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Editorial

As this issue goes to print, the ordination of women to the diaconate of the Church of England is rapidly becoming an established fact, and the order of Deaconesses, established in 1862, is at the same time virtually ceasing to exist. There may be some women who for one reason or another will choose to remain Deaconesses, thereby artificially prolonging the life of the order for a few more years, but after December 1986 there will be no more new entrants. A chapter in the life of the Church has thus come to an end.

What kind of end it will prove to be is still unclear. Women who have opted to be ordained as deacons have not really gained much by the change. Those who have become deaconesses in recent years will hardly notice any difference at all, since patterns of training and preparation for ministry have been identical for men and women for some years. Apart from a legal entitlement to perform weddings, the new deacons have gained little except symbolic recognition—the right to be called 'Reverend', to wear clerical dress, to vote with the clergy in General Synod elections and so on. It is all very much an in-house affair, which is unlikely to have much impact on the average person, churchgoer or not.

What the Church of England now possesses however, is a permanent diaconate, a development which was not forseen by those who first advocated the ordination of women and which may still prove to be only a transitional stage on the way to higher things. Nevertheless, for the immediate future, that is the position we are in, and it is high time that the Church gave some thought to the matter. What is a deacon, if he or she is not a trainee priest?

In the New Testament, it appears that the apostles appointed deacons to carry out the pastoral work which they had no time for. Their own ministry was to be one of preaching, teaching and evangelism, but as the Church grew they found that they were being increasingly burdened with pastoral tasks which needed to be done but which took up valuable time which they should have been using differently. So they ordained deacons, both men and women, to do the visiting, handle the administration and look after the charitable works which were springing up at the time. The division of labour was not rigid—Stephen was a deacon who preached the Gospel, and Paul was an apostle who collected money for famine relief in Jerusalem. But in principle, it was agreed that different people should be appointed for different tasks, and a diversity of ministries became an accepted fact of Church life.

Today there are few clergy who would deny that the great emphasis on the priesthood, combined with the parochial structure which tends

to leave everything in the hands of the incumbent, is no longer viable. Various schemes for lightening and spreading the load have been canvassed for some time now, though so far no one system has caught on universally. Radical proposals for reform of the ministry are futile because in the present state of affairs they simply cannot be implemented. Whatever one thinks of the Tiller Report, for instance, it is clear that it can never be put into operation. If the history of the Church of England tells us anything, it is that structures are highly resistant to change, which can only come about by a redistribution of power and responsibility among the existing officers of the Church.

Here is the opportunity for giving women (and N.S.M.s, and lay elders, and the locally ordained and so on) a valuable and important rôle in Church life without compromising either the principle of male headship or the principle of a full-time, educated clergy teaching and evangelising the nation. A revived diaconate, with clearly defined opportunities and responsibilities, could do a great deal to lighten the workload of the full-time presbyterate, and at the same time give proper attention (and therefore importance) to matters which tend to be overlooked in a busy clergyman's schedule. Why not let all the administration, all the committee work and so on be devolved to the diaconate? Why not make pastoral visiting a priority which the diaconate would regard as its special privilege? This would not prevent the presbyterate from becoming involved in these things as and when required, just as it would not prevent the diaconate from ever engaging in preaching and evangelism. But it would at least recognise that there are different functions to perform, different gifts which are required to meet them and different opportunities for ministry which ought to be recognised and taken up.

If this is to happen of course, the key rôle will have to be played by those women who regard the creation of female deacons as only a step to eventual ordination to the priesthood and even the episcopate. Sadly, such women do not seem to be prepared to accept that others in the Church (including not a few women) cannot follow them in their desires, and they seem to be willing to cause schism if necessary in pursuit of their aims. Would it not be a more constructive use of their time and energy if they could use the opportunity which the accidental creation of a permanent diaconate has offered them, and develop this new rôle into something of distinctive and permanent value to the Church as a whole?

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