

10 Minutes with a Deaconess



A candid interview reveals the struggles, the joys, and the opportunities for service that are part of the job description of a Deaconess.

What does a Deaconess do?

We spoke to Katie, a Deaconess at a Lutheran congregation in North Carolina about what it's like to be a Deaconess.

Here's what she shared:

1 What are your primary tasks as a Deaconess?

To serve my Lord and His people has always provided my primary sense of Calling. This office of the church, first mentioned in Romans 16:1-2, comes from the Greek verb *diakonia*, "to serve." I serve the Lord, whatever the setting or situation.

In the years I've served the church as a Deaconess, my ministry has included nearly all aspects of church ministry: planning and administering educational programs and Bible studies, providing ministry opportunities for youth, college students, single adults, and widows. From helping with the church outreach programs or teaching confirmation classes to visiting the elderly and hospitalized, it has been an enriching experience.

Deaconesses serve in a wide variety of settings in which they provide spiritual care, teach the Faith, and reach out to those who are in special need. The congregations in which I've served have needed someone with skills in education and youth ministry, with an added interest in being involved with the broader ministry of the church. A Deaconess in a parish may also visit the sick and homebound, teach Bible studies, work with a pre-school program, direct music, coordinate evangelism, volunteer for social ministry programs, or teach children's religion classes. About half of Deaconesses work in institutional settings with special ministries to the deaf, blind, aged, mentally retarded, or emotionally disturbed. Some of these serve in chaplaincy departments of hospitals, prisons, nursing homes, or hospices. Still others serve mission fields overseas or in the United States in some pretty incredible roles.

2 Describe your typical workday.

Variety is the spice of life, and this is one of the things I love the most about serving as a Deaconess in a congregational setting. Each day is a new adventure, filled with opportunities to help people and grow stronger in the faith.

Some days are pretty standard, studying the Word, preparing for Bible studies, writing articles and correspondence, and administrative duties. Other days may find me visiting the elderly, taking donations to the homeless shelter, and visiting a member in the hospital. Yet another day may be spent at an enrichment activity, such as a conference or seminar and even more days are spent with youth on trips and service projects. Thursday is the day I've chosen to take off, since the weekends usually have various congregation and youth activities.

3 What is the greatest challenge to your profession?

The greatest challenge is to continue to stay current with the world today. There is a great temptation, when serving a neighborhood church, to lose sight of the daily tensions, which impact the members of your congregation. We constantly struggle with the need to be relevant and understand those to whom we minister.

Within congregational life, it is also easy to become focused on your little corner of the world, so that you soon forget it is the world we are encouraged to touch with the Gospel of Christ. Our ministry must be about something more than serving our own worship and learning needs.

4 What is the greatest reward of your profession?

The joy of serving the Lord is to be present when someone else experiences His love and catches a glimpse of His wonderful forgiveness. I've been blessed to be part of this many times on youth trips, as the groups work through problems and are given the opportunity to exercise and live forgiveness with one another. I've been blessed to witness it in hospital rooms as people seek after the Spirit's peace in a time of trial. I've been blessed to participate in the Lord's love in helping others in times of disaster, such as loss of

personal property in floods and fire. Every day God gives us the opportunity to help make His love real in a hurting world. He gives us the eyes to see the hurting, the ears to hear their pain and the Word to touch their lives. In return, it is we who are filled with His joy.

5 What kind of training does it take to become a Deaconess?

The education of a Deaconess focuses on theology and takes 5 years of study/field work. Requirements also include courses in grieving, counseling and education. Choices for complementary areas of study include psychology, sociology, social service, education, church music, Biblical languages, and Spanish. Classroom theory is translated into meaningful service through two years of weekly field work and a one-year full-time internship.

If you already have a college degree, the personalized Deaconess Colloquy Program may be for you. I encourage you to contact the Deaconess Office at Concordia, River Forest to see how you might become a Deaconess.

“Each day is a new adventure, filled with opportunities to help people ...”

6 What is the average starting salary for a Deaconess?

Currently the suggested starting salary is around \$25,000, with medical benefits. The salary range does vary as greatly as the setting in which a Deaconess will find herself serving; so much depends on the setting, experience and abilities of the person.

7 How many hours do you work during a typical week?

I have no idea! I guess I don't focus too much on how many hours a week I work. With a calling to diaconal ministry, the focus changes from “what” you've come to do, to “who” you've come to serve...and with that the hours melt away. Also when you are given the privilege to become part of people's lives, then you can't expect their needs to neatly fit into a 40-hour week. Finally, sometimes it is hard to define what is “work.” Is being at a congregational potluck, work? Is spending the day at the ski slopes with kids, work? Is listening to a member work through a problem, work? To some of these questions I'd say “yes,” and others maybe “not so much,” so it really is up to the individual as to what their definition of work is. For me, it's all part of living and I love the adventure!

8 How does your job affect your family life?

For the most part, I've chosen to make the church my family. I'm single and have enjoyed the luxury of having the congregations I've served be my main focus in life. It is important, however, whether single or married to be intentional about taking time for your personal needs. You must be the one, as God leads you, to draw boundaries, which allow you to experience life beyond the close-knit community of the church.

9 In what ways are you able to help others as a Deaconess?

One of the greatest ways I believe we help others, through the Spirit's guidance, is to walk with them as they explore where the Lord is working in their lives. Teaching others the basic skills of how to find things in God's Holy Word, seeing them grow in understanding of how to apply His Word to their lives and then joining with them as they live out the Gospel is a life-enriching experience. I pray I am helpful in providing activities, programs and events, in which this process can take root, after which I try very hard to not get in the Lord's way!

10 And now a question for you...

Have you considered that God might be calling you to serve the church as a Deaconess?

Here are some steps you might take to help you answer that question.

- Talk to your congregation's pastor. He's there to give you the guidance and support that you need.
- Contact Kristin Wassilak, Coordinator of the Deaconess Program at Concordia River Forest for more information about the training it takes to be a Deaconess: 1-800-285-2668; www.curf.edu/~crfdeaconess/
- Contact a deaconess directly with your questions or thoughts: ktgoss@aol.com
- Ask God to grant you guidance as you consider ways in which you can serve His church.

“The love of Christ compels us.” II Corinthians 5:14