “The deaconesses of the Eastern Christian Church represent one group of particular significance to the history of nursing. These dedicated young women practiced ‘works of mercy’ that included feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, sheltering the homeless, caring for the sick, and burying the dead.”¹ Ellis and Hartley continue to say that these deaconesses are often cited as being the earliest counterparts to the community health nurses of today. They carried a basket that contained food and medicine that they distributed as they visited the homes of the sick. Their basket is the forerunner of the contemporary visiting nurse’s bag. Phoebe is often referred to as the first deaconess and first visiting nurse in books about nursing history.² Owen Chadwick also points out that during the 1500s, deacons and deaconesses were used as managers of hospitals in the Netherlands.³



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The ministry of deacons and deaconesses in the twenty-first century is a continuation of that history of caring for the sick and needy. In its list of duties for deacons and deaconesses, the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* includes the following statement:

Deacons and deaconesses are charged with assisting the sick, poor, and unfortunate and should keep the church informed of their needs and enlist the support of members. Money should be provided for this work from the fund for the poor and needy. The treasurer, on recommendation from the board, will pass over to the deacons or deaconesses whatever may be needed for use in needy cases.⁴

Eurico Tadeu Xavier concludes that the work of deacons and deaconesses is indispensable to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Among all of the services that they render, caring for the sick and helping the poor and suffering are important responsibilities that they carry out. He also states that the deacons or deaconesses may accompany an ordained minister or

elder of the church to give communion to a homebound member who happened to be sick, or who for any other reason could not leave home to participate in the communion service.⁵

Earl S. Johnson indicates that deacons assist senior citizens and visit shut-ins or members who cannot attend church services regularly. They organize transportation for those who cannot drive to their medical appointments. They provide meals and housing for the homeless, organize advocacy programs for those in legal trouble, and minister to those in jails and prisons.⁶

Ellis and Hartley relate the story of Pastor Theodore Fliedner and his wife Friederike who revived the deaconess movement in Europe by establishing a training institute for deaconesses at Kaisewerth, Germany, in 1836. Later they opened a small hospital. Gertrude Reichardt, the daughter of a physician, was recruited as their first deaconess. The endeavors at Kaisewerth included care of the sick, visitations and parochial work, and teaching. A course in nursing was developed that included

lectures by physicians. In 1849, Pastor Fliedner traveled to the United States, where he helped to establish the first motherhouse of Kaiserwerth deaconesses in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. With the help of four deaconesses, the Motherhouse of Kaiserwerth Deaconesses assumed responsibility for the Pittsburgh Infirmary, which was the first Protestant hospital in the United States. The hospital is now called Passavant Hospital.⁷

A great legacy has been left by the deaconesses and deacons of past generations. If today's deacons and deaconesses would continue this legacy by working with the nurses and other healthcare professionals in their churches and communities, a lot of suffering would be alleviated. ED



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¹ Janice Rider Ellis and Celia Love Hartley, *Nursing in Today's World: Trends, Issues and Management*, 8th ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2004), 117.

² Ibid.

³ Owen Chadwick, *The Early Reformation on the Continent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 105.

⁴ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2022), 84.

⁵ Eurico Tadeu Xavier, "Deacons Take Care of Almost Everything," trans. Antonio A. Rios, *Elder's Digest*, January–March 2004, 6–7.

⁶ Earl S. Johnson Jr., *The Presbyterian Deacon: An Essential Guide* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2002), 31.

⁷ Ellis and Hartley, *Nursing in Today's World*, 123.

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