

GUIDES *for* STUDY GROUPS

with Discussion Questions

For Those Wanting to Know More About
the Female Diaconate & Possibilities for its Revival



An initiative of the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess
orthodoxdeaconess.org



Study Group Materials

- In the following pages, you will find Study Guides for four study group sessions.
 - These Study Guides review one of the articles listed below. These articles can be found in the separate Resource Packet.
 - The Study Guides include questions that can be discussed in the group as a way to better understand the content of the articles and share thoughts with others.
 - We recommend that a study group hold four meetings, one focusing on each document and its discussion questions below. However, it is possible to hold only one meeting, in which case we recommend focusing on one of the first two documents.
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General Overview of the Case for Deaconesses

“Not a Novelty: The Eastern Orthodox Case for Deaconesses” by Carrie Frederick Frost, *Commonweal*, May 18, 2017.

More In-depth History and Case for Deaconesses

“The Deaconess: Meeting Her in the 21st Century,” by Teva Regule, presented at Women and Men in the Church sponsored by the Fellowship of St. John the Baptist and the Women’s Orthodox Education and Ministries Network, July 29, 2006.

History of Deaconesses in the Orthodox Church

“Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church” by Valerie A. Karras, *Church History*, Volume 73 , Issue 2 , June 2004 , pp. 272 – 316.

Common Misconceptions and Misrepresentations in the Conversation Around Deaconesses

“Towards a Reasoned and Respectful Conversation About Deaconesses” by Ann Marie Mecera, et. al., *Public Orthodoxy*, April 17, 2018.

Women and the Early Church

“Household Names,” Michael Peppard, *Commonweal*, April 23, 2018.



Deaconesses: Brief Introduction Study Guide

GOAL OF THE STUDY

The goal of the *Deaconesses: Brief Introduction Study Guide* is to offer a general and brief overview of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church today—their history and the present need for them in the church. This study guide uses the shortest and most succinct article compared to the readings for the other study guides, and it is well-suited for those who would like a brief and manageable introduction to deaconesses in the Orthodox Church. *Deaconesses: Brief Introduction Study Guide* may be used as a one-time group event or as part of the multiple reading group materials offered by St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess.

Participants will be expected to read the article “Not a Novelty: The Eastern Orthodox Case for Deaconesses” by Carrie Frederick Frost in advance of meeting, or since this article is so short, an appointed person could read the article out loud in about fifteen minutes at the beginning of the session. Participants will share their impressions of the article and will go through the discussion questions together.

There is a separate Resources Section where you will find everything you need for your study session. We have included it in this email. This includes:

- Copy of the article which may be distributed electronically or on paper
- Bio of Carrie Frederick Frost (see below)
- Discussion questions (see next page)
- “Common Questions” handout
- Prayer to St. Phoebe (to begin your session)
- Sign-up Sheet (for joining the St. Phoebe Network)
- Concluding Prayer (to end your session)

[“Not a Novelty: The Eastern Orthodox Case for Deaconesses”](#) by Carrie Frederick Frost, *Commonweal*, May 18, 2017.

Bio of Carrie Frederick Frost

Carrie Frederick Frost is an Orthodox Christian theologian who attends to matters of women and mothers in the church, sacraments and practice, the reinstitution of the ordained order of deaconesses, Christian material culture, and contemplative prayer. She received a PhD in Theology, Ethics, and Culture from the University of Virginia, and she teaches at Western Washington University and Saint Sophia Ukrainian Orthodox Seminary.

She is the author of *Maternal Body: A Theology of Incarnation from the Christian East* (Paulist Press, 2019) and the forthcoming *Church of Our Granddaughters*, as well as the Book Reviews Editor of *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies*. She serves on the boards of the International Orthodox Theological

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Association and St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess. She lives in Washington State with her husband and her three out of five children who are still at home. Her work may be accessed on her website: carriefrederickfrost.com.

Discussion Questions

Q Frost writes, “Rarely does anything happen this fast in the Orthodox world.” Why is this the case? What is helpful and unhelpful about the slowness to change in the Orthodox Church? How does this affect the effort to reinstitute deaconesses?

Q Frost emphasizes that deaconesses are “not a novelty” in the Orthodox Church. Why is this important to a discussion of deaconesses in the church today?

Q Frost says, “Deaconesses would be a boon to parish life.” What reasons does she give? Do you find her reasons convincing? Are there other reasons deaconesses would improve the quality of parish life?

Q Frost briefly outlines and addresses the concerns usually raised in arguments against reinstituting deaconesses. Do you, or do people you know, share any of these concerns? How might they be addressed?

Q Frost considers what deaconesses might look like in the church today in the final section of the article. What other qualities would be helpful in deaconesses today? Are there certain aspects of church life you think deaconesses should or should not be involved in?

Q Frost writes, “A women’s diaconate would demonstrate that there is a place in the Orthodox Church for women to serve in roles of leadership.” Do you see other places in the Orthodox Church today for women to serve as leaders? How would having deaconesses affect those other roles?

Q What are your concerns or thoughts about ordaining deaconesses in the Orthodox Church?

Q What questions did Frost’s article raise or answer for you about deaconesses?



Deaconesses: In-depth History Study Guide

GOAL OF THE STUDY

The goal of the *Deaconesses: In-depth History Study Guide* is to offer a thorough and complete history of deaconesses in the history of the Orthodox Church including ordination rites and roles and responsibilities in the community and the liturgy. This study guide may be used as a one-time group event or as part of the multiple study guides offered by St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess, but this particular guide is geared towards those who wish to go deep into the history of deaconesses. This guide would work well following either (or both) *Deaconesses: A Brief Introduction Study Guide* or *Deaconesses: Past and Present Study Guide*.

Participants will be expected to read “Female Deacons in the Orthodox Church” by Valerie Karras in advance, a forty-six-page scholarly article. Participants will share their impressions of the article and will go through the discussion questions together.

There is a separate Resources Section where you will find everything you need for the event. We have included it in this email. This includes:

- Copy of the article which may be distributed electronically or on paper
- Bio of Valerie Karras (see below)
- Discussion questions (see next page)
- “Common Questions” handout
- Prayer to St. Phoebe (to begin your session)
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“[Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church](#)” by Valerie A. Karras, Church History, Volume 73 , Issue 2 , June 2004 , pp. 272 – 316.

Bio of Valerie Karras

Dr. Valerie Karras's areas of research interest include women in early and Byzantine Christianity, gender in early church theology, and Orthodox Christianity in ecumenical, interreligious, and feminist conversation. She has published articles, translations, and book reviews in scholarly journals such as Church History, the Journal of Early Christian Studies, and Theological Studies, and in such books as the Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology and Holy Women of Byzantium.

Dr. Valerie Karras has taught at the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, Saint Louis University, and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. Dr. Karras has earned doctorates in patristic theology from the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki and in church history from The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. She also holds a Master of Theological Studies degree from Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology.

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Discussion Questions

Q Karras provides a comprehensive history of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church. What aspects of this history most surprised or impressed you?

Q What aspects of the past presence of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church most directly affect the conversation about deaconesses in the Church today?

Q Karras begins by saying that historians have shown comparatively greater interest in investigating women and the priesthood in the ancient past than investigating women and the diaconate. Why might this be the case and why does Karras seek to study deaconesses?

Q Karras says the order of deaconesses “appears to have thrived in the early Byzantine period.” Why was this the case? What changed over time that compromised this thriving? Might deaconesses thrive today?

Q Karras discusses the ordination rites used for deaconesses with some detail. What stands out about these rites? What in or about these rites is important for the conversation about deaconesses today?

Q What historical information or examples did you find most meaningful to the conversation about deaconesses today?

Q Karras discusses the separation between women and men’s lives in the ancient world and how the role and duties of deaconesses were determined by this cultural norm. Women and men today live much more integrated public lives. Even so, do you see situations today in which it would be more comfortable or appropriate to have a woman (a deaconess) than a man?

Q Karras clearly establishes the history of ordaining women to the diaconate. Some today are reluctant to give deaconesses “full ordination” even in light of this history. Why is that the case? What do you think?

Q Karras even discusses historical clothing worn by those in the diaconate. Why is this important? How would you imagine deaconesses dressing today?

Q What questions did Karras’s article raise or answer for you about deaconesses?



Deaconesses: Past and Present Study Guide

GOALS OF THIS STUDY

The goal of the *Deaconesses: Past and Present Study Guide* is to offer a portrait of deaconesses in the history of the Orthodox Church as well as a vision for how deaconesses might function and benefit the Church in the present. This study guide may be used as a one-time group event or as part of the multiple study guides offered by St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess. It would work well after the *Deaconesses: A Brief Introduction Study Guide*, but groups who already have a working knowledge of deaconesses may wish to skip that guide and go directly to this one.

Participants will be expected to read the article [“The Deaconess: Meeting Her in the 21st Century”](#) by Teva Regule in advance, a twenty-three page article. Participants will share their impressions of the article and will go through the discussion questions together.

There is a separate Resources Section where you will find everything you need for the event. We have included it in this email. This includes:

- Copy of the article which may be distributed electronically or on paper
- Bio of Teva Regule (see below)
- Discussion questions (see next page)
- “Common Questions” handout
- Prayer to St. Phoebe (to begin your session)
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In-depth History and Case for Deaconesses

[“The Deaconess: Meeting Her in the 21st Century,”](#) by Teva Regule, presented at Women and Men in the Church sponsored by the Fellowship of St. John the Baptist and the Women’s Orthodox Education and Ministries Network, July 29, 2006.

Bio of Teva Regule

Teva Regule received her M. Div. from Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology and her Ph. D. in Systematic Theology with a focus on liturgical theology and history from Boston College. She is now an adjunct instructor at her alma mater. In addition, for many years, she taught at the Pappas Patristic Institute. Throughout her life, she has been an active member of the Orthodox Church, working in youth and college ministries as well as initiatives dedicated to uplifting the ministry of women in the Church. At present, she serves on the board of the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess and as President of the Orthodox Theological Society in America (OTSA).

Discussion Questions

Q Regule writes, “We are all ‘ordained’ into the ministry of Christ—the Royal Priesthood—at our baptism.” In what ways do you understand yourself to be “ordained”—or not? What does this sort of ordination mean and how does it relate to the formal ordained ministry of deacon, Presbyter (priest), and bishop?

Q What are the core characteristics or duties of the diaconate? How were those exhibited in the early church in terms of women?

Q Why did the entire diaconate—male and female—experience a decline? How does this affect conversations around deaconesses today?

Q Regule discusses the recent changes to the diaconate in other Christian communities. How do those affect—or not—the thinking about the diaconate in the Orthodox Church?

Q Some in the Orthodox Church who support the reinstatement of deaconesses are skeptical or hesitant about deaconesses serving liturgically, meaning during the services of the church. Why do you think there is this so? Does Regule’s vision of deaconesses serving liturgically appeal or make sense to you? Why or why not?

Q What case(s) does Regule make for the need for deaconesses today and specifically the need for ordained deaconess? Are there other cases to be made? How do you agree or disagree with Regule’s case?

Q Regule includes personal reflections from her own experience that deal with pastoral care. How can you envision deaconesses providing pastoral care? Are there particular settings in which you think deaconesses are needed today?

Q What questions did Regule’s article raise or answer for you about deaconesses?



Deaconesses: The Conversation Today Study Guide

GOAL OF THIS STUDY

The goal of the *Deaconesses: The Conversation Today Study Guide* is to outline the current discussion around the possibility of reinstating deaconesses in the Orthodox Church Today. This study guide will work best if used after participants have used either *Deaconesses: A Brief Introduction Study Guide* or *Deaconesses Past and Present Study Guide* (and possibly *Deaconesses: An In-depth history Study Guide*, for those who wish a deeper knowledge of the history), in order to have a solid context for the material in this study guide.

Participants will be expected to read to short articles:

- [“Towards a Reasoned and Respectful Conversation About Deaconesses”](#) by St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess Board, *Public Orthodoxy*, April 17, 2018.
- Saint Phoebe Center FAQs, <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/faqs/> note: it might be nice to have a pdf, but right now these are formatted on the website as clickable questions.
- Calls for the Rejuvenation of the Female Diaconate in the Modern Era

There is a separate Resources Section where you will find everything you need for the event. We have included it in this email. This includes:

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Q [“Towards a Reasoned and Respectful Conversation About Deaconesses”](#) addresses some points about deaconesses by theme, each theme being in response to common misconceptions and concerns about deaconesses. Which of the themes seems more important to you and why?

Q Do you think this article succeeds in addressing misconceptions and concerns about deaconesses? It’s a short article—what other points might have been included?

Q The authors write, “The question of reinstating deaconesses is a matter of praxis; it is not a dogmatic issue.” What do they mean by this and why is it important?

Q How would you describe the Orthodox Church's ability or willingness to change today, generally speaking? How does this affect the conversation about deaconesses?

Q What are your thoughts on the entire diaconate—male and female? Would rejuvenating this order help the church and in what ways?

Q Reading the list of calls, why do you think the Orthodox Church, other than in Africa, has not heeded these calls? What do you perceive to be the biggest obstacles to the Orthodox Church ordaining deaconesses today?

Q Did the FAQs satisfactorily answer questions you have or might anticipate others having about deaconesses? What other questions ought to be included?

Q What questions did these articles and this conversation raise or answer for you about deaconesses?



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