The Office of Deaconess is a lay Office for women who feel called to a greater commitment to service in the world around us, reaching out as servants of God in the Church. The term *deacon* comes from the Greek word *diakonos,* which means "servant." Deaconesses are not ordained. They are an Office among the laity. Their duties require them to remain in the congregation and minister among the people. Like a sister in the Roman Catholic Church, a Deaconess is under the authority of the Rector or Priest-in-charge if she works within a specific congregation, or her duties may be directly entrusted to her by the Bishop.

A Deaconess' duties include her presence among the parishioners of a church, providing spiritual counsel to women and young people. They also may include caring for the sick, the afflicted, and the poor, giving instruction in the Christian Faith and to organizing and carrying on social work. Deaconesses are a leading voice among college students in need of direction, religious education, and spiritual care.

The Office of Deaconess goes back to biblical times. Saint Paul says in his Letter to the Romans: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cen′chre-ae" *(16:1)*.

In Paul's First Epistle to Timothy, he says: "Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for gain; they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then if they prove themselves blameless let them serve as deacons. Women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things" *(3:8-11)*. Many early Christian writers also mention Deaconesses, including Clement of Alexandria and Origen.

In the early days of the Church, those preparing for baptism were stripped of their clothes, a white robe was placed over them, and they were anointed with oil before their baptism. As many of these were women, a Deaconess was necessary to help them with this task. Deaconesses were in charge of preparing women for baptism and their instruction afterward. An ancient Syrian church text regarding church law states:

> *And when she who is being baptized has come up from the water, let the deaconess receive her, and teach and instruct her how the seal of baptism ought to be [kept] unbroken in purity and holiness. For this cause we say that the ministry of a woman deacon is especially needful and important.*[1]

The Office of Deaconesses started to disappear among laity in the West around the eleventh century and these tasks were left for nuns. It continued to thrive in the East until around the thirteenth century. Eventually the diaconate became reserved solely for men most of whom were transitioning to priests.

In the early 19th century, facing a time of upheaval in the society around them, Protestants revived the concept of Deaconesses, beginning in Europe and expanding to America. Anglicanism revived the Office of Deaconess as a product of the Oxford Movement, with it's emphasis on the ministry to the poor, as well as an emphasis on liturgical richness. In 1862, the Church of England reintroduced this Office when Elizabeth Catherine Ferard was set apart as a Deaconess by the Bishop of London. She founded the North London Deaconess Institution, which eventually became the Community of St. Andrew. The Oxford Movement went on to produce many more Deaconesses. Deaconesses disappeared from the Episcopal Church USA when General Convention voted to declare that all Deaconess were to be ordained to the Office of Deacon in 1970. Deaconesses were retained by the Reformed Episcopal Church after it split from the Episcopal Church in 1873, and they are found in the REC to

[1] Connolly, Richard Hugh. *DidascaliaApostolorum*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1929.

this day. In the 21st century, the Eastern Orthodox restored the Office of Deaconess.

The Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth is restoring the Office of Deaconess. In this diocese, we believe that lay Offices are vital. They allow the laity to pursue divine calls to a deeper level of service. Deaconesses will provide an opportunity for women in the Diocese of Fort Worth to be trained and supported as they minister to their communities and are witnesses for the Gospel. We look forward to seeing this Office come to fruition.





Deaconess Phoebe

HISTORY OF THE DEACONESS