



October 4

Commemoration: Theodor Fliedner, renewer of society, 1864

Fliedner was born in Eppstein in the Taunus, the son of a Lutheran minister. Pastor Fliedner studied theology and was, for a time, a house teacher. In 1821 he assumed the pastorate in the poor municipality of Kaiserswerth (now in Düsseldorf). When the town could no longer support church and ministry due to an economic crisis, he undertook journeys to collect donations. Beginning in Westphalia, he also went to the Netherlands and England.

In the Indies he became acquainted with the ancient church office of deacon while spending time among the Mennonites. In England he met with Elizabeth Fry, who demonstrated her work among her nation's impoverished and imprisoned people. He returned home not only with a large financial collection for his municipality but also with new ideas about social work among the disadvantaged.

He began by working among inmates at the Düsseldorf Prison, preaching the Gospel and ministering to spiritual and physical needs. He walked to and from Düsseldorf every other Sunday until a regular prison chaplain was appointed. The German prisons were then in a very bad state; but those interested in their improvement banded together, and in 1826, Fliedner created the Rhenish-Westphalian Prison Society (Rheinisch-Westfälische Gefängnisgesellschaft). Fliedner realized that the first step must be toward looking after the prisoners on their release, and accordingly, in 1833, he opened at Kaiserswerth a refuge for discharged female convicts. To better support and teach Kaiserwerth's children, he founded a school in 1835 which became the venue for a women teachers' seminar.

In many cities, there were no hospitals at that time. Following somewhat the model of the early Christian Church's diaconate, incorporating ideas learned from Fry and the Mennonites, and applying his own thoughts, Fliedner developed a plan whereby young women would find and care for the needy sick. For this, he needed to create an institute where the women could learn theology and nursing skills. He opened the hospital and deaconess training center in Kaiserswerth on 13 October 1836. Gertrud Reichardt was the first deaconess commissioned by the new school. One of the associated Kaiserwerth professional schools was later named in her honor.

After his wife died in 1842, he found a new life companion (and important employee) in Caroline Bertheau. They opened institutes for the diaconate in 1844 in Dortmund and in 1847 in Berlin with the support of King Frederick William IV of Prussia, and his Queen, Elizabeth. Fliedner's attention became completely focused on this aspect of the ministry and in 1849 he turned completely to working with the diaconate, including increasing activity abroad.

Fliedner's movement has been cited as the model for the Inner Mission movement which Johann Hinrich Wichern developed.

Because of these efforts, deaconess institutes arose in Paris, Strasbourg, Utrecht, and elsewhere. By the time of his death in 1864, there were 30 motherhouses and 1600 deaconesses worldwide. By the middle of the 20th century, there were over 35,000 deaconesses serving in parishes, schools, hospitals, and prisons throughout the world.

A sign of the international respect Fliedner garnered is that his most famous pupil came from outside Germany. Florence Nightingale, then a crusading English health care reformer, visited Kaiserwerth in 1846 and came away favorably impressed. She later returned for nursing studies and graduated in 1851. Today, one of Düsseldorf's hospitals bears her name.