

Elizabeth Ferard 1825-1883

In the Revised Calendar of the Church of England, 18 July sees the Commemoration of Elizabeth Ferard, who was the first Deaconess of the Church of England in modern times.

The Order of Deaconesses was revived in the Anglican Communion by the action of Dr Tait, Archbishop of Canterbury, in ordaining Elizabeth Ferard deaconess in 1862. The revival received the recognition of the Lambeth Conference in 1897 and the Order was formally restored by the Convocation of Canterbury in 1923 and by the Convocation of York two years later.

At a time of great prejudice against women being in any professional work, in 1917 the Archbishop of Canterbury appointed a committee to look at the history of women's ministry. The Lambeth Conferences of 1920, 1930 and 1948, and also Convocations of Canterbury & York discussed the matter and clarified the position of deaconess as one where the Episcopal laying on of hands was the procedure by which



Archbishop Tait

"a woman receives by Episcopal ordination, a distinctive and permanent status in the church and is dedicated to a life-long service and ministry".

The special committee of the 1930 Lambeth Conference did not however regard the deaconess and deacon as equivalent in Order and affirmed that the Deaconess Order was 'sui generis' (unique in its own characteristics). Some deaconesses ordained between 1920 and 1930 undoubtedly thought that they had been admitted to the third order of ministry, and in these circumstances the Lambeth Conference resolution of 1930 appeared to them a backward step. Indeed within the Church of England, the Archbishops' Commission on the Ministry of Women (1935) referred to the Order of Deaconesses as 'a Holy Order', but the 1939-41 Convocation Resolutions on Deaconesses made no mention of 'Holy Order' at all. The fact that the Deaconess Order was revived at the same time as the religious communities were being re-established and that Elizabeth Ferard was both the founder of the Community of St Andrew and the first Anglican deaconess, led to the assumption that the deaconess should remain unmarried. Many deaconesses in fact took the view that celibacy was involved but it was never required by the Church of England. Indeed Lambeth 1920 and 1930 clearly stated that no vow or implied promise of celibacy should be required for admission to the Order, and there is no reference to celibacy in the Convocation Resolutions. In spite of this, some church people still wrongly assume that celibacy is at least implied in a deaconess ordination.

The Church of England, as a result of the Deacons (Ordination of Women) Measure 1986 no longer admits women to the order of Deaconess. However the role still of course exists and the canon (rule) says that "The order of deaconesses is an order of ministry in the Church of England to which women are admitted by prayer and the laying on of hands by the bishop". The role is described as "in the place where she is licensed to serve and under the direction of the minister, to lead the people in public worship, to exercise pastoral care, to instruct the people in the Christian faith, and to prepare them for the reception of the sacraments".

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