

# *The Origins of Lutheran Deaconesses in America*

by FREDERICK S. WEISER

ONE OF THE pioneers whose work came to be influential in the deaconess movement was Pastor Theodore Fliedner (1800–1864).<sup>1</sup> Born in a parsonage and educated for the ministry in German universities, Fliedner's only parish was at Kaiserswerth, a predominantly Roman Catholic community on the Rhine. In need of funds to support his congregation, he traveled to England and to Holland, returning with ideas for the social problems he was observing at home. In 1833 he converted a summer cottage on his property into a home for the rehabilitation of freed female prisoners. Then, on October 13, 1836, he and his wife ventured on faith to open a hospital in a house they purchased in Kaiserswerth. One week later the first deaconess, Gertrude Reichardt, arrived.

Fliedner acted, in “restoring” the apostolic office of deaconess, upon a suggestion voiced several times in the decades before 1836, chief among which had been the praise expressed by the Lutheran Prussian minister of state, Freiherr vom Stein, for the work of the Roman Sisters of Charity, to which he had appended a wish for a similar Protestant institution. Immediate suggestion had come to Fliedner on a trip through Holland some years earlier, on which he had seen some Mennonite deaconesses at work and learned of the office which no longer existed in much of Protestantism.

At Kaiserswerth, Fliedner's plant grew by leaps and bounds. There was the motherhouse and hospital, the center for prisoners who were to be rehabilitated, a training school for teachers, a girls' high school and laboratory, kindergarten, the orphan home, the home for female Protestant lunatics, a home for lonely or invalid women, and a preparatory school for deaconesses. The institution even operated a farm for its own needs.

## *The Passavant Era, 1849–1893*

Among the many, many visitors who were impressed by the work at Kaiserswerth, one possesses strategic significance for the

development of the diaconate for women in America. Pastor William Alfred Passavant (1821–1894), pioneer builder of missions, churches, schools, and institutions in American Lutheranism, stopped at Kaiserswerth on a visit to Europe in 1846, and promptly asked director Fliedner to send some deaconesses to America. Upon his return home to Pittsburgh, and even before, Passavant began attempts to popularize deaconess work through letters, sermons, and *The Missionary*, a monthly he issued in behalf of his many activities.

After a premature effort which failed, he opened a hospital in Pittsburgh in January 1849 (even before the deaconesses he had been promised had arrived) and found his first patients on board a ship at the Pittsburgh docks. This hospital, known at first as Pittsburgh Infirmary, and since 1895 as the Passavant Hospital, is the oldest Protestant hospital in America.

Pastor Fliedner left Bremen on June 12, 1849, with four young deaconesses to serve in the new hospital: Sister Elizabeth Hupperts, directing sister of the children's station at the Charite, in Berlin; and Sisters Paulina Ludewig, Luise Hinrichsen, and Elizabeth Hess. The party reached Pittsburgh exactly one month later. Since Passavant had purchased and remodeled a girls' school for hospital purposes in the meantime, a dedication service was scheduled for July 17, in which Fliedner was the primary speaker.

The sisters began their work at once, changing the diets to suit their German tastes, overworking themselves in a cholera epidemic then raging in Pittsburgh, patiently facing and repelling the suspicious glances of citizens who doubted the sisters' Protestantism. Fliedner returned home after an extensive journey throughout the middle Atlantic region, which he reported in detail to his readers in Germany; Passavant began a program of institution building which would have pleased his mentor.

In May 1850, the Pittsburgh Infirmary was incorporated under a Pennsylvania charter as part of the Institution of Protestant Deaconesses, whose purpose it was to maintain the hospital and such other charities as might from time to time be started. When the corporation was organized in June, Passavant was named director and Sister Elizabeth the matron.

Almost at the same time, on May 28, 1850, the first American deaconess, Sister Louisa Marthens, was consecrated in First Lutheran Church in Pittsburgh, the parish from which she entered the diaconate and which Passavant had served as pastor. In April 1852, an orphans' home was established, and in October of that year the hospital moved into its own quarters. An orphans' farm school for boys was added to the works in the institution in May 1854 on a tract at Zelienople, some miles north of Pittsburgh. Here some of Wichern's trainees, including some of his deacons, served for a time.<sup>2</sup> In 1863, the orphans' home was moved to nearby Rochester, Pennsylvania. Together the two institutions provided leadership for the establishment of the orphanage at Germantown, Philadelphia, in 1859, an orphanage at Jacksonville, Illinois, in 1870 and the Wartburg Farm School at Mount Vernon, New York, in 1869.

Hospitals, too, arose from the Institution of Protestant Deaconesses in these decades: in 1863, Milwaukee Hospital, in 1865 the Chicago Passavant Hospital (which was destroyed in the Chicago Fire of 1871, and was not reopened until 1885); in 1871, the orphanage at Jacksonville was converted into a hospital, which is still operated under the Passavant name, but which, as the Chicago Passavant, has long since severed connection with the church. In all these institutions deaconesses served at one time or another.

#### *An Era of Establishment, 1884-1900*

In 1884 the development of the diaconate in America received a new encouragement. On June 19, seven deaconesses arrived to superintend the German Hospital in Philadelphia, established in 1860. The work of the seven has led to the Philadelphia Motherhouse of Deaconesses and, somewhat indirectly, the tremendous Lankenau Hospital in Philadelphia (as German Hospital subsequently became known). As the Philadelphia Motherhouse was established and showed signs of success, it also contributed directly to the establishment of other motherhouses in America. Within little more than a decade, seven similar houses had been established

in Lutheran circles, and numerous others outside them. Of the seven Lutheran houses, three worked closely with Philadelphia, either by training sisters there or in receiving counsel or leadership. Some of the non-Lutheran sisters were trained at Philadelphia. The initial meeting of the Lutheran Deaconess Conference in America was held at the Philadelphia Motherhouse, at its officers' call, in 1896.

The central personality behind all of this activity was not a deaconess, however, but a prosperous Philadelphia banker. John Dietrich Lankenau (1817-1901) had been elected to the presidency of the German Hospital board some years after its establishment in 1860. Lankenau had guided the relocation of the hospital to Girard Avenue in Philadelphia and in 1884 provided single-handedly for the addition of a wing to the hospital in memory of his wife, son, and daughter, all of whom had died in less than a decade prior to 1882. Lankenau had also encouraged the hospital to provide for cooperation with the Lutheran Church; in 1882 a charter provision provided for three of sixteen trustees to be elected by the Lutheran Ministerium of Pennsylvania. When the lack of qualified nursing staff became evident, John D. Lankenau, with German Consul Charles H. Meyer and Pastor Adolph Spaeth of St. Johannes Church, turned to Germany in the hope of persuading some deaconesses to come to America. They needed trained, dedicated women to meet the challenge!

After repeated efforts, seven sisters of a community working at Iserlohn, Westphalia, under Oberin Marie Krueger, were brought to America. Lankenau, Pastor Spaeth, and Sister Marie contemplated the establishment of a motherhouse at Philadelphia. Simultaneously, Lankenau desired to erect a home for the aged (as a memorial to his wife); and Sister Marie suggested adding a children's hospital. A charter revision provided for the separate incorporation of the Mary J. Drexel Home and for the Philadelphia Motherhouse of Deaconesses. Ground was broken on September 10, 1886, the cornerstone laid November 11, and the building dedicated on December 6, 1888. In the meantime, preparations were made for the organization of the sisterhood, so that a dea-

coness was consecrated January 4, 1887. A rector (Pastor Augustus Cordes) and a new *Oberin*<sup>3</sup> (Sister Wanda von Oertzen) were secured. Sister Marie Krueger had died in November 1887. In September 1888, the Kaiserswerth General Conference voted to admit Philadelphia into membership conditionally. The ocean was bridged!

The new motherhouse, completely the gift of Lanckenau, consisted of a central portion with wings attached at right angles. At the top of the center, over the chapel, was a tower whose bell tolled the hour and announced chapel services. It was constructed of a yellow, imported German brick in a Gothic style, adorned with decorative gables. Within, the central feature was the chapel, whose stained-glass windows depicted scenes of service from the life of Jesus. On either side large assembly rooms could be opened for additional space when needed. The ground floor, otherwise, held the library, rector's office, committee room, apartment for the Sister Superior, dining hall, and some rooms for sisters. Above the dining hall on the second and third floors were dormitories for students. These floors also held sitting rooms and sewing rooms and classrooms for probationers and candidates. The fourth floor was intended for a preparatory girls' school which was opened in 1890 with sisters, Pastors Cordes and Spaeth, and lay teachers on the faculty. The entire west wing of the building was devoted to the home for the aged and the children's hospital. A kindergarten was opened in the motherhouse in 1893 and parish work had been begun in 1887. Most of the sisters, of course, were trained in nursing, so that the largest single group served in Lanckenau Hospital. Others were stationed at Easton Hospital, Easton, Pennsylvania (a secular institution which requested deaconesses) and at St. John's Home and Hospital at Allegheny, Pennsylvania.

The spirit of the motherhouse cannot be captured by a description of the physical facilities or of the labors undertaken by the sisterhood. The motherhouse was *home*, with the usual festivities of the family observed alongside the rich religious life of the community. The Neuendettelsau<sup>4</sup> example provided the sisterhood with choral services of Vespers and Holy Communion and special

orders of worship for the holy seasons of Christmas and Lent. The chapel easily became the center of each sister's life. Here she had been consecrated and given her silver cross with verses selected especially for her cited on it. Here she joined in the daily services of the Word which served as the binding force in the community's life. All was not work and worship, of course; the sisters were given access to the Lankenau cottage at Cape May Point, New Jersey, and each received a month's vacation for relaxation.

The administration of the motherhouse was in the hands of the Pastor and *Oberin*, who worked with the Board of Directors, the sisters, and the directors of stations at which sisters worked outside the motherhouse control. The motherhouse published a German monthly *Der Diakonissen Freund*, beginning in 1890, and *The Deaconess Messenger*, a larger quarterly in English, from 1890–1894. In 1893, Emil Wacker's *Deaconess Calling* was published in translation in a hard binding, as part of a campaign to popularize the diaconate.

The founders of the Philadelphia Motherhouse had set out to establish an exact duplicate of one of the great continental inner mission institutions and in this they succeeded. Practically all fields of deaconess service known in Germany had been entered by the Philadelphia sisters by 1900, except ecclesiastical embroidery and foreign missions, and the cluster of institutions on one location (hospital, home for the aged, children's hospital, girls' school, kindergarten, and motherhouse) bore marked resemblance to the continental prototype. The sisters spoke German, almost exclusively, were dressed in the traditional German garb, submitted to the rigid Teutonic discipline and labor, and served with the gracious humility which is still characteristic of the German deaconess.

The Philadelphia Motherhouse had its connection with the church in the traditional European fashion. The pastor belonged to the ministerium and reported regularly to it, but the church had no organic control of the motherhouse and its affiliated institution. It had only representation. Beginning one year before the seven sisters arrived at Philadelphia, however, a significant chain of events was sparked which culminated differently, when one of the conferences of one of the synods of the General Synod<sup>5</sup> (a large Lu-

theran body composed of territorial synods) concluded that "there is an actual need of an Order of Deaconesses in our church, and that we ask Synod at her next regular meeting to consider the matter." Pastor Frank P. Manhart was the source of the suggestion, and one of the guiding fathers of the diaconate as it was to appear within the General Synod.

The subject was referred ultimately to the General Synod itself, which recognized sentiment favoring the diaconate and appointed a committee to study it and report. Slowly and deliberately the General Synod moved in considering the prospect, so that it was not until 1889 that the decision was made to establish a Board of Deaconess Work which, when incorporated, had responsibility to promote and develop the diaconate, to establish and direct motherhouses and training schools, to select and place deaconesses, and to hold property and investments for this purpose. This board first met in 1890, began to receive the applications of candidates (who were sent to Germany or Philadelphia for their training) and sought a center for the work. Eventually Baltimore was selected as the home for the deaconess program of the General Synod. In 1895, the motherhouse was opened and the first six deaconesses consecrated on October 23. One of them, Sister Augusta Schaeffer, was elected head sister (the board's translation of the German *Ob-erin*).

The work of the Baltimore sisters at first was chiefly home nursing, with sisters sent from the motherhouse to the homes of the sick in Baltimore and neighboring communities. In time, sisters were sent to do the same work from a parish church as center. An industrial school, an evening school, and a kindergarten eventually occupied the sisters' time, too. As early as 1898, a deaconess was sent into the foreign mission field, although the board was reluctant to enter it since there were few deaconesses available. The Baltimore Motherhouse, with all its innovations from the Kaiserswerth pattern of the diaconate, was received into the [Kaiserswerth-eds.] General Conference in September 1898.

In May 1895 the synod had approved the constitution of the Board of Deaconess Work. In so doing, it "officially recognized

the ancient office of deaconess” and “created a Board for the purpose of practically reviving this office among us.” The same constitution had defined a deaconess as an “unmarried woman or widow of approved fitness or training, who shall serve Christ and the church according to the general principles of the female diaconate as recognized by the Board.”

In this fashion the General Synod took action which no other Lutheran body in the world had taken. It declared the diaconate to be *an office of the church*. It is true, of course, that the diaconate’s churchly character had not been denied elsewhere, but no other church body in Lutheranism had provided specifically for this kind of recognition or control of the diaconate. Simultaneously, the Baltimore Motherhouse became the first to have been established by a church body, just as the actual decision to organize the diaconate as a sisterhood, with a motherhouse was achieved only after study and choice.

The concept of the diaconate as it evolved in the General Synod was not purely a copy of the continental example; in many ways, it also reflected British developments, in which the deaconess, primarily at work in the parish, joined hands with the pastor in a team ministry. Symbolic of this was the adoption of the garb of the Mildmay deaconesses of England, with its full sleeves, cord, and veil.

### *The Larger Picture*

To review the history of all of the American motherhouses in these years reveals essentially the same pattern in each. The total number of Lutheran deaconesses in America ranged from 197 in 1899 to 487 in 1938, which happened to be the highest figure recorded. These figures include both consecrated and probationer sisters, and the latter number includes the deaconesses of the synodical Conference whose organization was not on the classic motherhouse pattern. The same growth is true for most of the motherhouses:

MOTHERHOUSE	1899	1940	HIGHEST REPORT
Philadelphia	71	122	127 in 1936
Brooklyn	13	12	25 in 1913
Omaha	25	76	77 in 1944
Milwaukee	26	63	64 in 1935
Baltimore	22	74	77 in 1935
Minneapolis	31	14	48 in 1914
Chicago	9	40	65 in 1920
Brush	—	5	7 in 1924
Axtell	—	16	16 in 1940
Fort Wayne	—	58	73 in 1933

It is thus fair to state that the period in question was marked by growth in size of the diaconate, perhaps not the startling growth for which the leadership might have hoped, but growth generally sufficient to warrant the oft-expressed hope that it would be greater in the future.

Within the motherhouses themselves, sisters were serving in a tremendous number of hospitals, orphanages, old folks' homes, and similar institutions for the needy. To list the names of all of the service agencies staffed by deaconesses would present a panorama of activity which belies the comparatively small number of deaconesses available. In the decades in question, each of the motherhouses operated several branches on the campus itself. Philadelphia had the hospital, children's hospital, old people's home, girls' school and kindergarten. Baltimore, whose main program was in training parish sisters, operated a kindergarten in the motherhouse. In Omaha a continued program of development included a children's home (1901, to which a second was added in 1918), a home for invalids and the aged (1902, partly replaced by a new home for the aged in 1931), repeated additions and rebuilding to the hospital (1904, 1909, 1925), and assembly hall (1937), and a chapel (1925), the gift of the women's auxiliary of Augustana Synod. The same auxiliary presented a church to the Bethphage mission during these years. In Chicago a kindergarten and day

nursery program was started by the deaconesses, and in Milwaukee a generous gift from Episcopalian lay people provided for the Layton Home for Incurables. In addition, almost all motherhouses provided sisters for parish work and for the foreign mission fields. Because of all this conscientious and effective service the diaconate came to hold an enviable reputation.

### *Conclusion*

Since it reached its numerical high point just before World War II, the diaconate has continued to develop. The net result of these years of service has been the reduction of the number of deaconesses and deaconess communities. Three of them (Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Omaha) merged into one on the campus of the former Philadelphia community now in a suburb, Gladwyne, in a Tudor-style mansion which was an outright gift to the community. Three others (Minneapolis, Axtell, and Brush) died out when the last deaconess in the group died. Milwaukee, Chicago, and Brooklyn still exist but no longer train deaconesses. Successive mergers of the Lutheran bodies have ended a separate Board of Deaconess Work and all financial support for the community. Within the surviving deaconess community itself, a modified (one is tempted to say, modernized) garb was adopted, deaconesses were permitted to marry, and the economic cooperative was replaced by a salary. In terms of the fields of service, there is even less evidence of health care, but more management of institutions, chaplaincies, social work, staff appointments on synodical and national church levels, which has been matched by higher educational standards. The Lutheran Church in Canada has continued to contribute its share of deaconesses to the community and considers it its own training center and deaconess program. International participation in DOTAC (Diaconate of the Americas) and other bodies has provided fellowship ecumenically as well as geographically. The beautiful, quiet center in Gladwyne has been available for meetings, personal and planned retreats, and there is a week-long minister in

residence program for clergy and qualified associates who are willing to come for a week's worship leadership. A program of one-year volunteers has placed hundreds of persons in ministry of all sorts throughout the church, not a few of whom have remained as deaconesses or in other forms of churchly service. Best of all, the requests for the ministry of deaconesses continue to be made, and each year there are candidates who present themselves and sisters who are consecrated. The percentage remaining in the diaconate for their entire life has never been higher. If one does not allow the general decrease in the size of the community to be threatening (quite a few deaconesses of advanced age have died in the last decade) there has been reason to hope that a highly committed, highly trained, and well poised corps of deaconesses will be part of the Lutheran churches in America for years to come.

At its assembly at Gladwyne in April of 1998, the community voted to dispose of the house and acreage in Gladwyne and relocate the center of the community's life to the Chicago area. Financial considerations as well as concern for relationships to the leadership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America were cited as justifications for this move. Although the plan for a new headquarters contains facilities to operate retreats, it will not have a healthcare facility for chronically ill or aging deaconesses, which is a prominent part of the current building in suburban Philadelphia. It will contain facilities for part of the training of deaconesses, for which about two dozen candidates are in various stages of preparation in the spring of 1999. Whether the century and more of symbiosis with Philadelphia-area Lutheranism, indeed with eastern Lutheranism generally, will be a bitter loss remains to be seen, but as the above historical statement indicates, the most "successful" deaconess communities in the United States were those in Philadelphia and Baltimore. The flexibility that deaconesses often cited, when none had marital responsibilities and all agreed to be ready for movement on short notice, will be put to the test by the historic decision reached by the community in 1998.<sup>6</sup>

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## NOTES

1. A. R. Wentz, *Friedner the Faithful* (Philadelphia, 1936) is the only biography in English. See also A. Sticker, *Continental Deaconry*, (Diakonia, World Federation of Deaconesses, 1957, mimeographed).

2. Johann Heinrich Wichern (1808–1881) was a pioneer in Germany of the “Inner Mission” movement and established many social service organizations staffed by deacons. [-eds.]

3. *Oberin*: German term for the head deaconess. [-eds.]

4. Neuendettelsau, a small parish in northern Bavaria, had been turned by its pastor in the nineteenth century, Wilhelm Loehe, into a thriving center for mission work and liturgical renewal. [-eds.]

5. By this time the Pennsylvania Ministerium was part of the rival General Conference. See the articles on the Ministerium and the founding of the Philadelphia Seminary in *Lutheran Quarterly* 10.4 (Winter 1996). [-eds.]

6. The author's other works on the diaconate and general studies published in English now many years ago provide some sources for study of the deaconess movement.



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