

“Living the Vision: How United Methodist Deaconesses and Home Missioners Understand and Embody the Lay Diaconate”

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Abstract

The lay diaconate is a long-standing tradition in American Methodism, formally beginning in 1888 when the Methodist Episcopal Church recognized and established the Office of Deaconess. Today, the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner is one of the few avenues available for laity called to ministry and a lifetime relationship as laity. Deaconesses and home missioners understand themselves to be in covenant community with one another and function as a lay order of those called to full-time vocational ministries of love, justice, and service. This paper will explore the nature and role of deaconesses and home missioners within The United Methodist Church as understood both by the church and by the deaconess and home missioner community.

Introduction

The ministry of the diaconate within United Methodism and its predecessor churches has taken many forms. The pioneers of *diakonia* were deaconesses, lay women consecrated for vocational ministries in the world. In the 127 years since the Order of Deaconesses was first established in the Methodist Episcopal Church, American Methodism has seen *diakonia* embodied in a variety of ministerial forms and designations. While many of the other diaconal offices have closed, the lay Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner continues to thrive today along with the clergy Order of Deacons.

Deaconesses and home missioners are clear in their call to a lifetime relationship and ministry as laity. This has been one of the most important aspects of the deaconess and home missioner relationship. Identification and location as laity enables many deaconesses and home missioners in their ministries, which are oftentimes on the cutting-edge of what it means to represent the church in the world. At present, the deaconess and home missioner relationship is the only option available to women and men called to lay diaconal ministries in the United Methodist Church.¹

Since the beginning of the deaconess movement, there has been a strong understanding of covenant community among those who are consecrated and commissioned as deaconesses and home missioners. Those in the community understand themselves to be part of something bigger than themselves, sharing with their sisters and brothers a sense of call and dedication to ministries of love, justice, and service. While deaconesses and home missioners no longer live in communal homes, as they did in the early days of the movement, the shared sense of call and purpose combined with a spirit of camaraderie and mutual support are evidence of how this community functions as an order within United Methodism.

The deaconess and home missioner community, a lay order within The United Methodist Church, has always looked to *The Book of Discipline* as a starting point for interpreting the purpose

¹ The authors acknowledge that there are an expanding number of ministries and opportunities for laity who feel called to servant leadership. The Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner, however, is the only one of these ministries that is recognized by *The Book of Discipline* as part of *diakonia* and actively participates in the ecumenical diaconate through DIAKONIA World Federation and DIAKONIA of the Americas and Caribbean (DOTAC).

of its ministries. The guidance found in ¶1314 provides deaconesses and home missionaries with a foundation from which to build an understanding of lay diaconal order that can be shared with others outside the community. It has also shaped and supported a process of clarity and visioning within the community.

To fully understand the nature and role of deaconesses and home missionaries within The United Methodist Church and how they function as a lay diaconal order, it is important to define the term laity, explore the nature of the deaconess and home missionary community, and understand the documents that guide the community. This paper will reflect on two of those documents. First, we will study the provisions contained in *The Book of Discipline*, and how they have developed from 1888 to the present. The second document is “Living the Vision,” the strategic plan of the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner. Strategic planning is a process we used to prayerfully consider the needs of God’s people and how we as a community within The United Methodist Church are being called to respond.

The Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner is a lay diaconal movement of the present with forward-thinking vision. In the present, our history informs us, Scripture roots us, and the mission that God has called us to as a lay diaconal order drives us. Our outreach is global as our ministries have no boundaries for where we may be called, and our scope is ecumenical as we serve in solidarity with the diaconate across the Church universal and within diverse communities. Looking toward the future we envision, we seek to clarify language used in describing the functions of the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner so that what is recorded in church polity and what we say we believe and understand is in congruence.

A Definition of Laity

Before exploring our guiding documents, it is important to first establish how *laity* is defined and understood in this paper. The term *laity* and its root *lay* are derived from the Greek *laos*, which is used in the New Testament to mean the “people” of God.² As people of God, *laos* comprise the priesthood of all believers, a construct introduced in the letter to the Hebrews and later reclaimed by Martin Luther at the dawn of the Reformation.³ A form of this doctrine exists in present-day Methodism and is the basis of Part IV in *The Book of Discipline*, titled “The Ministry of All Christians.” In addition to this biblical understanding, United Methodists connect lay identity and call to ministry to the sacrament of baptism: “All Christians are called through their baptism to this ministry of servanthood in the world to the glory of God and for human fulfillment.”⁴

The biblical witness of the New Testament and our Methodist understanding of the ministry of all Christians form the basis of our understanding of laity. We are God’s people, baptized in Christ, and called to a life of discipleship and servant ministry. As *The Book of Discipline* states, “Lay members of The United Methodist Church are, by history and calling, active advocates of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁵ Deaconess and home missionary identity stems from this definition of laity and a call to life-time relationship under the authority of the church in a full-time vocation of ministry.

It is important to note that this understanding of laity is stated in independent terms and does not rely upon a definition of clergy. It is a common tendency to define laity in relation to clergy, as though they are on opposite ends of a spectrum. In secular contexts a layperson is contrasted with a professional or expert, connoting an amateur or unskilled person. When laity is placed in a dichotomy with clergy, it establishes two classes of Christian leaders and adds a layer of difficulty to

² 1 Peter 2:9 (Common English Bible): “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God’s own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light.”

³ Mark A. Maddix, “A Biblical Model of the People of God: overcoming the clergy/laity dichotomy,” *Christian Education Journal* 6, no. 2 (September 2009): 218-9.

⁴ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 2012, 95 ¶126.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 95 ¶127.

ecclesial organization which is not helpful and sometimes hurtful.⁶ This dichotomy is perpetuated by many constructs, including but not limited to the professionalization of clergy.⁷ Since deaconesses and home missionaries are also professionals in their areas of ministries, it is essential to develop an understanding of laity outside of the clergy/laity dichotomy.

Deaconesses, Home Missioners and the Book of Discipline

The Book of Discipline, our denomination's primary church polity document, has mandated the Office of Deaconess since 1888.⁸ The Methodist Episcopal Church added the office to Part II, Chapter IV on local preachers and lay workers, and charged deaconesses to "minister to the poor, visit the sick, pray with the dying, care for the orphan, seek the wandering, comfort the sorrowing, save the sinning, and, relinquishing wholly all other pursuits, devote themselves, in a general way, to such forms of Christian labor as may be suited to their abilities."⁹ When the Office of Deaconess was established in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, it was created in connection with the Woman's Home Mission Society, which provided direction and oversight for the training and appointment of deaconesses.¹⁰ Her duties at that time had expanded to include, "any religious or teaching work to which she may be assigned by the preacher in charge, employing her in the home or foreign field."¹¹ From the beginnings of the movement, deaconesses were identified as being called to ministries that took them to the edges of society, to be the church in the world. While this list of ministry tasks may seem very specific, there is some freedom and space for deaconesses to employ themselves in general ministry activities that are suited to their abilities. This forward-thinking language helped the deaconess movement to grow and gain momentum in a rapidly changing industrial world.

When the three branches of Methodism merged to form the Methodist Church in 1939, all language of charge had disappeared from the Discipline. The closest language to that of charge that appeared in the early years of the movement can be found in the description of candidates: "She shall be a woman having the necessary qualifications who has been led by the Holy Spirit to devote herself to full-time service of the Church. She shall be a member of The Methodist Church in good standing between the ages of twenty-three and thirty-five and shall have shown fitness for such service by some form of active Christian work."¹² This trend continued through the time of the uniting conference of 1968 which created The United Methodist Church. By that Discipline, a deaconess is simply described as "a professionally competent laywoman who, in response to God's call on her life ... has been duly consecrated by a bishop and commissioned and licensed for a ministry of special need."¹³

It was not until 1976 that the purpose of deaconesses and home missionaries found its way back into the Discipline. As a result of the 1972-1976 Special Committee on Study of the Diaconate and the creation of diaconal ministers, the paragraphs on deaconesses and home missionaries were rewritten to include a clear statement of purpose and description of call.¹⁴ The language has remained largely unchanged since that time. The most significant changes were the closure of office of home missionary in 1988¹⁵ and the opening of the office to lay men designated as home

⁶ Maddix, 214, 221.

⁷ Maddix, 221.

⁸ The 1888 Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church is the first Discipline in the American Methodist tradition to provide for the Office of Deaconess.

⁹ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1888*, 126.

¹⁰ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1902*, 169-170.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹² *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Church, 1939*, 311.

¹³ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1968*, 390.

¹⁴ See *My Calling to Fulfill*, 256-259 and *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1976*, 446-447.

¹⁵ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1988*, 549ff.

missioners in 2004.¹⁶ The Discipline's definition and interpretation of the office of deaconess (and now home missionary) has remained constant through significant moments in denominational life and polity, such as the centennial celebration of the deaconess movement in 1988, staffing cutbacks and financial crisis of the General Board of Global Ministries in the late 1980s, the conclusion of the Council of Bishops Study on Ministry and creation of the ordained order of deacon in 1996, and the relocation of office of deaconess and home missionary to the national organization of United Methodist Women.

The current provision for the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner is found in ¶1314 of *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2012*. It states:

The purpose of the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner shall be to express representatively the love and concern of the believing community for the needs in the world and to enable, through education and involvement, the full ministry and mission of the people of God. Deaconesses and home missionaries function through diverse forms of service directed toward the world to make Jesus Christ known in the fullness of his ministry and mission, which mandate that his followers:

- a) Alleviate suffering;
- b) Eradicate causes of injustice and all that robs life of dignity and worth;
- c) Facilitate the development of full human potential; and
- d) Share in building global community through the church universal.¹⁷

This statement of purpose captures much of the purpose and passion that developed in the deaconess movement since 1888. It portrays deaconesses and home missionaries as the link between our churches and the world, engaging in diverse ministries that enable all God's people in mission and ministry. The four mandates of Christ are of particular note, in contrast to Disciplines prior to 1976. This is the first time in the history of the movement that the purpose of deaconesses (and home missionaries) is theologically justified within church polity. Whereas the movement had always identified itself with Phoebe and the early church establishment of *diakonia*, the revisions in 1976 took the connections directly to Jesus Christ and his call to discipleship, ministry and mission.

¹⁶ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2004*, 563ff.

¹⁷ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2012*, 623.

The Deaconess and Home Missioner Community Today

In the time since the 1976 revision, deaconesses and home missioners have gleaned from the Discipline's statement of purpose three words to describe our call to ministry: love, justice, and service. We have used these as key terms to describe the foundation of our full-time vocational calling. This language is woven into the consecration service liturgy for deaconesses and home missioners: "The call of God is always profound, and our response can be no less extraordinary. In the varied ministries of love, justice and service to which the Holy Spirit is leading you, you will testify to the infinite love of God in Christ Jesus."¹⁸

In living out the call "to express representatively the love and concern of the believing community for the needs in the world,"¹⁹ deaconesses and home missioners are expressing God's love in the world. This is grounded in 1 John 4:16b: "God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them."²⁰ God uniquely loves and gifts each person and calls us to the same level of loving relationship and commitment with one another. In the wide variety of ministries in which we are called and in all that we do, deaconesses and home missioners represent God's love felt within our individual selves, within our covenant community and what is known in the community of believers that is the UMC.

Ministries of justice have long been present within the deaconess movement. John Wesley preached "that the world is our parish" and therefore as United Methodists, this translates into a support of justice and mission work globally. The professional training and coursework required for deaconess/home missioner preparation emphasizes the Wesleyan-based understanding that evangelism and social action are inseparable. Deaconesses and home missioners witness to and address the immediate concerns of individuals and the systemic issues/root causes of injustice so that justice may be realized and all may experience abundant life.

The heart of the deaconess or home missioner is that of a servant. This is illustrated in our motto, "I serve neither for reward nor recognition but from gratitude and love my reward is that I may serve." Service is often defined as an intangible product, though, for deaconesses and home missioners it is very real. It is how we express what is felt spiritually within us and is an external witness of and response to God's love. Deaconesses and home missioners are able to serve wherever called, whether or not the ministry is directly connected to a church body as long as the required approvals are given. The ability to serve wherever one is called reflects one of the layered meanings of the deaconess and home missioner emblem. The cross with all arms of equal length represents the spread of Christianity in all four directions—North, South, East, and West. We believe that there is no limit as to where God may call us to service, and we serve with full inclusiveness representative of God's love.

It is the shared love, commitment to justice, and call to service that knits us into community. Together, deaconesses and home missioners form a covenant community providing support, mutual accountability and care for one another while we all strive to fulfill the calling we have received to lay diaconate ministry. A covenant community is a group of persons who bind themselves to each other and to the group by a solemn agreement or covenant. Deaconesses and home missioners publically commit to this covenant community relationship and to the greater world diaconate community during their consecration:

Presider: The Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner includes mutually supportive ministry as part of a covenant community. Will you accept responsibility for participation in the deaconess and home missioner community?

Candidate: I will, God being my helper.

¹⁸ From the liturgy of the Deaconess and Home Missioner Consecration and Commissioning Service.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Common English Bible translation.

Presider: By joining the deaconess and home missionary order, you will become part of the ecumenical world diaconate that reaches out in service to all parts of the earth. Do you commit to a lifetime of loving and supporting your sisters and brothers as a part of the world diaconate?

Candidate: I will, God being my helper.²¹

A sustaining, nurturing community forms out of this covenant commitment of individuals who share being “led by the Holy Spirit to devote their lives to Christlike service under the authority of the Church,”²² Our community members are currently representative of the full diversity of the membership of The United Methodist Church. As a community based upon a shared faith commitment and calling, there is a level of trust and safety in space to learn and grow, both as individuals and as a group.

This understanding of community for deaconesses and home missionaries starts in candidacy as individuals must complete prescribed core seminary courses in addition to the individual educational-level certifications required for specific ministries. The road to candidacy begins with a course on the theology of mission, taught in an intensive residential format allowing for candidates to interact with one another and with consecrated and commissioned community members. Candidates quickly bond with one another and with community mentors who journey with them for up to one year after they are consecrated. During the preparation and training phase prior to consecration and commissioning, candidates prepare to make the full commitment to covenant community and to service under the authority of The United Methodist Church. All of these activities seek to provide a deepening of relationship with God, sustaining a person for their individual vocational ministry call and living out the mandates outlined in *The Book of Discipline*.

Deaconesses and home missionaries illustrate our life together as covenant community in a variety of ways:

1. We support and sustain one another through ongoing prayer and communications with one another.
2. We gather biennially for a convocation event that includes fellowship, professional development, and spiritual renewal opportunities.
3. We are held accountable to the practice of continual discernment of call and undergo an annual review of appointment, coordinated by the administrative office.
4. We participate in the life of the church as lay members of the Annual Conference in which we serve and hold local church membership.
5. The community financially contributes to the nurture and care of the community through contributions to endowment, compassion, scholarship, and grant funds.
6. Individuals contribute time and talents in support of the community through national and jurisdictional associations.

Deaconesses and home missionaries have a shared vision and commitment to the ministry and mission of the church. While church structure and requirements for those in ministry as deaconesses and home missionaries has changed since 1888, the covenant community continues to exist in mutuality to support, nurture, and hold us accountable to one another for the benefit of the life and mission of the church. The web of diverse relations we share nurtures and deepens our call to lifetime servant ministry and enriches the community and its collective ministry. This strong sense of community undergirds, empowers, and supports deaconesses and home missionaries in our ministry. It calls us into accountability, affords us opportunities to struggle together to find answers to critical problems, and supports us in our personal and professional struggles.

²¹ From the liturgy of the Deaconess and Home Missioner Consecration and Commissioning Service.

²² *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, 2012, 623 ¶1314.2.

Shaping the Future of a Movement: Our Strategic Plan

Deaconesses and home missionaries have relied upon the Book of Discipline to interpret their role and function within the broader church. What ¶1314 could not provide, however, was a plan and vision for sustained growth. To accomplish this, the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner engaged in a visioning and strategic planning process during the 2008-2012 quadrennium. The process was led by Becky Louter, Executive Secretary of the Deaconess Program Office, working closely with leadership from the Deaconess/Home Missioner/Home Missionary community including the National Association of Deaconesses, Home Missioners and Home Missionaries; the Global Ministries advisory committee for the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner and United Methodist Women (formerly Women's Division).

Louter found inspiration to lead our community in this process in her own sense of call. Her dedication to servant ministry combined with a background in business administration, offered the deaconess and home missioner community the right blend of gifts, talent, and leadership skills. She recognized that the process of strategic planning was one that our community was ready for and needed. It was a particularly important process for our community to engage in as we were in a period of growth following a time of questioning and uncertainty that ended with the conclusion of the Council of Bishops Study on Ministry in 1996. For the deaconess and home missioner community, strategic planning was a process whereby we prayerfully considered the needs of God's people and how we as a community are being called to respond. We wanted to be smart about how we grow and develop our Community and how we use our resources for the greatest good.

The decision to engage in a strategic planning process at this point in the life of the deaconess movement rested on five premises. First, the community had to be ready for the process. We were led by someone gifted in this type of organizational work, ready to thrive and live fully as a community, and ready to organize in planning for the future of the movement. Second, the community had to be confident in its identity. It was very important because we are a community that we defined and claimed our purpose and vision together. Third, we needed to be fully aware of our circumstances. Our clarity of purpose would need to develop out of a comprehensive perspective that included a realistic view of our situation, resources, church structure, societal structure, and challenges. Fourth, visioning would require discipline to set priorities and follow the steps of the process. Fifth, our community would have to be committed to the plan and staying on task.

The Process began with a Visioning Symposium, held October 26-28, 2008 in conjunction with the National Association of Deaconesses, Home Missioners, and Home Missionaries (NADHM) Convocation at Scarritt Bennett Center in Nashville, TN. Fifty members of our community met to begin our visioning process. Our purpose for this initial gathering was to examine and celebrate our history and current ministry as we begin discerning God's will for our Community for many years to come. During this time we prayerfully and with due diligence worked our way through our history, identified our community's enduring values, and began looking at our current realities.

In April 2009, a Strategic Planning Steering Team met at Brooks Howell Home in Asheville, NC with our planning consultant, Mary Baker, to design a planning process for the Community. The team in attendance included Becky Louter, Liwliwa Robledo, Robert Walker, Wendy Putka, Judy Poole, Maureen Carr and Betty Letzig. Our goal as a team was to create an open process for strategic planning that would be accessible to all members of the community. This meeting produced three basic questions that would guide the planning process:

1. What do we know to be true today - about our Community, our ministries, the world around us, and emerging needs?
2. What do we want to be true in ten years? Or, what impact are we called to have over the next ten years?
3. How will we make our vision true? Or, what do we need to do to achieve that impact?

During May 2009, the Steering Team sought to answer these questions in a variety of ways including the following:

- Research the dynamics of Millennials to determine their motivations, patterns of behavior, and other findings that may help us attract younger members
- Interviews with Bishops and other key stakeholders
- Redrafting our Theology of Mission statement and developing a Values statement based on our work during our Visioning Symposium last fall
- Reviewing a summary report from our Visioning Symposium
- Examination of members and ministry trends

Throughout the strategic planning process, the deaconess and home missionary community received reports and opportunities to contribute to the process during this month. The community was encouraged to self-organize small groups either at annual conference or in other intentional gatherings (Schools of Christian Mission, World Diakonia, etc.), to discuss the visioning questions and return a summary of all responses to the Deaconess Program Office by the end of July 2009. Those unable to join in a gathering were encouraged to submit individual responses.

In August 2009 the Steering Team reviewed all the feedback submitted and drafted a strategic plan. The plan included Vision, Values, and Outcome Statements along with the start of Annual Performance Targets. The draft of the Vision, Values, and Outcome Statements was sent to all community members for review and comment. The Strategic Planning Steering Team revised the plan as needed based on responses and sent a final version to the community before it was submitted to the Committee on Deaconess Service and finally to the General Board of Global Ministries for approval.

October 2009 was a new beginning as we began implementing what was developed and learned through this strategic planning process. A vision is relevant when it is nurtured and able to grow as the community develops and lives into it. In every activity of the Deaconess Program Office, which is now the Administrative Office for the Offices of Deaconess, Home Missioner, and Home Missionary, the Vision, Values, and Outcomes Statements were used as the lens through which all activities were viewed. We decided it was important to be in the present with God guiding our actions as to what we are to be doing in service and how do we expand the availability of this lay diaconate opportunity for ministry for all who are called. In the months that followed the adoption of the strategic plan, the leadership sought new ways to educate United Methodists about the importance and value of deaconess and home missionary ministries. This was part of a conscious effort to raise awareness and understanding of the lay diaconate movement as represented by the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner, and move past the history of inequitable and diminishing treatment that lay women in particular had suffered from the church's institutional structures. The strategic planning process had started us down a path toward intentional organizational design that was Spirit-led, reflected what we valued, and allowed us to move forward with a confirmed sense of value and worth.

The Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner moved to the Women's Division, now national organization of United Methodist Women, in 2010. The change in oversight offered the Administrative Office an opportunity to take the next step in implementing the strategic plan and began a human resources consultation facilitated by Deb Rice with Missional Movement International. This was a crucial next step toward realizing our vision because it allowed our leadership to evaluate our administrative capacity and resources and take measures to ensure they would not be an impediment or limitation to the future growth of our movement. This consultation helped to identify and develop the structures, systems, and staffing that would be optimal for the deaconess and home missionary community to realize the desired outcomes defined by the strategic plan.

Rice presented a project plan that helped deaconess and home missionary community leaders understand the different levels of functioning and how our administrative approach had been. The

tradition of the deaconess movement and lay diaconate in the Methodism is one of humility, competency, community and efficiency. Instead of managing around the circumstances, it was time to acknowledge them for what they are and to move forward unapologetic for our existence and call as servants in the Church and world. Rice helped us to recognize that reactively developing new programs and policies out of demand or crisis leads to inefficiency and weariness. We needed to break the cycle of reaction and move toward proactive response to the needs of both the deaconess and home missionary community and God's people.

As part of the human resources consultation, we took time to further bring to life the strategic plan. We used our identified values to find areas where clarity was needed. We owned that our organizational values are our moral boundaries and represented a line that we could not cross. They are the ethical standards we are called to uphold and by which we wanted our community to measure the administrative leadership and hold it accountable. Each decision we would make would be guided and measured by our values.

With 4 years of focused work, the most recent (final) version of the Living the Vision statement was ready. Along with this summarized statement, reflective of the deaconess and home missionary movement, came added awareness provided by the human resources consultation. This Spirit-led process, facilitated by Deb Rice with Missional Movement International working closely with deaconess and home missionary community leadership, reflected the professional standards of the current knowledge of the human resource industry and principles of organizational development. It was a process of listening and understanding the uniqueness of the deaconess and home missionary community, our organization's service offerings, structure, leadership style and actual/desired culture.

STRATEGIC PLAN: *LIVING THE VISION*

Final Version – November 2011

OUR PURPOSE....Why we exist

The Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner of The United Methodist Church in the United States enables laity to respond to a vocational call to be Christ in the world through consecration for lifetime servant ministries of love, justice and service.

VISION FOR 2021

The Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner of The United Methodist Church is a prophetic voice for love, justice, and service so that all may experience abundant life.

VALUES

- Embodying the life-giving love of Christ.
- Commitment to a lifetime relationship in servant ministry in love, justice and service.
- Covenant community with one another.
- Showing love and respect for all.

OUTCOMES

- Deaconesses and Home Missioners experience a strong sense of supportive and connectional Community.
- The Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner is vibrant, diverse and growing.
- Deaconesses and home missionaries expand the church's impact in the world by engaging in diverse cutting edge ministries and in training the laity for mission.
- The Deaconess and Home Missioner ministry is strengthened and expanded through strong global relationships within the ecumenical diaconate and Pan-Methodist connections.
- Deaconesses and home missionaries engage in spiritual growth and self-care for themselves and as an example for others.
- The Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner has the resources and administrative capacity to support their purpose.

Conclusion

Many events, stories, understandings, and conversations informed the strategic planning process. In many ways, it was a response to those major moments that occurred in United Methodism since the last major revision to the disciplinary provision for the Office of Deaconess in 1976. These moments included a time clouded with uncertainty and a time of growth and excitement. The strategic planning process indicates continued development of focus, understanding, and purpose for the deaconess and home missionary community. Just as the *Discipline* has informed and shaped our understanding of deaconess and home missionary ministries, it is time for the practices and understandings of deaconesses and home missionaries to inform the *Discipline*.

Betty J. Letzig, former executive secretary of the Deaconess Program Office, gave a presentation to the Committee of the Council of Bishops Study on Ministry in December 1993. She described the many and varied forms of deaconess ministry, which have only grown to be more varied and diverse since the inclusion of lay men designated as home missionaries in 2004. Our diaconal call continues to be clarified and strengthened as laity to full-time vocational ministries of love, justice and service representing Christ's presence among those we serve with. In fulfilling our call under the authority of the Church, we witness daily in our servant ministries to the mandates as affirmed by the *Discipline*. "Living the Vision," our strategic plan, supports the governance provisioned in the *Discipline* for the deaconess and home missionary community and builds upon it by guiding how we actively live out the mandates today and into the future.

¶122 of the *Discipline* explains that one way in which United Methodists live out the call to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world is through living lovingly and justly as servants of Christ. Those consecrated and commissioned persons serving in the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner and sent forth into the world are responding to their call and embodying this Wesleyan principle. We do this as part of a covenant community that functions as an order, under accountability to one another and to the Church. Distinctly unique and clear in our varied ministries, we serve alongside the clergy orders of deacon and elder. Deaconess and home missioner ministries continue to evolve as the needs of the world evolve, and it is vitally important that our *Discipline* reflect our forward-thinking vision and how we function as the lay diaconal order of The United Methodist Church.