

“Revisioning Christian Ministry: Women and Ministry in *Agnes Grey*, *Ruth*, *Janet’s Repentance*, and *Adam Bede*”

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CHAPTER II

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: VICTORIAN CLERGY, THE LAITY, AND ISSUES OF
DIFFERENTIATION, AUTHORITY, AND RECOGNITION

The heroines of *Agnes Grey*, *Ruth*, *Janet’s Repentance*, and *Adam Bede* do not take vows, wear distinctive clothing, or live in communities of women. They are not described as sisters, deaconesses, or district visitors. However, Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot reflect the historical debates surrounding the mid-nineteenth century advent of Anglican sisterhoods, the restoration of the female diaconate, and the expanded scope and authority of female district visitors.¹ The issues of differentiation, authority, and recognition—central to Victorian debates over women’s involvement in these Christian ministries—are also central to the heroines’ activities depicted by Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot. Each novel compares the heroine’s ministry with that of a clerical character, blurring the line between clergy and laity. Each novel considers the control that clergymen should have over a woman’s ministerial activities, presenting each heroine’s work as largely independent of such control. Each novel forces the reader to question whether the work the heroines perform is or should be recognized by others as an official

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ministry completed in the name of the Christian church.

Despite the lack of references to the more well-defined emerging opportunities (sisterhoods, etc.), Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot's presentations of the heroines' activities delineate their view of the patriarchal Church's actions toward female Christian ministers. The patriarchal Church hierarchy worked to distinguish the activities of sisters, deaconesses, and district visitors from those of the clergy, to maintain male clerical authority over all such female ministers, and to limit the recognition granted to the daily ministerial work undertaken by many women.

Victorian laywomen were not alone in struggling with these issues. The clergy and laymen fought over the latter's wish to elevate their participation in local parish activities and carve out an official position within the Church's hierarchical structure.² Laymen who discussed their displeasure with the Church's hierarchical structure opened up alternative visions of institutional ministry. Because of these challenges from laymen to institutional conceptions of ministry, those who supported women's ability to more fully enter into ministerial activities found the discussion already open. Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot, in choosing to focus on the connection that *laywomen* have to the Christian church, present important fictional evidence that discussions of women's displeasure with the Church's patriarchal, hierarchical structure were also a significant part of the Victorian world. However, it is first important to identify the ways in which the laymen's quest for greater authority and a larger share in the clerical ministry may

have contributed by challenging the very definition of ministry.

Given the theological background of the Church of England, it is not surprising that the differentiation between clergy and laity was a source of tension. At the heart of the Reformation were key debates about defining ministry, authority, and the role of laymen.³ According to theologian Kenan B. Osborne, in *Ministry: Lay Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church, Its History and Theology* (1993), while Martin Luther did not begin with a focus on the clergy/laity issue, the “theological and pastoral role of the lay person” soon became one of the issues central to his calls for church reform (398).

As part of his history of the role of the Roman Catholic laity, Osborne provides an overview of Luther’s relevant writings and describes their “challenge [to] the then common understandings of the priestly role” (398). In Luther’s view, the differentiation between clergyman and layman had become too great. The active priest was seen as the sole dispenser of God’s grace, and the passive layman had been removed from the possibility of attaining grace without the priest. Luther challenged this idea, asserting that all Christians are priests by virtue of their baptism. Consequently, the “priesthood of all believers” became a fundamental tenet of the Reformation (Osborne 398).⁴

However, Luther believed that a call to ministerial priesthood was still heard by a selected group of Christians (Osborne 408). Despite the existence of a distinct group of clergy, Luther argued that the church should not view those who were called to minister as superior to laymen, or as a “higher form of disciple” (Osborne 400).⁵ Contending that ministry is service,

he opposed an “ontologizing of ministry” (Osborne 400); instead of focusing on the priest’s very “being,” Luther focused on his “doing.”

The changes that the Church of England underwent in the sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries encouraged laymen to feel as if they were integral to the worship and ministry of the Church. The language of worship became English, making the liturgy more accessible to all; clerical celibacy was no longer required, removing one significant difference that had separated clergymen from the laity (Sheils 154-55). However, by the nineteenth century, tensions had developed between the clergy, who were emphasizing the special nature of their professional ministry, and laymen, who felt that focus had been shifted away from their share in the “priesthood of all believers.” Once again, some felt that the distinction between the clergy and laymen had grown too large.

Furthermore, in the nineteenth century, some of the legal duties that had helped to define the clerical role in the eighteenth century were carried out by other professionals, such as lawyers and non-clerical magistrates. Some of the clergy then worked to promote their remaining duties, especially the sacramental duties, attempting to maintain their status as the only individuals who could carry out specific important tasks. Alan Haig, in *The Victorian Clergy*, indicates that the professionalization of the clergyman emphasized his religious functions. This led to more individual clerical power over the way worship was conducted in a parish and the way ministry would be enacted (14-15). Within High Church Anglicanism especially, a sense of the clergy as a select group of Christians who mediated between God and the masses suggested

that Christian clergy were separated from, if not superior to, laymen.

The mid-century ritual controversies demonstrate the tension between laymen and the clergy which was an extreme result of this sense of separation. In 1842, Bishop Blomfield's address to the congregation at St. Paul's Cathedral regarding the need for a stronger emphasis on the ritualistic elements of the Sunday service led to the first of these ritual controversies. One of these elements was the importance of the clergy wearing the surplice during services. Such an emphasis on ritual within the service would further mark the clergy as distinct, making them more central and essential to the worship service (Chadwick 220).

An uprising against the use of the surplice by clergymen ensued. The "surplice riots" at Exeter were caused by laymen's identification of the garment with an Anglo-Catholicism that opposed the ideals of Luther and the Reformation and would mark the clergy again as separate and special. Historian Owen Chadwick calls the surplice riots a symptom of the "distrust growing between ordinary layman and high churchman" (220). That such an uprising could occur over controversy about how much ritualism should be restored to the Church's worship service shows not only a great interest in political and religious issues on the part of laymen, as Chadwick points out, but their opposition to a minimizing of their own status in the Church.

Beyond the confines of High Church Anglicanism, Robin Gilmour notes that issues related to social and Church reform accentuated the developing split between laymen and the clergy of all church affiliations. The clergy's debate over seemingly small matters of doctrine and internal politics led many to view the clergy as unconcerned with the truly necessary social

and church reforms. Gilmour argues that the “arrogance” that many of the clergy showed in relationships with laymen also did little to foster a sense of a mission shared by all members of the Christian church (*Victorian Period* 88). Some clergy and laymen warned that the creation of a “‘caste’ clergy,” one that was distinguished from laymen in dress, education, and most importantly, theological and social concerns, was “‘dangerous to the English Church’” (qtd. in Haig 18-19).

The sense of dissociation that existed between laymen and clergy was even greater in terms of class; working and lower-class parishioners were decidedly separated from the clergy, and the Church’s hierarchy appeared to be working to maintain that distinction. It was assumed by most in the Church’s hierarchy that only leisured middle- or upper-class men were acceptable candidates to the ministry. High Church supporters simply insisted that all clergy should be graduates of Oxford or Cambridge, thus virtually insuring that the vast majority of clergymen would not be from the working classes (Heeney, *Different* 23-25).⁶

Unfortunately, the distance in social class often made it more difficult for pastors to have close sympathy with the lives of their poorer parishioners. The gap between laymen and the minister was addressed in pastoral handbooks which urged preachers to avoid using scholarship when teaching from the pulpit because the working classes would not understand. Such writers also attempted to aid clergy in their approach to working-class parishioners while visiting (Heeney, *Different* 33-41).

Some within the Established Church did believe that the clergy should come from all

social classes. By mid-century, more and more lower-class non-graduates were ordained each year. Evangelical institutions working within the Church of England, such as St. Aidan's founded in 1846, provided theological study and training to men without previous university experience, men who came from other trades and occupations marking them as lower-middle class (Heeney, *Different* 25, 103-106). This extension of ordination to the lower classes allowed working-class laymen to feel more connected to the clergy.

The fact that the laymen had no voice in deciding who could enter the ranks of the clergy points to another concern felt by many: the lack of any official decision-making position within the Church's hierarchical structure. In response to demands by the laymen that they have a larger role, by mid-century some clergymen in the Church of England did become concerned that laymen have a voice in "the consultative and policy making life of the church" (Heeney, *Different* 59). As the issues surrounding Convocation and the Gorham case of 1850 demonstrate, many clergy and bishops opposed a potentially larger role for laymen in official Church matters, highlighting again the tensions felt whenever the clergy/laity differentiation was questioned.

Convocation was a group of clergy and bishops which was originally intended to have control over legislative affairs within the Church and ecclesiastical affairs of doctrine, theology, and practice. Beginning in 1717, Convocation had essentially been suppressed by Parliament and the Crown; at the opening of each Parliament, Convocation would meet, send a royal address to the throne, and then be suspended by royal prerogative. This left the Church without

an authoritative body outside of Parliament, which was increasingly concerned with secular business rather than the minutiae of the Church's doctrinal disputes (Bowen 35-36).

Additionally, a number of clergymen within the Church of England wanted an independent voice in the institutional Church separate from the hierarchy of bishops and archbishops (Chadwick 324). Beginning in the 1830s, and continuing throughout the 1840s and 1850s, there was a movement toward the reinstatement of Convocation with its original powers.

Most laymen opposed Convocation, viewing it as another opportunity for the clergy to control the doctrine and practice of the individual Church member (Chadwick 311; Bowen 26).

Some laymen supported its restoration, hoping that in the future they might also be included within it. Some suggested an alternative synod-style body that would include laymen from its inception (Bowen 36). Few, if any, in the Church's hierarchy supported the idea of including lay members in Convocation or in some alternative body. High Church and Tractarian voices insisted that "the laity had not vocation to teach, only to receive. [Edward] Pusey believed that if laymen were admitted to Convocation the Church of England would be finished" (Chadwick 313). An article in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1842, entitled "Movements in the Church," describes the laity as "a great body" waiting to hear from the bishops what they should believe (728). This endorses the central image of a passive laity who should not be involved in official Church matters.⁷

As a result of opposition to involving the laymen in such an official Church instrument, lay members were not permitted when Convocation was eventually reinstated in 1855.

Ironically, Convocation itself never attained any great power within the Church (Chadwick 324). The debate over lay involvement in Convocation indicates the desire of many Churchmen to limit laymen's role in the organized institution. Further, it illustrates the blurring of distinct categories as some laymen sought to disrupt the rigid clergy/laity distinction and clergy fought to maintain the categories intact.⁸

The debate surrounding the 1850 Gorham case also exemplifies the struggle over which group—the clergy or the laymen—would have authoritative power within the Church, and how much each group should have. Gorham's case involved a doctrinal dispute about the saving grace of baptism and arose because of the clergyman's Calvinist beliefs. However, the doctrinal dispute itself became much less important than the dispute about who should determine Church doctrine. The ecclesiastical courts made a decision about the case, declaring Gorham guilty of heresy, but that decision was overturned by a Parliamentary body that included both Churchmen and laymen. This assertion by a state body that it had a legal right to determine Church doctrine, and the subsequent dissatisfaction of many of the Church's hierarchy, was again indicative of the divisive nature of clergy/lay relations. Who had the authority to decide what the dogma of the Church should be? The clergy wanted sole power to reside in the hands of clergymen, while some laymen used parliamentary councils, as in this case, in order to have some part in such decisions (Cockshut 39-57). The Gorham case shows the tensions present between the clergy and the laymen and demonstrates the latter's open questioning of the Church's assertion that authority resided only with the clergy.⁹

Authority versus influence: Laymen's true position within the Victorian Church

While some laymen in the nineteenth century felt distanced from the clergy by the latter's growing sense of professional ministry, by class, and by authoritative structures which excluded them, some historians propose that laymen had a large degree of influence over local parish matters. Frances Knight cites churchwardens, parish clerks, vestrymen, sextons, and patrons as official positions which gave laymen influence. Churchwardens had a degree of autonomy, could notify the archdeacon of a deficiency in a local clergyman, and were the legal representatives of the parish. Clerks sang psalms and made responses with or in place of the congregation, and thus could have an impact on the tone of the liturgy. Sextons were responsible for grave digging, sweeping the church, and cleaning the pews (Knight 182-87). Parishioners could spread rumors about a new curate they did not like (Knight 116), object to a clergyman's preaching style to the bishop, or leave a parish where they did not agree with the clergyman for another, perhaps Dissenting, parish (Knight 82-84).

Knight does acknowledge that these roles did not allow laymen to participate in the management of the Church as a whole (182). However, an important distinction can be made between authority and influence. The examples Knight provides demonstrate that while laymen could attempt to influence a bishop or other official Church authority, they had no official authority within the institutional Church.¹⁰ In reality, within even the local parish "the layman had little role and even less authority. The power of the parish priest could not be challenged by

those in his parish” (Shiman 92).

Responding to laymen’s dissatisfaction with the monopoly of authority held by those within the hierarchical Church structure, Evangelicals in the 1830s and 1840s worked to increase lay involvement in the Church’s ministry. Working from within the Church of England, Evangelicals enlisted laymen to support efforts to reach out to the secular world (Shiman 43-44) even though High Churchmen wanted “to curb what they considered to be the irregular ministrations of lay helpers” (Heeney, *Different* 34). However, even within the Evangelical organizations that permitted lay ministry, it was clear that such lay participants were always subject to the authority of the official ministers (Heeney, *Different* 34).¹¹

The hierarchy of the Church of England as a whole did not truly begin to acknowledge the need for greater lay involvement in the Church’s ministry until after the published census results in 1851 showed the alarmingly high numbers of Dissenters in England. The Church’s hierarchy then began to acknowledge that they needed to bring the Church “closer to the people” (Shiman 93). Encouraging more lay involvement would operate as a safeguard against further encroachments by Dissent; since Nonconformists often offered laymen greater opportunities for involvement in services and in local parish matters, the Church needed to do so as well to provide them with a vested interest in the institution.

By the 1860s, limited concessions to include laymen in the official affairs of the Church had begun. Beginning in the 1860s, Church Congresses met to discuss Church reform. While no decisions were made at these congresses, laymen were allowed to attend. At the same time,

the bishops began to encourage the formation of voluntary parish councils and diocesan conferences began to include laymen as well (Heeney, *Women's* 95). Although the objections raised by some laymen began to be heard by the Church, the mere presence of these debates and the challenges they posed to the institution's conception of ministry would only have made it easier for laywomen in the Church to question their role as well.

Dissenters: Laymen and the clergy

The differentiation between laymen and clergymen was less pronounced in most Dissenting groups. Many Dissenting ministers came from the lower classes, thus allowing a greater number of parishioners to feel connected to them (Hempton, "Religious" 310). Lay participation in services was often greater in Dissenting chapels; more than simply singing hymns was frequently required of Dissenting church members (Cunningham 43). Although every Independent, Dissenting, or Nonconformist denomination dealt with the clergy/laity split differently, Methodism offers an example of how in one group outside the Church similar issues arose.

While Methodism at its core sought to maintain an idea of ministry that included all Christians, as the movement became an institutional religion, this core idea of ministry seems to have been challenged by a growing hierarchy of professionalized ministers. Many Methodist preachers originally had little to separate themselves from laymen but their distinctive dress. "Many of the preachers had little education, less than their leading laymen. They were not

separated from their flocks by vows of celibacy, nor by a bishop's hands, nor by knowledge of divinity, nor by literary education, nor by social convention, nor by exclusive right to the pulpit" (Chadwick 377). This lack of separation could produce what High Churchmen in the Church of England feared: a sense that the ministers were "incurably lay" (Chadwick 377).

As Methodists and other Dissenting denominations officially split from the Church of England and became institutionalized themselves, recognizing certain preachers as representatives of the religion and others as not, greater rifts between laymen and preachers developed. In 1849, at the Manchester Conference of Methodists, a controversy arose over whether laymen should even be admitted (Chadwick 382-84). Margaret Batty, in *Stages in the Development and Control of Wesleyan Lay Leadership 1791-1878*, argues that from the 1820s through the 1870s there was a great deal of tension between laymen and clergymen in Methodist denominations, as questions were raised about what ministry meant and who should have pastoral power and authority (151-68). Batty cites letters and interviews with Methodists of this time period who exhibited distrust of the Methodist ministers as they sought to form a specialized group of clergy.

Laymen, she writes, were aware that in the New Testament no such brotherhood of ministers was described. Instead, it was the brotherhood of the church which was stressed in the biblical texts (Batty 252). This brotherhood included all (male) members. Despite this growing tension within Methodism, however, Dissenting groups appear to have been more successful at avoiding a large split between the clergy and laymen. Most religious historians

agree that the increasing number of Nonconformists throughout the century is a direct result of the opportunities for lay involvement and the sense of authority that such involvement offered to laymen (Cunningham 43).

Women in the Church of England

For laymen in the Church and Dissenting chapels, issues of differentiation, authority, and recognition arose as a result of their desire to be more involved in the institutions' official work. Laywomen faced not only the same issues of significant differentiation from the work of the clergy, proper authority, and debate over recognition, but were also forced to challenge a gender ideology which called for all women to aspire to the roles of wife and mother first.

To suggest that women might be called by God to a lifelong ministerial vocation, perhaps even to the exclusion of the vocations of wife and mother, opposed the dominant Christian gender ideology. Any charitable activities were to be secondary to the domestic duties of women. However, some women argued that their work went beyond a secondary avocation and merited recognition as a vocation—as an official role within the Church. Many within the Church's hierarchy wondered why such recognition was necessary; were these women not simply obeying their divinely-dictated womanly nature in caring for others, rather than choosing to engage in a ministerial vocation?

At the heart of this question was a distinction between universal and specific Christian ministries. Christian/universal ministry is service to others because of Christ, is rooted in

Christian baptism, and thus includes all baptized individuals. The “priesthood of all believers” calls on all Christians, men and women, to care for others because of their baptism in Christ. However, there still exists within Christianity a specialized ministry. This Christian/specific ministry is service to others because of Christ, but done “*in the name of the Church and for the sake of helping the Church to fulfill its mission*” (Rademacher 90; italics in original). These are the ministers recognized and designated as official by the church.

Thus, all baptized Christians can feel justified in doing good works for others and consider themselves to be engaged in ministry, but only those who work in the name of the church and are recognized by the church for their work move into the specialized category of official ministers. Discussions about women’s ministerial activities in the 1840s and 1850s inevitably included the question of whether women should be allowed such an official designation.

Were nineteenth-century women interested in greater and more recognized involvement in Christian ministry? Lilian Shiman argues that in the 1840s and 1850s a “growing number of unmarried, wealthy, and some not so well-to-do women wanted an official position within the Church of England” (96). Florence Nightingale, in *Suggestions for Thought*, a work published privately in 1860, wrote that “the Church of England has for men bishoprics, archbishoprics, and a little work (good men make a great deal for themselves). She has for women—what?” (88). Sean Gill argues that Nightingale’s strident request for work for women within the Church is unusual. Most women simply seized the opportunities that volunteer work provided for them

(135). However, the Anglican sisterhoods, begun in the 1840s, grew rapidly in numbers of members (Heeney, *Women's* 63), a testament to many women's desire for more than volunteer work for a place within the Church's organized ministry. Sean Gill counters by suggesting that the inception of such structures as the sisterhood and female diaconate actually caused some women to question their position more than they had before (146).

Whether women had a desire before their inception or not, factions within the Church did provide women with the opportunity of recognized roles in the Church. As any new ministry evolves, questions arise as to its nature and purpose: do these new individuals need to be in a community? Must they be sent by someone in authority to do their work? Who will determine what their work should be? Do they need special education, training, certification, or ordination? How will they be distinguished from others who also serve voluntarily? Will this be an "official" or non-official ministry of the church? (Rademacher 3). Focused on the core issues of differentiation, authority, and recognition, these questions helped to define the new ministerial vocations for women in opposition to the images of women found within domestic ideology and in relation to images of clergymen within the Church.

Anglican sisterhoods

Beginning in the 1840s, clergymen associated with High Church Tractarianism, or the Oxford Movement, began to encourage the establishment of communities of women who took vows and lived celibate lives of service. The formation of these Anglican sisterhoods allowed

women an official role within the Church. The communities were active, not contemplative (Gilley, "Church of England" 298), as women essentially worked in social service, helping orphans, prostitutes, the sick, and the poor. Sisters worked as nurses and teachers, offered retreats and spiritual counseling, and became increasingly involved in foreign mission work.

The first woman in the nineteenth century to take a vow as an Anglican sister was Marian Hughes in 1841. In 1844, Lord John Manners suggested a Sisterhood of Mercy in memorial to Robert Southey who had expressed approval of such organizations. Established in London, it consisted of four women who taught a school to pauper children, ran an orphanage, and visited the poor. In 1848, W. J. Butler helped two women to begin a teaching community which enabled them two years later to found a penitentiary, a home to reclaim prostitutes or unmarried mothers. Also in 1848, "with encouragement from Pusey and blessing from Bishop Phillpotts, Priscilla Lydia Sellon founded a community to work among the poor of Plymouth and Devonport" (Chadwick 506). By 1850, there were sixteen convents at work in London operating under the auspices of the Church (Chadwick 287).¹²

The motives of High Churchmen such as John Henry Newman and Edward Pusey in establishing convents within the Church of England often had little to do with providing women with an official position in the Church. As early as 1835, Newman wrote in "Letters on the Church of the Fathers" that female religious institutions could "give dignity and independence to the position of women in society" (A Letters" 667). However, Newman's primary motive was not to provide women with a deserved participatory role in the Church's ministry. Instead, he

argues that the option of Anglican convents would stop women from converting to Roman Catholicism. Many single women would be saved from “the temptation of throwing themselves rashly away upon unworthy objects” such as unworthy spouses or Roman Catholicism’s convents (Newman, “Letters” 667).

Newman was correct in claiming that a significant number of converts to Roman Catholicism in the mid-1840s were women and that many of these entered the convent. One of the attractions of Roman Catholic convents, according to historian Sheridan Gilley, was the degree of autonomy they gave to women’s work, allowing them to initiate large new missions in education, nursing, and charity (Gilley, “Roman” 354). Barbara Bodichon, a close friend of George Eliot, published *Women and Work* in 1857 in which she argued that “more than one-half the women who go into the Catholic Church join her because she gives work to her children” (Bodichon 39). Anna Jameson’s 1855 lecture, “On Sisters of Charity Abroad and at Home,” states that Roman Catholicism offered women the opportunity and power “to throw their energies into a sphere of definite utility” (Jameson 119). Those who supported the new Anglican sisterhoods recognized the opportunity they presented to squelch female conversions to Roman Catholicism.

In the opinion of most Churchmen, the sisterhoods were to remain firmly under the control of the male clerical hierarchy. Newman notes that the administration of such “foundations for single females” would need “proper precautions,” thus noting the need for others to be in authority (“Letters” 667). Frances Power Cobbe, a Unitarian and prolific writer

in the second half of the nineteenth century, wrote in her 1862 essay, “What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?” about the Church’s continued concern with male authority in these institutions.

It was clear from the Convocation of Canterbury in 1862 that “Mother Church expressed herself satisfied at her daughters ‘coming out,’ but considered that her chaperonage was decidedly necessary to their decorum” (Cobbe, “What” 236).¹³

While control by a male hierarchy may have been the patriarchal Church’s ideal, Sean Gill argues that mother superiors such as Priscilla Sellon worked to claim authority and leadership in a male-dominated Church “by manipulating Victorian theological and social prescriptions for correct female behaviour,” stretching the boundaries in their own charitable activities and in the direction they provided for the work of other nuns (158-59). In *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920*, Martha Vicinus writes that sisters were kept under the strict control of men in the Church. However, she also notes later that some women left the sisterhood founded by Sellon, citing her “unbridled authority” as reason for their departure (Vicinus 51-53). Most sisterhoods also elected their own Episcopal Visitor, and thus had a large say in what clergyman had authority over the community (Heeney, *Women’s* 66-67). This type of authority within the sisterhood represented a challenge to the episcopal, hierarchical power structure of the patriarchal Church.

Jameson’s “Sisters of Charity” and her second lecture on the subject of women’s Christian vocation, “The Communion of Labour,” provide numerous examples throughout history of women’s ability to successfully act as the sole authority figures within all-female

religious institutions. Jameson writes of the Béguines, an order of hospital-sisters founded in the twelfth century, who have acted “under a strict self-constituted government” without difficulties since their inception (46-47). A female community at Turin, France which carries out a number of outreach and service acts with a great positive effect on the community is “ruled by a superior, elected from among [the women] themselves” (Jameson 251).

Indeed, Jameson argues that in order to be successful, women who work as sisters, district visitors, teach within “Schools or Houses of Detention,” or work in female penitentiaries, must be “invested with an official authority” (89, 249). She does not wish to reproduce Roman Catholic institutions for women which were often contemplative, not active, and were “subservient to a hierarchy” (Jameson 38). The language Jameson uses repeatedly indicates that women can and have successfully functioned as authorities within religious institutions such as the new Anglican sisterhoods. She describes a prison “governed chiefly by women” (205) and a penitentiary where the *women* are “assisted by three chaplains, a surgeon, and a physician: none of the men resided in the house, but visited it every day” (Jameson 208).

Despite the historical precedent, women’s attempts to assert authority within the Anglican convents were controversial. The new institutions were also criticized for a number of other policies and practices. One such criticism invoked the belief that the women of a local parish could minister to the needs of the sick and the poor just as well as a nun could (Casteras 137). Such a response clearly indicates that at issue in part was the recognition of such work as a lifelong vocation. Further criticism of the new sisterhoods demonstrates that their existence

appeared to contest an ideology of women's natural vocations as daughters, wives, and mothers.

Many detractors objected to the young women's "unnatural withdrawal from the world and an abdication of family ties" (Casteras 136). Convents were also viewed suspiciously because they forced women to give up their property, causing some to see the Church as desirous of financial gain through recruiting women (Casteras 137). Also, many argued that convents were a direct challenge to the authority of the patriarchal family (Sean Gill 153). Ironically, some criticized the practice which forced women to relinquish personal liberty, freedom, and property once they entered the convent, even though marriage would have meant the same relinquishment to a husband (Casteras 137-38). The patriarchal structure of marriage apparently held the greater claim.

The issue of celibacy forced criticism from both those who supported women's equality with men and those who supported the patriarchal relationship of marriage. Many were shocked by the insistence on celibacy, difficult to understand in a society where women were idolized and idealized as mothers (Casteras 136; Sean Gill 151). There were also those who opposed enforced celibacy for these women as unjust since it was not required of male ministers. Though the ministry of the new sisters did not appear as a threat to the ordained ministry of the clergy, some in society and most within the Church's hierarchy openly questioned how such a new role for women might pose a threat to the patriarchal structures of both institutions.

Restoration of the female diaconate

The ongoing debate about women's role in the Church also provoked a response from Low Churchmen. Sisterhoods involved taking vows, renouncing family, and living separately for the rest of a woman's life, aspects reminiscent of Roman Catholicism which made Evangelicals and Low Churchmen uncomfortable. The official reinstatement of the order of Deaconesses in 1861 represented an attempt to offer an alternative ministry for women within the Church.

Recognition was the central issue which was repeatedly raised in the discussions about the reinstatement of the female diaconate. The supporters of the deaconess movement believed that women should have some kind of "recognized status in the Church" when they performed charitable services in the name of Christ (Grierson 21). One supporter, Dr. Howson, wrote that the position of deaconess would give women "sufficient ecclesiastical recognition" for the charitable work they performed (qtd. in Grierson 20-21).

Support for the restoration of the female diaconate began to develop in the 1830s. Well before the official decision in 1861, many in England were aware of the Kaiserswerth Institute established in Germany in 1836. There, Lutheran "parish deaconesses" (Jameson 73) lived in a community and worked to help the sick and the poor, but were not required to take vows nor to make a lifelong commitment to the order (Heeney, *Women's* 68). Low Churchmen endorsed the work of Kaiserswerth in large part as an answer to the High Church Anglican convents (Prelinger 164). In England in 1855, the author of *Women and Their Work*

wrote that the model provided by the Kaiserswerth Institute, if followed by England, would give numbers of single women “who wished to offer themselves for service but who could not manage the total immersion and life-long obligations of the conventual life” such an opportunity (Heeney, *Women’s* 68).

Florence Nightingale spent time at the Kaiserswerth Institute in 1850 and 1851. Back in England in 1851, she anonymously published a thirty-two page pamphlet in response to the time she spent as a participant in the religious life of the community. *The Institution of Kaiserswerth on the Rhine* proclaimed: “Let those women who sit in busy idleness, look at Germany” (Nightingale 32). Nightingale’s pamphlet portrays an institution with shared authority, contends that women must be *taught* how to visit, and states that Christ calls both men and women to official service in the Church.

Nightingale writes that Pastor Fliedner, the founder and head of Kaiserswerth, “really, not nominally, delegates his authority,” and this is one secret to the institute’s success (*Institution* 16). Once trained and past a three-year probationary period, the deaconesses exercise authority over the “men-nurses” in the hospital, over all those working in a specific hospital ward, and have “a vote on the reception of a new sister into the Institution, and in the choice of a superintendent” (Nightingale, *Institution* 19-20, 24). Nightingale also argues that women do not naturally know how to care for the sick and the poor, but must be taught, as clergymen must be, the proper ways of district visiting and spiritual nursing (*Institution* 7, 13, 16-18). Only after training are deaconesses sent to parishes in Germany, England, America,

and Jerusalem (Nightingale, *Institution* 28-32).

Perhaps most significantly, Nightingale points to the presence of female deacons equal to male deacons within the early church. “We read, in the Epistle to the Romans, of a ‘Deaconess,’ as in the Acts of the Apostles, of ‘Deacons.’ Not only men were employed in the service of the sick and poor, but also women” (*Institution* 8-9). Nightingale continues, telling of the presence of deaconesses in various Christian denominations throughout history (*Institution* 9-10). As she concludes, she offers a challenge: “Shall the Roman Catholic Church do all the work? Has not the Protestant the same Lord, who accepted the services not only of men, but also of women?” (*Institution* 32). Emphasizing ministry as service, Nightingale contends that Christ called all people to share in a recognized ministry.

As in the Kaiserswerth Institute, women within the official deaconess order in the Church of England were allowed to follow a personal calling within the scope of the Church and to act in the name of the Church without having to take the vows required of Anglican nuns (Prelinger 161). However, the order was designed to be even more closely under the authority of the Church’s hierarchy than the sisterhoods (Heeney, *Women’s* 71). Deaconesses were to serve the clergy in a clearly subordinate role, making it essentially a “helping profession.” As the female diaconate grew during the second half of the nineteenth century, the main concern of the Church leaders continued to be one of maintaining authority (Prelinger 176-79).

Frances Power Cobbe questioned the efficacy of this arrangement in an 1865 essay “Woman’s Work in the Church.” She wondered if it was the “best and safest” arrangement to

have clergymen so wholly direct the activities of the deaconesses. “Are they to be his unpaid curates, doing his bidding day by day? But if so, when they (like other curates) differ in points of judgment, is it to be expected they will always yield, and become mere passive servants of a despotic master?” (A Woman’s” 517). Cobbe questions whether deaconesses can simply be inserted into a preexisting power structure without redefining some concepts of ministerial authority.

In practice, all deaconesses were most likely not the “passive servants” Cobbe feared. Martha Vicinus argues that in some institutions, such as the Mildmay Institute founded in 1860, women were expected to be subservient to the clergy, but were probably quite independent in their work. In the large cities where many deaconesses worked, they probably knew more about the individual situations than the overworked clergy did (59). According to the Church, however, deaconesses were not to have official authority. The fact that this issue is raised repeatedly over the remainder of the century at meetings of Church officials suggests that to some extent the hierarchy was unsuccessful in maintaining complete control over deaconess activities.

Despite attempts to maintain a male authority over the deaconesses, once they received recognition as official representatives of the Church, they became increasingly significant rivals to the clergy. Mirroring the training and key duties of the clergy, members of the diaconate wore distinctive clothing and underwent preparation before engaging in their active pastoral ministry (Prelinger 167). Training that deaconesses received eventually included time spent under a

parish priest, a type of apprenticeship, during which time the deaconess served “essentially as a curate to a parish vicar” (Prelinger 172). One proposed solution to the failure to adequately prepare young clergymen for the variety of duties they were expected to perform once ordained was a similar “‘kind of ministerial apprenticeship’ under the direction of a competent and experienced parish clergyman” in addition to their time spent as a curate (Heeney, *Different* 100). By the 1880s, as a result in part of such similarities in types of training, male and female ministries began to be compared by clergymen within the Established Church. This was radically different from the practices of the middle of the nineteenth century (Prelinger 180) which had been punctuated by the efforts of Pusey and others to maintain clear distinctions between sisters or deaconesses and the clergy (Sean Gill 156). Consequently, the role of deaconess continued to challenge gender norms for women as it asserted an equal place for women within the patriarchal Church’s ministry.

Other positions: District visitor, bible woman, and clergyman’s wife

District visiting, or visiting the sick and poor in the neighborhood to both alleviate material wants and discuss spiritual needs, was an activity encouraged for those middle- and upper-class women whose leisure time allowed them to participate in such work. All district visitors were supposed to work under the authority and direction of the parish clergyman (Heeney, *Women’s* 11). Indeed, all volunteer work was to be under the supervision of a clergyman. Thousands of women “in duly subordinate capacities, to thousands of parish priests

[worked] as district visitors, Sunday School teachers, and patrons and organizers of local charities” (Heeney, *Women’s* 21). Both clergymen and female district visitors were recommended to keep a diary of their visits, but the district visitor’s diary was primarily for review with the pastor (Heeney, *Different* 55, 63). Handbooks to parish priests emphasized the desirability of delegating work to these women, but also stressed the importance of maintaining control over their activities (Heeney, *Women’s* 27-28). Most likely many women would have visited the poor even without the sanction of the incumbent, so many clergymen felt it was better to enroll women as district visitors than to have them work independently in the parish (A. Russell 120).

Organization of the thousands of women who volunteered as district visitors became essential by the early 1800s, especially in large cities, and by 1828 the General Society for the Promotion of District Visiting was established (A. Russell 119). While large cities were the primary focus of such organizations, since clergymen were spread thin and needed support there, rural areas also had such volunteers. A letter written in March 1835 to *The British Magazine* indicates the concern some had with authority issues in the newly organized Society. The letter, signed Rechab, affirms the local clergyman’s ultimate authority over such individuals and groups. The writer argues that “it *never can be expedient* for persons not having any official authority in a parish, to assist in forming there any society contrary to the wishes of the resident minister.” In fact, it is “*indispensable* to the maintenance of parochial unity and ministerial influence, that the resident minister should be president, or have the absolute direction

of the operations of the society,” including deciding what tracts should be distributed and who is fit to act as a visitor (A District” 297; emphases in original). Writing only seven years after the establishment of the General Society, this letter indicates the uneasiness some felt about who had the authority to create and direct groups of district visitors.

In addition to the need for strict supervision, many also argued that middle-class women could visit outside the home only if their *primary* domestic duties were completed first. In early writings by women on philanthropic work, there is a tension between their charitable and domestic duties. Many women in the 1830s and 1840s were accused of neglecting their own homes and causing more moral mischief than they could ever hope to eradicate in their visits (Summers 59). Thus, while visiting was an option for middle-class women, it was to be held in check by male clerical authority and limited by domestic obligations.

Anne Summers cautions against belittling the work that these women did by accepting the perception of the middle-class “lady of the manor” who is bored with her leisured life and chooses to engage in a little philanthropy to fill her time. For example, while Sean Gill acknowledges that middle-class and lower-class women were kept very busy maintaining their own households, he claims that philanthropy and volunteer visiting arose largely because women had time and “were bored by the stifling and repetitive round of domestic life” (134). Summers counters this perception by arguing that while many Victorian men of the upper classes sought Parliamentary careers, “it has never been suggested that their overriding motive for doing so was one of boredom” (Summers 38). Summers maintains that visiting “*was* work and not a pastime

for so many women” (33).

Support for Summer’s claim that district visiting was a vocation rather than an avocation is found in references to district visiting and other religious ministries as potential jobs for the redundant single females of society. Twentieth-century critic Valerie Sanders states that during the second half of the nineteenth century, religion was increasingly discussed as a form of employment for women, particularly their work for various causes (166). Barbara Bodichon’s *Women and Work* is an example of this discussion. Bodichon argues that philanthropy is a temporary solution to middle-class women’s need for work. “Most of the work of the world must be done for money . . . [and] to insist on work for love of Christ only, to cry up gratuitous work, is a profound and mischievous mistake” (Bodichon 62).

Bodichon proposes as a solution a variety of work opportunities for women within various areas including hospitals and schools, medicine, arts, manufacturing, and the Church. Since sisterhoods were already offered as an opportunity to middle-class women in the Church, Bodichon is clearly arguing for another role, one that would not require vows but instead would pay middle-class women for the work in which they were already engaged. The charitable work and visiting that women did could become a source of income if it were no longer presumed that women should do such work for “love of Christ” alone.

Bodichon’s suggestion that women be paid for doing charitable work opposes the view of Victorians who considered such acts as simply an extension of a woman’s domestic activities into other homes. This idea subverts the model of Victorian woman as divinely directed to

engage in such self-sacrificing acts by virtue of her gendered nature alone. Anna Jameson also writes in support of both paid and unpaid positions for women within the Church's ministerial structure (274). In response to men's criticism that charity should not become a profession for women, Jameson writes:

Why should not charity be a profession in our sex, just in so far (*and no farther*) as religion is a profession in yours! If a man attires himself in a black surplice, ascends a pulpit, and publicly preaches religion, are we, therefore, to suppose that his religious profession is merely a profession, instead of a holy, heartfelt vocation? (268; emphasis in original)

Jameson insists that, like clergymen, women are capable of performing charitable acts and receiving remuneration for those acts, while still maintaining the correct motivation—the desire to help others. These descriptions of district visiting suggest that in the mid-nineteenth century there were ongoing discussions elevating the work from a leisure pastime to a serious employment.

The women visitors themselves were able to see their own work as entering into the male sphere of public work. The charitable activities the women engaged in, particularly in larger cities, finished work left incomplete by men. For example, women in larger cities worked to fill roles that were vacated by male unpaid Guardians of the Poor, positions established in the 1830s. As these men failed to fulfill their duties, women both urged them to return and moved to fill in the gaps, often without the instigation of a clergyman. Consequently, many middle-class women who visited the sick and the poor were aware that they were moving into functions and positions that men of their class had previously held (Summers 60). Such a recognition

demonstrates how these women, despite subordination in many cases to clergymen, saw themselves moving into a typically male/public sphere.

In contrast to middle-class women, lower-class women were provided with fewer opportunities for religious work outside the home until mid-century. Lower-class women were not given an official opportunity to participate in any type of ministry until the mid-1800s. Interestingly, when such opportunities did evolve, they were frequently paid positions, providing the remuneration for religious work that Bodichon suggested. One such opportunity was the paid position of bible woman. An organized group of women begun by Ellen Henrietta Ranyard in the mid-1850s, bible women worked mainly in larger cities with the class “below the decent poor” (qtd. in Heeney, *Women’s* 46). The organization offered many lower-class women a paid position for helping others spiritually and physically and was at first largely independent of clerical involvement. Ranyard worked with other female superintendents to supervise the work of the bible women. It was only after Ranyard’s death in 1879 that management of the bible women’s training and work efforts came under the control of parish priests, bishops, and other clergymen (Heeney, *Women’s* 49).

Lower-class women living in larger cities could also work as paid parochial missionaries (Heeney, *Women’s* 55). Scripture readers could be either male or female and were considered good helpers to clergymen, but only as long as they remained under the control of the incumbent (Heeney, *Different* 61). Much like the subordination of middle-class women’s district visiting to the supervision of a clergyman, religious historian Brian Heeney argues that this desire to

keep lower-class paid women Church workers under the strict supervision of the clergy shows the Church's "reluctance to license, or officially to sanction in any way, any special style of women's work within the institution" (Heeney, *Women's* 58). While Heeney describes women's "special" work, the Church hesitated to recognize any official ministry for women.

Clerical objections: Blurring the boundaries between laywomen and clergymen

Even if undertaken with the direct supervision of a clergyman, there was some resistance to women of any class visiting the sick and the poor. Some clergy saw laywomen's activities as visitors as a threat to their own role as clergy; "many were suspicious of the ladies of the district visiting society. A typical letter of 1829 referred to such a lady as 'a female spiritual quack'" (A. Russell 120). As clergymen fought to maintain a distinct profession while medical and legal professionals moved to occupy roles clergymen had held in the eighteenth century, the clergy were worried about "the encroachment of assistants into their [remaining] area of professional competence," that of ministry (A. Russell 120-21).

This included a fear that women who acted as lay ministers would encroach on one significant aspect of a clergyman's role, pastoral ministry. Women working as district visitors were expected to undertake activities similar to the clergy and were cautioned in the same ways. Visiting was always considered a part of the clergyman's role, but it was emphasized in the nineteenth century more than it had been earlier. Not only are clerical handbooks filled with recommendations to visit parishioners, but biographies of the period show that active clergymen

were heavily participating in such ministry. Clergymen were urged to devote at least three and a half or four hours a day to visiting work, making it a large part of a clergyman's occupation during the 1840s and 1850s (A. Russell 114-18).

In pastoral handbooks, clergymen were told that they would often find themselves fulfilling seemingly secular needs of their parishioners during visits including writing letters or perhaps helping a young girl “to follow her husband who had gone off with the recruiting-sergeant” (qtd. in Heeney, *Different* 52). Clergymen were told that sensitivity and thoughtfulness were necessary; they must show the proper respect and remember that no matter how poor a person may be, they have dignity (Heeney, *Different* 53).

The “rules” or recommendations for women district visitors are similar. They were urged by male writers of district visiting handbooks to obey a certain etiquette. It was important for these middle- and upper-class women to be courteous and respectful when entering the houses of the poorer classes (Summers 43). District visitors were expected to read from the Bible and Prayer Book when appropriate but were warned that other duties might arise: telling people about an institution that might help them, such as a school or dispensary, or helping someone to find employment when possible. While their main job was to “assist the pastor with the spiritual care of the members of his flock” (Heeney, *Different* 63), the presence of other duties aligns their work with that of the clergy. The fear that some clergymen felt about female district visitors encroaching upon their ministry also suggests that the roles of the two were associated by many in society.

Some clergy also feared the “feminization” of religion that they thought would be a result of greater and more active participation by women in the duties of the Church. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin, in *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, note the nineteenth-century fear of male clergy that women would enter into and take over the official church ministry (27).¹⁴ Some clergymen feared that women’s greater presence within religion would not only feminize the religion but the clergy themselves. In some texts of the period there is a blurring of boundaries between what qualities a clergyman should have and what qualities a woman was, by nature, assumed to have.

Brian Heeney points to numerous behavioral tracts and novels of the early Victorian period that emphasize the “distinguishing characteristics of the female” as tenderness, compassion, sympathy, unselfishness, and cheerfulness (Heeney, *Women’s* 12). The characteristics many pastoral theologians felt clergymen ought to have are reflections of those an ideal woman was to have. Clergymen were to have “gentleness and serenity,” to take “a simple interest in people,” to demonstrate a “capacity to appreciate and to feel the tenor of his parishioners’ lives,” and to be compassionate and sympathetic to others (Heeney, *Different* 13-18).

Furthermore, for both women and clergymen, maintaining moral character and respectability was essential. Valerie Sanders describes a well-known part of the middle-class domestic ideology predominant in the Victorian Period: “What a woman *was*, in terms of her personality and moral standards, was of far greater significance than what she knew” (20;

emphasis in original). Comparatively, Brian Heeney notes that for many pastoral theologians writing handbooks for Victorian clergymen, “what a clergyman was mattered quite as much as what he did” (*Different* 11). There was an emphasis placed on both the pastor as example, being a “living pattern to Christians” (qtd. in Heeney, *Different* 11), and on his overall character. Additionally, it was especially important for single women who worked outside the home to maintain, in reality and in perception, sexual propriety (Rendall 15). Clergymen, similarly to women, were counseled about how to avoid suspicions of unchastity or inappropriate conduct by never meeting with a young woman alone (Heeney, *Different* 20). High moral character and the *perception* of high moral character were central to the reputations of both women and clergymen.

Since some of the descriptions of the ideal clergyman align with that of the ideal woman, it is perhaps not surprising that issues of “manliness” in relation to clergymen became important during the middle of the century in response to a perceived feminization of the clergy. England’s “muscular Christianity,” so dubbed in 1857 by Charles Kingsley, appears in the novels of Kingsley and Thomas Hughes in the 1840s and 1850s as, in part, a corrective to this perceived feminization of religion and the clergy. While Norman Vance argues that notions of Christian manliness during this time period opposed not womanliness but effeminacy (Vance 8), Donald Paul notes that in the fictional and non-fictional works of muscular Christianity the male body is indeed representative of a gender power struggle within religion that was well underway by the middle of the nineteenth century (Paul 9).

The works of muscular Christianity demonstrate that female and male characteristics were to remain distinctly associated with men and women. In Kingsley's muscular Christianity, women and men are complementary in their divinely-dictated natures (Fasick, "Charles" 93). Women appear in Hughes' novels as a model *against* which men define themselves. Womanliness and manliness are both needed in Christianity, but should not co-exist in the same individual (Vance 119).

The emergence of muscular Christianity coincides with an expanding role for women within religion and concerns over the feminization of religion. The clergy's strict supervision and restriction of women's work in religion is reflective of this perceived threat to the "masculine" domain of the clergy. Many clergy felt that women, who by nature lacked the strength of moral authority, would be unable to appropriately act out the Church's ministry without supervision and guidance.

Some women could receive the much-needed guidance through marriage to a clergyman. This was the final significant way in which women could enter into the Church's ministry. Brian Heeney writes that Victorian handbooks such as *Hints to a Clergyman's Wife* (1832) assumed that marriage to a clergyman meant a commitment to his vocation (*Women's* 22). Many histories of women's involvement with the Church point to the high number of clergymen's wives who engaged in visiting the sick and poor and taking on other ministerial duties.

There was, however, apparently a need to emphasize that the wives were not to

compete with their clerical husbands for position. Unitarian William Turner's 1812 letter to his daughter, Mary Robberds, on the duties of a clergyman's wife, provides an example of how this role was perceived.¹⁵ Pointing to Mary's ability to be a "companion and helper," a "help meet for her husband" (Turner 115-16), Turner emphasizes the secondary nature of any work she might undertake. Her primary duty is to be her husband's "refuge, his comfort and counsellor" (Turner 117). While Turner describes many clerical duties in which Mary might participate—visiting the sick, comforting the distressed, directing the charitable activities of others—she is to see herself as "assisting" her husband, at best as a "substitute" when the situation requires it (Turner 118). Thus, while marriage to a clergyman offered some women a source of vocational work, it was ideally to be distinguished from the work done by the clergyman himself.¹⁶

Lilian Shiman shifts the perspective slightly and suggests that "many a Protestant woman who felt she had a religious vocation could only express it through marriage to a man in Holy Orders. It was common, therefore, to find clergymen's wives as the originators of various social efforts" (95). Shiman suggests that women had a sense of vocation and a desire to help in the ministry of the Church well before marriage. She proposes that clergymen's wives did not suddenly feel upon marriage that they had a duty to fulfill; rather, they saw marriage to a clergyman as an opportunity to live out their own calling.¹⁷ Since it was expected for a clergyman's wife to engage in such activities, these women would be able to express their sense of religious vocation without risk of censure from society, and without suffering pecuniary difficulties. Marriage could signal the beginning of a lifelong ministry for a woman.

Linda Wilson's examination of obituaries for wives of Nonconformist ministers shows how women could be seen as equal ministers with their husbands rather than helpers. Wilson provides examples of women who are described as "co-pastor" and "fellow-labourer" rather than as a "helper" to their clerical husbands (155). One clerical wife's obituary describes her work as suggesting texts for sermons, choosing hymns, helping to select workers, and helping with pastoral visiting. Despite the overlap between these activities and a clergyman's work, the obituary gives no indication that the woman had overstepped her bounds (Wilson 156). For some women, marriage to a clergyman may have offered the opportunity to pursue a lifelong ministry which the Church did not allow.

Women in Nonconformist denominations

Outside of the Church, different denominations allowed for women's involvement to varying degrees. Again, Methodism provides an example of the ways in which Nonconformist groups dealt with women's involvement. As Eliot notes in the end of *Adam Bede*, Wesleyan Methodists forbade women preachers at their 1803 conference. Yet this did not signal an end to women's ministry within Methodism. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the issue of women's role in Methodism was contested. First, women continued to preach despite the Methodist Conference's official statement. The conference in 1836 reinforced the ban on women preaching, evidence that the initial ban was not completely successful (Wilson 154). Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, a significant figure in women's Methodist preaching in the late

eighteenth century, preached her last sermon on July 25, 1815 (Brown 154), twelve years after the Conference's decision. The exclusion of women preachers within Methodism was probably only complete by 1850. Primitive Methodists, more like street revivalists than the organized Wesleyan Methodists, continued to use women as ministers throughout the nineteenth century (Chadwick 379).

Second, women's ministry in Methodism continued in various forms after the initial ban on preaching. Extending the definition of "ministry" to include more than public preaching of a sermon demonstrates that in significant ways women continued to have a public ministerial role in Methodism. Women's ministry in Methodism had included and continued to include work as leaders of classes and bands, as advisers and counselors, and as visitors. While these may appear to be less significant roles than that of public preacher, Earl Kent Brown's *Women of Mr. Wesley's Methodism* illustrates that within Methodism these were leadership roles equivalent to a public preacher. For example, to lead a class or a band was to engage in public prayer, testimony, and speech often in front of large groups. Visiting was not a casual activity to Methodists. Rather, it was serious work related to saving souls that only certain people were called by God to undertake (Brown 43-68). Historical and religious scholar David Hempton concurs that within Methodism, even without public preaching, women were allowed and sanctioned by the church to express their thoughts and judgments on theological issues in public, an option not sanctioned for women in the Church of England during the same time period (*Religion* 186).

Third, most Methodist denominations, from the 1790s to the 1860s, allowed women to preach in the context of “cottage religion” (Valenze 37). This would limit the numbers that a woman could address, but admitted for a continuation of her preaching in some form. These alternative forms of ministry should not be ignored. They represent a continuing opportunity for women to participate in the Methodist church’s mission and ministry in active, officially recognized roles.

Many of the eighteenth-century Methodist women preachers also served as models for nineteenth-century women. Mary Bosanquet Fletcher’s life was the subject of two full-length biographies during the nineteenth century. One was so popular that it was reproduced twenty times in the nineteenth century (Krueger 80). Through official publications and unofficial conversations, the deeds of these women as official representatives of the Methodist church in the eighteenth century continued to be told, potentially influencing nineteenth-century women.

However, just as Methodism’s growing institutionalization in the nineteenth century restricted laymen’s voice, it began to limit women’s roles. Hempton argues that larger roles for women in particular denominations did not represent a breakdown or even questioning of boundaries between clergy and laymen and women, but rather a temporary stretching of those boundaries (*Religion* 182). Even within cottage religion, women were pushed aside beginning in the 1840s as Nonconformist groups became concerned with having theologically educated preachers in control in all sectors (Hempton, *Religion* 62). While Methodism does appear to have offered more official ministerial opportunities for women during the first half of the

nineteenth century, such opportunities began to disappear by mid-century.

Aside from Methodism, while Valentine Cunningham argues that the “radical disposition of Dissent cannot lightly be disposed of [since] nonconformity was radical *per se*” (91), the Nonconformity of these denominations often focused on inclusion of the poor and did not carry over into expanded roles for women in ministry. Some Nonconformist groups such as the Society of Friends accepted the public ministry of laymen and women from their inception, and by 1835, female ministers outnumbered male ministers two to one in the Society (Chadwick 422-23). Largely because of the efforts of Catherine Booth, the Salvation Army’s ministerial work was divided equally between men and women and it became one of the Christian denominations most open to women’s ministry during the Victorian period (Helsing, Lauterbach, and Veeder 180-83). Booth’s 1859 and 1861 essays on “Female Ministry; or, Woman’s Right to Preach the Gospel” argue that “not only is the public ministry of woman unforbidden, but absolutely enjoined by both precept and example in the word of God” (5). Aside from these examples, the majority of Dissenting groups made no greater efforts to introduce a recognized ministry for women than the Church of England did. Some, like the Methodists, removed the official status of women’s ministry once the denomination became institutionalized.

While Victorian laymen, clergymen, and some laywomen were able to publicly react to the historical debates over the differences between the work of the clergy and laity, the authority

of laymen and women to direct ministerial activities, and the level of recognition deserved for such activities, novels offered many women writers a better opportunity to respond. Within Victorian novels, the juxtaposition of female and clerical characters often signals a fictional response to the emerging ministerial opportunities for women within Victorian Christianity.

While *Agnes Grey*, *Ruth*, *Janet's Repentance*, and *Adam Bede* present a positive, sustained portrait of women who actively engage in a ministry equal to that of the clerical characters, the variety of literary responses attests not only to the widespread interest in the discussions, but to the wide-ranging views on such new opportunities as the Anglican sisterhoods or female diaconate.

Notes

¹ Primarily of Low Church or Nonconformist backgrounds, Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot would not have been likely to unilaterally support the Anglican sisterhoods, a city-based product primarily of the Oxford Movement and High Church sentiments within the Church. All three authors would more likely have been interested in the involvement of women in Dissenting churches and in rural parishes, as well as in the emerging Low Church response to Anglican sisterhoods: the reinstatement of the female diaconate. However, Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot's experiences and letters demonstrate their awareness of discussions about these new opportunities for women, and the issues of authority and recognition which arose.

For example, Eliot knew of Kaiserswerth, the German deaconess institution, in the 1850s. By at least 1855, Gaskell was aware of the idea as well. During a trip to Paris, Gaskell visited the Maison des Diaconesses and wrote about the visit to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth (*Letters* 231). In 1864 Gaskell wrote to Rev. R. S. Oldham "You'll return the Kaiserworth [sic] pamphlet some time, please" (*Letters* 549a). While these references in her letters occur after the publication of *Ruth*, Kaiserswerth was known in England during the 1840s. Consequently, it is possible that, like Eliot, Gaskell and Brontë had heard of the deaconess institute years earlier.

Furthermore, the formal articulation of the debate which occurred in the 1850s was doubtless the outcome of earlier, less formal discussion among Low Church or Dissenting church members about women's involvement. Additionally, individual deaconesses had been at work, unrecognized by the Church, for several years before their official status was granted in 1861; at the Convocation in 1858, there was already formal discussion of using the approved format of deaconess to allow the Church to take advantage of women's service (Grierson 21-22). Reading or hearing about women who participated in the new ministerial opportunities, Brontë and Gaskell in particular could have been led to reexamine how their own work as minister's daughter or wife compared with these activities. As I discuss each novelist individually, I will present further relevant evidence of their awareness of the contemporary debates.

² I refer to laywomen as defending their right to participate in Christian ministry and include in that group the new sisters and deaconesses. Because sisters are not ordained, they are still considered laywomen. While deaconesses were for a time officially received into their roles through a ceremonial laying on of the bishop's hands, most in the institutional Church

would have contested an attempt to call them “ordained.”

³ Although Luther emphasized the priesthood of all who are baptized, his primary focus was on the rightful position of *laymen* within the church’s structure. He assumed that men alone were called to be the official ministers in the church. Many of the changes in the early Anglican Church may have also affected women’s perception of their position within the institution, but this was usually an unintended side-effect. I use the word “laymen” in this discussion because that is the group with whom the clergy and the Church’s hierarchy were concerned.

⁴ Within the Roman Catholic church, Vatican II takes up the strain of the “priesthood of all believers”; official documents emphasize the priesthood of the baptized. See Osborne’s text for a full exploration of Vatican II theology as related to the laity.

⁵ Calvin’s claim that the laity should listen to the clergy as if God were speaking (Osborne 416) appears to reinstate a vision of the clergy as separate and superior.

⁶ Some clergy even feared that working-class men would be able to use the foreign ministry as a way to move up in social class. Consequently, some missionary societies initially prohibited laymen of lower classes from becoming ordained missionaries. The reasoning was that lower-class men could be ordained and sent on missionary work, find such work not to their liking, and upon returning to England try to claim a position as a member of a higher class because of their ordination. Some missionary societies even suggested working-class men would purposely use such a tactic to elevate their social status (C. Peter Williams 384).

⁷ Interestingly, the author’s plea to “RESTORE THE CONVOCATION” (AMovements” 729; emphasis in original) is not the only voice heard. The article begins with an editorial note saying that “in some of his views the writer is mistaken; but he understands what he is about” (AMovements” 715). While it is not stated on which views the editors disagree with the author, the issues of the restoration of Convocation and its eventual membership were debated in other places and may well be the subject of the dispute here.

⁸ The debate surrounding the restoration of Convocation also shows the internal power struggles between members of the “lower” clergy (ordained ministers) and members of the episcopacy (bishops and members of the Church hierarchy). For a description from the time period of these hostilities see “The Convocation of the Province of Canterbury,” *The British Magazine* 6 (1834): 637-47.

⁹ John Henry Newman’s “On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine,” published in July 1859, demonstrates that within Roman Catholicism as well there was a concern with how much power laymen should have in deciding matters of dogma. Newman argues that the

consensus of the faithful should be consulted—although he carefully defines the word “consulted”—in matters of dogma. Newman’s *The Idea of a University Defined* calls for Roman Catholic university students to receive theological and religious instruction which would allow them to participate in doctrinal discussions with other Roman Catholics and with Protestants who oppose them. However, such instruction is to be under the close superintendence of more experienced individuals and through the carefully delineated catechisms of the church (*Idea* 377-80). While it is important for laymen’s university education to include a better understanding of the doctrines of the church, Newman is concerned with the level of knowledge they receive; restricting this knowledge means a restricted role in decisions about doctrine.

¹⁰ The story of Patrick Brontë’s attempts to assume the parish at Haworth provide a relevant example of the power of one congregation to choose its own minister. In her biography, *The Brontës*, Juliet Barker describes the events which centered on the (lay) church trustees’ unique administration of the Haworth pastor’s salary. To protest the decision by the vicar of Bradford to nominate Brontë as pastor without consulting the church trustees, they declined to pay Brontë’s salary, effectively opposing the vicar’s right to appoint a minister of his choosing (Barker, *Brontës* 81). Samuel Redhead was the vicar’s second attempt to appoint a minister without consulting the trustees; the congregation’s vocal and physical disruption of Redhead’s sermons and services represent another way in which they could affect the vicar’s decision (Barker, *Brontës* 84-85). Finally, the vicar agreed to allow the trustees to join him in the nomination of Brontë. With this concession, the appointment was accepted (Barker, *Brontës* 87).

This example shows that resistance to decisions made by the hierarchy of the Church could be successful. Despite this success, it is important to remember that the power asserted by the congregation and trustees did not represent a sanctioned authority within the Church. Members of the Church hierarchy viewed such actions as an attempt to usurp the rightful authority of clergy and bishops, not as a justified entrance by the laymen into official Church affairs.

¹¹ The Evangelicals also enlisted laywomen to aid in these efforts. Many women found in Evangelicalism a number of opportunities to visit those in need and to participate in philanthropic organizations. However, the Evangelicals stressed distinct roles for men and women in the Church, and women did not have roles in the leadership of the outreach organizations established in the 1830s and 1840s by the Evangelicals (Shiman 44).

¹² It is interesting to note the language with which emerging sisterhoods are discussed in twentieth-century historical texts. Very few pages are devoted to the development of Anglican convents in Chadwick’s history of the Victorian Church, and the language centers upon male involvement. Clergymen “helped” the women, “started” the sisterhoods, “put” the women into

convents. While it is true that the public impetus for the sisterhoods came from clergymen, this language effectively removes the idea that these women felt a calling from God. Instead, it appears that they felt they were responding to a call from clergymen. Marian Hughes “read Newman’s desire for a sisterhood in the Church of England” and responded to that call, not one from God (Chadwick 506). “Nearly all [the sisterhoods] began as little groups of ladies helping a vicar to extend his parochial duty” (Chadwick 508). Descriptions such as this one seem patronizing at best and at the very least belittle the sense of vocation that would distinguish a full-time vow taken by a nun from the philanthropy of a middle-class woman. In contrast, Sean Gill’s description of the inception of the convents emphasizes the decision that women made. Marion Hughes “dedicated herself to the religious life” (Sean Gill 148). Priscella Sellon is also given more agency for her choice in Sean Gill’s work; without emphasizing any “encouragement from Pusey and blessing from Bishop Phillpotts” (Chadwick 506), he explains how Sellon “founded the Sisterhood of Mercy” (Sean Gill 148).

¹³ Cobbe herself seemed unconvinced that sisterhoods were the best option for women’s greater involvement in the ministry of the Church, overwhelmingly favoring lay associations over monastic ones in her essay “Female Charity: Lay and Monastic” (1862).

¹⁴ Ann Douglas’ *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977) describes similar concerns among nineteenth-century American clergy.

¹⁵ William Gaskell would later become a junior colleague to Mary’s husband, John Gooch Robberds, at Cross Street Chapel (Chapple and Wilson 106).

¹⁶ While I will take up the literary presentations of these issues in the next chapter, two such examples are relevant to my discussion here of restricting the role of clerical wives. Brian Heeney argues that Charlotte Yonge’s novels remind readers that “the clergyman’s wife must remember that she is not the clergyman” (*Women’s* 23). In some novels of the period, such as Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, the assumption of clerical duties by wives is presented in a comical sense, thus de-emphasizing the seriousness of potential ramifications for viewing women and Christian ministry. Mrs. Bute Crawley writes her husband’s sermons as he busies himself with hunting and dinners (Thackeray 132), but the broad satire of her character induces the reader to see this as comical rather than as serious ministerial work undertaken by a clergyman’s wife.

¹⁷ This conception of a woman’s choice to marry a clergyman in order to pursue an active ministry is reminiscent of Dorothea Brooke’s decision to marry Casaubon in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*.