



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.



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ARE  
CHURCH**

## Deaconess Community of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Sr. Dorothy Almoney, *chair*, Lancaster, Pa. (2020)  
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Sr. Michelle Collins, Tampa, Fla. (2020)  
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Ms. Barbara Swartling, *secretary*, Bainbridge Island, Wash. (2022)

### Adviser:

Pr. Philip Hirsch, Chicago, Ill.



### Leadership team

Sr. Liz Colver, *director of vocation and education*  
Sr. Noreen Stevens, *directing deaconess*

### Statement of purpose

The Deaconess Community of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is a prophetic, Christ-centered community of diaconal womxn, called to impact a broken world by accompanying, forming, equipping, and providing resources for diaconal leaders and communities. This ministry relates the gospel to human need in every situation, builds bridges across divides, and works with the church's mission to proclaim the gospel and to extend the ministry of *diakonia* to all the world.

### Mission

Compelled by the love of Christ and sustained by community, members of the Deaconess Community devote their lives to proclaiming the gospel through ministries of mercy and servant leadership.

### Vision

Empowered by the Spirit for public ministry, the community passionately seeks to:

- Embody its mission.
- Be a Christ-centered community of womxn.
- Witness to Christ's church and the world.

### Core values

- A gospel-centered purpose that proclaims and furthers the reign of God among us.
- A prophetic *diakonia* that commits its followers to risk-taking and innovative service on the frontiers of this church's outreach.
- Cooperative partnerships that invite participation, bridge divisions, and accompany others in mission.
- Inclusivity in mission that affirms the individual gifts of all people.
- Stewardship that respects God's gifts of time, talents, and resources.

## Historical context

The Deaconess Community of the ELCA carries a rich history that dates to the earliest acts of the apostles. Documents from the early second century record the existence of womxn who served as deaconesses and were even martyred for their service.

In the 19th century, a revival of the ancient diaconite was led by the Rev. Theodor Fliedner, a Lutheran pastor from Kaiserswerth, Germany; his first wife, Friederike; and, after her death, his second wife, Caroline. In a society that still regarded a womxn's place as solely in the home, they trained womxn to venture outside and minister to the poor and marginalized members of society. By the mid-to-late 19th century, their work had expanded across Europe and to the United States, where they exemplified Jesus' ministry of mercy through work on the battlefield and in orphanages, prisons, schools, hospitals, hospices, and institutions for children and adults. Today, many Lutheran social-service agencies worldwide can trace their origins to the work of these deaconesses.



The Deaconess Community of the ELCA dates to 1884, when seven deaconesses were brought from Germany to superintend the German Hospital of Philadelphia (now Lankenau Medical Center). Thus began the Philadelphia Motherhouse of Deaconesses. In 1889, the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States established the Order of Deaconesses. This in turn led to the creation of the Deaconess Board and then the Deaconess Community in Baltimore, Maryland. The General Synod designated deaconesses to hold office in the church. A third deaconess community, including Immanuel Lutheran Hospital, was established in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1890. These three communities formed the present Deaconess Community in the mid-1960s as part of the merger that created the Lutheran Church in America.

The community serves in both the ELCA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) thanks to its earlier relationship with the LCA, which served both Canada and the U.S. Prior to the ELCA's formation, members of the Deaconess Community were fully accredited in both denominations.

From the beginning of the LCA until 2002, the Deaconess Community operated a single center in Gladwyne, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia. It provided a retirement residence, administrative offices, and a center for study, worship and retreat. The community sold the Gladwyne property in 2002 and moved its offices to the Lutheran Center in Chicago in 2003.

Living in diaspora, the community is embodied by the sisters' intentional commitment and call to support and motivate one another, especially through prayer, assemblies, shared learning, and advocacy. The nine-person board of directors provides a breadth of knowledge and experience of the church and world that draws the community to focus on and proclaim boldly its vision and mission. The community's highest decision-making body is the Deaconess Community in Assembly.



When the ELCA united the three lay rosters in 2017, the members of the Deaconess Community became a part of the roster of Ministers of Word and Service. As a separately incorporated ministry of the ELCA, the community members serve as deacons in the ELCA and as diaconal ministers in the ELCIC. Called into public leadership, the Deaconess Community is uniquely positioned as an intentional community of womxn to partner with the church in prophetic *diakonia*.

## Report of work for 2017–2019

Listening with the Spirit, the community has worked to foster intentional community, leadership development, and strategic partnerships within the church and the world while living into a new, streamlined organizational structure. This community of 71 womxn seeks social change that restores, reforms and transforms; specifically, it has worked with dynamic partners and used its financial resources to speak to gender equity and creation care, taking its advocacy voice to the legislature. Intentional work with ReconcilingWorks has focused the community's attention to language, welcome and presence as a Reconciling in Christ community. With DIAKONIA World Federation, the community has engaged in the global movement Thursdays in Black, resisting attitudes and practices that permit rape and violence against women.

Open to a diversity of ministerial passions and creative ideas about how to change the world, the Deaconess Community works to engage the church and world prophetically through action and partnership. This is realized through mission grants and partnerships and through the diaconal ministry program.

### **Mission grants and partnerships**

Drawing on the community's core values, mission grants have been provided and partnerships developed that are risk-taking, provide innovative services, and build bridges for the healing of the world. In 2019, 16 grants were provided. In the last three years, the community has shared over \$350,000 in grants; over \$2 million has been provided for national and international grants since 2004.

Dedicated to leadership development, the community has embraced the roster changes in the ELCA and continues to provide diaconal formation for the greater church, as well as establishing a new formation process for its own candidates that accompanies and receives womxn in their discernment and formation as public leaders. While currently walking with 20 candidates, the community also welcomed womxn from two of the former lay rosters as members.

### **Diaconal ministry: History, formation and spirituality course**

Since 2006, the community has commissioned and funded a January elective course on diaconal ministry, offered through Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. The course introduces the historical, theological and social contexts of diaconal (Word and Service) ministry throughout history; provides discussion on vocation and diaconal calling; and affirms and encourages recognition of the importance and knowledge of the Lutheran Confessions as theologically and spiritually founded writings. The course instructors are Susan W. McArver, Ph.D., professor of church history and educational ministries at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, and the Rev. Dirk G. Lange, Ph.D., academic dean and associate professor of worship at Luther Seminary. All are invited. Past participants have included: people discerning public leadership; candidates for Word and Service and Word and Sacrament, synod and seminary staff; and the church's ecumenical partners. The on-site component of the class alternates between Mount Olivet Conference and Retreat Center in Farmington, Minnesota, and Spirit in the Desert Retreat Center in Carefree, Arizona.



### **Financial summary**

Stewarding financial resources calls the community to be active investors and to use the community's voice to improve companies' practices and sharpen their focus on fostering a sustainable economy. The Deaconess Community is an independent and separately incorporated ministry of the ELCA and, as such, does not receive any funding from either church body; it does provide an annual gift from its yearly mission tithe to the ELCA and ELCIC. The operating budget is funded primarily through distributions from four investment accounts that function as endowments, two of them established with proceeds from the sale of the community's property in Gladwyne, Pennsylvania. A fifth account, invested with the ELCA Endowment Fund Pooled Trust, serves as a reserve fund to support the annual diaconal ministry course. Annual withdrawals from each account are governed by a spending policy so that the community's values are preserved over time.

### **Moving into 2020**

Drawing on its vision and mission, the Deaconess Community will move into 2020 with a new strategic plan to work for justice and the flourishing of all God's creation. Using available technology and resources, as well as those yet to be imagined, the community moves forward confident in the Spirit's presence and the partnership with the ELCA.

Emboldened by the community's history, this strategic plan will focus on the group's diaconal mission as an intentional community rooted in a living Word and love of God. It will further cultivate opportunities to develop leaders, both nationally and internationally, and will draw on dynamic partnerships within the church and world.

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