





Diakonia

Where human rights
and theology meet

**A guide to the ACT Alliance and World Council of Churches
report** Called to Transformation, Ecumenical Diakonia



A close-up, low-angle shot of a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a blue shirt, looking down intently at an open newspaper. The scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source coming from the newspaper, creating a focused and contemplative atmosphere. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting an indoor setting like a library or a quiet study area.

**“Diakonia without
justice becomes
anemic. Justice
without diakonia
can be heartless.”**

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Opening Section

A guide

Welcome to this study guide, which aims to serve as a companion through the report *Called to Transformation – Ecumenical Diakonia*, with the purpose of facilitating your reading. The guide is intended for students, theologians and employees of churches, denominations and congregations, staff of aid and mission organisations, those interested in ecumenism, and all people working in social services. In other words, the guide is intended for those who study or work with issues at the intersection of diaconal theology and practice, or faith-based involvement and rights-based involvement. It aims to help you find the content in *Called to Transformation* that is most relevant to you and challenge you to ask relevant questions about the text.

A report from the World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance

In connection with the World Council of Churches' General Assembly in Karlsruhe in 2022, the report *Called to Transformation – Ecumenical Diakonia* was presented. Among the documents and reports presented there, this is the only one that has the World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance as joint issuers. The report was created during a long process that began in 2014. The aim was to clarify the relationship between, on the one hand, the churches and, on the other hand, specialised ministries, i.e., organisations or agencies that are based in churches and have a Christian identity, and which carry out social work or international development cooperation. The purpose of the report is to create conditions for synergies and common goals between these types of organisations.

The report consists of ten chapters focusing on, among other things, the history of ecumenical diakonia, theological reflection, differences in views on diakonia between different church families, differences in the practice of diakonia between different regions of the world, and a forward-looking concluding chapter. There is also an appendix concerning the churches' diaconal response to Covid-19.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is an international Christian ecumenical body with around 350 churches and denominations as members. It is mainly Protestant and Orthodox church families that are represented. The churches and organisations that are part of the WCC are sometimes referred to as the ecumenical movement. This is a term that is used quite frequently in the report.

ACT Alliance consists of more than 140 faith-based member organisations working in long-term development, advocacy, and humanitarian relief. The member organisations have their roots in churches and communities belonging to the World Council of Churches or the Lutheran World Federation.

SMC Faith in Development is an actor for rights-based international development cooperation on a Christian foundation. Since its formation in 1912, SMC has been a meeting place for ecumenical cooperation between different Christian traditions, with a particular focus on mission, global development, and the role of religion in society. Today, SMC consists of around 30 member organisations and churches from Swedish civil society.

Why is *Called to Transformation* important in both global and local contexts?

Called to Transformation is relevant to the major global conversations, such as the dialogue between WCC and ACT Alliance, but also to the local congregation's search for a genuine and sustainable commitment to God's mission. *Called to Transformation* is relevant to anyone interested in the borderland between the commitment of churches and diaconal/social organisations, and how these different commitments may differ.

The document is relevant for any organisation that has a Christian foundation or identity, while also using rights-based language in its daily work, and any community that is seeking a theology for engagement with the world. In other words, any organisation that needs to be "bilingual" and able to speak both theological language and rights-based language.

Called to Transformation moves in several different dynamic fields of tension, which makes it relevant to both global and local contexts:

- Between what is congregation- or community-based sustainable diaconal engagement and what is agency-based project engagement.
- Between the theology of diakonia and the practice of diakonia.
- Between rights-based language and theological language.
- Between the Global North and the Global South.

- Between what is voluntary-driven and what is professionally driven.
- Between diaconal work and social services.

The document seeks synergies in these areas of tension and aims to "shape dialogue and cooperation between churches, ecumenical partners, and the WCC."

Another way of demonstrating its relevance is the external monitoring that describes the context in which the report should be read and used: changing views on development cooperation, reduced democratic space, increasing nationalism, the discussion on "religion and development," war, social injustice, the climate crisis, and so on.

The WCC and ACT Alliance, which are behind the report, are two stakeholders with the same roots but different identities and different missions. It is clear that the report wants to do different things for the churches, represented by the WCC, and agencies, represented by the ACT Alliance. It seeks to build bridges that bring churches closer to a diaconal calling and identity, while bringing agencies closer to a theological language that enables them to understand themselves and their background.

The report can be downloaded from the World Council of Churches website: oikoumene.org.

SMC wants to disseminate the report

SMC has earlier undertaken the task of disseminating the report in Sweden and have now translated this study-guide into English to reach a wider audience. Our target group is primarily organisations working with mission, development cooperation, or international diakonia on a Christian basis. These are either independent organisations or parts of churches or denominations. We believe that the report is relevant for anyone who is considering the intersection between the engagement of churches and the engagement of organisations that have their roots in these churches and communities. How can we see each other's strengths and weaknesses, how can we work together, and how can we find common roots without compromising our unique identities? Anyone interested in how faith influences engagement, especially in the Christian context, will benefit from the report.

The selection of texts made by SMC is based on the context in which SMC operates, namely holistic mission or international development cooperation on a Christian basis. SMC has extensive experience of working with concepts that appear in the report, such as religious literacy and bilingualism (between theological language and rights-based language).

As the study guide was released in Swedish, SMC decided to re-translate it into English, to make it accessible beyond the Swedish audience.

Petter Jakobsson, senior advisor at SMC, is responsible for selecting texts, translations, and questions for discussion.

Here the guide begins

The guide follows the chapter structure of the document. Each section begins with an answer to the question of for whom this chapter is useful. This is followed by a brief description of the chapter, taken directly from the introductory summary of the report. Next comes selected passages, chosen for their ability to capture the central ideas of the report. Finally, there are comments written from the perspective of the SMC, followed by questions for discussion.



Chapter 1

Introduction

For whom?

The introduction provides the best summary of the report and introduces the concepts used. It should be read by anyone who wants to understand the report.

Brief description of the chapter

The first chapter presents background information and introduces a definition of ecumenical diakonia. The chapter describes some important and challenging contemporary trends that encourage diaconal agents to reflect on what it means to work in a way that is both faith-based and rights-based, and how best to be innovative in their practice.

Selected passages from the chapter

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/.../ both “ecumenical” and “diakonia” are demanding terms to work with. Both concepts are value-laden; they express a vision for the global church and her mission in the world. At the same time, they are disputed. To be ecumenical is not as obvious as it may appear in this and other texts coming from the ecumenical movement. The ecumenical movement is marked not only by joint interests but also by tension and conflict. This reality constantly challenges the concept of ecumenical diakonia. Similarly, the concept of diakonia is disputed. It is mainly used in some denominations, and it is better known in some regions of the world than in others. Many agencies involved in diaconal

work prefer not to use the term, but rather use social or development work, thinking that the term diakonia does not communicate well in the secular world, or that it would signal a “churchy” move away from professional working methods.

This document conceptualises ecumenical diakonia from two perspectives. The first links to a theological understanding of diakonia, based on a reflection that seeks to understand diakonia as an integral dimension of the nature and the mission of the church. This perspective reflects diakonia as a biblical and theological concept; it intends to identify motifs and normative elements that guide the understanding and practice of diakonia. One such motif is the image of human beings created in the image of God, another is the vocation to compassion and justice, a third links diakonia to the human vocation to serve as stewards of creation, and might be described as ecological diakonia, expressed in both prophetic and practical dimensions. This perspective states that diakonia expresses a strong link between what the churches are and do. /.../ The second perspective is practical, describing how churches across confessional and geographical borders are engaged in diaconal action.

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This document presents ecumenical diakonia as faith-based and rights-based action; the following chapters will elaborate on the meaning of these terms and their critical function as regards the challenges and opportunities in today’s world. To be rights-based refers on the one hand to the biblical concept of justice and the prophetic heritage of unmasking systemic injustice and defending the rights of the poor. On the other hand, it refers to human rights and their central role in the formation of a just society. The commitment to human rights has convinced actors of ecumenical diakonia to include advocacy in their work with the task of bringing duty-bearers to account. This also helps us to see how diakonia is different from benevolent action, and that it does not aim to replace responsibilities of other stakeholders, including governments.

Comments

This chapter takes an interesting approach to the tension between a theological- and human-rights perspective. These are often presented as two complementary but different starting points. In

discussions between diverse types of faith-based organisations, polarisation between these starting points can easily arise, even though they largely coincide in most faith traditions. *Called to Transformation* describes it less polarising and somewhat different: a rights perspective can be based both on a theology of creation and the biblical concept of justice, and on universal human rights. The rights perspective is thus both theologically and legally grounded, and there is no contradiction between these starting points.

Questions to discuss

- We sometimes contrast the concepts of faith-based and rights-based, as if they were two completely different starting points for engagement and social work. Do you feel that there is tension between these concepts in the context in which you work, or is this an unnecessarily polarising construct?
- How is the concept of diakonia used within your organisation? Are there other words that you prefer to use to describe the same thing?
- When you hear the word diakonia, who do you picture as the doer?
- What words do you use in your context that could be misunderstood or create tension in the conversation between, on the one hand, organisations and people who are mostly rights-based and, on the other hand, those who are mostly theology-based?

Chapter 2

The History of Ecumenical Diakonia

For whom?

For anyone who wants to understand how diakonia has been part of the Church's identity and proclamation since its inception, and how diakonia has been an identity-forming part of the ecumenical movement as we have known it over the past century.

Brief description of the chapter

Chapter 2 introduces the history of ecumenical diakonia. It demonstrates that this history starts in the faith and practice of the early church and its commitment to serve people in need. Such practice continued in different forms throughout the history of the church as an integral part of missionary outreach. It then focuses on the development of diakonia within the ecumenical movement, its beginning as inter-church aid in the aftermath of the world wars, later widening its mandate to include development work and to engage in public advocacy. The second chapter concludes by presenting the formation of the ACT Alliance and its vision of providing coordination and cooperation within the area of ecumenical diakonia.

Selected passages from the chapter

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It is noteworthy that the Apostle Paul argues theologically when urging the Corinthians to share in what he calls the “ministry to the saints” (2 Cor 8:4). At no moment does he ask them to pity the poor and their suffering; instead, he reminds his readers of their identity and mission as part of the communion of believers in Christ. The example of their sister church in Macedonia should convince them: although being poor, they begged for “the privilege of sharing.” Here, Paul connects the two concepts communion (*koinonia*) and diakonia, indicating the organic connection between what they are and what they are called to do in Christ. Sharing thus has both an ontological and a practical dimension; for Christians, it

expresses our belonging together and our care for each other.

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Since the 1960s, many mission agencies have been involved in development projects in cooperation with the partner churches in the Global South. In cases where they have received public funding, they have had to follow the governmental requirements of not mixing evangelisation and development work. This process has caused debate, especially among partners in the Global South, which, in many cases, understand mission holistically, i.e. carrying out God's mission through development work and service, as acknowledged subsequently.



In 1974 churches in Africa represented at the All Africa Conference of Churches' conference in Lusaka, Zambia, issued a call for missionary 'moratorium' so as to ensure African churches' self-determination, self-reliance and sense of identity within the growing tensions of the reality of Western dominance and African dependence within local and global church relationships.

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In the 19th century, problems of urbanisation and industrialisation mobilised churches to act together when addressing social issues, recognising that their traditional structures would not suffice and that they needed to work together when dealing with such challenges. Urban Mission, the YMCA and similar organisations were set up with a clear interdenominational and diaconal profile, and their leaders largely contributed to the formation of the ecumenical movement. Diakonia has been a major impulse and dimension in the formation of ecumenism. The Life and Work Movement, from its first conference in Stockholm in 1925, expressed the vision that Christian unity and social issues are interrelated, and that the churches should act together.

Comments

This chapter has multiple purposes: To describe the role of diakonia within the church from its inception to the present day, and to describe the movements that paved the way for ecumenical diakonia and holistic mission, as the terms are used within the ecumenical movement today.

Since the ecumenical initiatives that led to what is now the WCC and ACT Alliance originated in the Global North, the focus of the historical account is on that very part of the world. It is interesting to follow the history and journey from charity to justice, and from inter-church aid to broader social responsibility.

The history also captures the process within churches and agencies that has led to the professionalisation of diaconal work and aid. This is the same process that has increased the distance between rights-based work and the theological faith-based identity that was its starting point.

At the end of the chapter, there are also references to the developments we have seen since the 1990s, where interest in the special contribution

of religious actors to rights-based work has become a prominent issue and academic discipline. Often under the heading "Religion and Development."

This chapter discusses how ecumenical diakonia is described today based on three aspects:

- The ecclesiological, i.e., how ecumenical diakonia affects the church's self-image.
- Diakonia as prophetic. That is, the ability of ecumenical diakonia to speak to contemporary society about injustice.
- Ecumenical diakonia as holistic. That is, it encompasses the entirety of God's mission to humanity.

These three terms are, of course, related to each other, but they illustrate different ways of approaching the concept of ecumenical diakonia in contemporary discourse.

Questions to discuss

- What does cooperation between churches/denominations and Christian-based organisations look like in the contexts where you are active? Is there mistrust or consensus? On what occasions do the two types of organisations meet and where do their interests coincide?
- The chapter talks about a mission moratorium suggested from the Global South. This idea has been widely criticised. How would you describe the motivation for stopping missionary work?
- The relationship between civil society and state actors is currently being renegotiated. We are seeing a decline in support from state donors in the Global North to civil society organisations. How will the relationship between churches and diaconal organisations change when the relationship (read: support) between states and these organisations changes?
- What does the next chapter in history look like? Have we seen the end of an era in which states and faith-based organisations have worked together very closely?



Chapter 3

Diakonia in Today's Polycentric Ecumenical Movement

For whom?

This chapter is interesting for anyone who wants to understand the perspectives of the WCC and ACT Alliance on the changes in the global church landscape over the past few decades, and how these changes have affected the balance of power between different regions of the world, between different church families, and between churches and other actors. Particular focus is placed on the relationship between the ecumenical movement, i.e. the WCC, and the Lausanne Movement.

Brief description of the chapter

Chapter 3 presents the place of diakonia within today's polycentric ecumenical movement. Its

main point of reference is the WCC's 10th Assembly at Busan in 2013 and its outcome, in particular the challenge to reflect on diakonia from the perspective of the margins, and as part of the invitation to a pilgrimage of justice and peace.

Selected passages from the chapter

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Polycentric means recognising a changing ecclesial landscape as we have entered the 21st century. The centre of gravity of Christianity has shifted toward the Global South. While the churches in the Global North, in particular in Europe, experience declining membership, church life is vibrant in the Global South and membership is growing. The shift also relates to

the growth of charismatic and Pentecostal churches, mainly churches outside the traditional ecumenical family.

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The process of approaching the wider ecumenical landscape has included rebuilding relations with the Lausanne movement, which in the past had been very critical of the WCC and especially its understanding of mission. When meeting in Cape Town, South Africa, for the third Congress of the Lausanne Movement in 2010, a delegation from the WCC was invited, led by General Secretary Olav Fykse Tveit. In his address, he spoke of Christians' "common vision of the holistic mission of God." He added, "Let us keep the road open, and the dialogue going, so that we learn from one another how we can participate in God's mission together with respect to others as one Body of Christ." The concept of holistic mission is of pivotal importance in this re-approach. The Lausanne movement has strengthened its understanding of what is described as "integral mission": *Integral mission is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life.*

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The Continuation Committee on Ecumenism in the Twenty-First Century points in its report to the WCC assembly in Busan to some of the trends in today's world that challenge the ecumenical movement, and states:

Diakonia is an immediate response to sufferings that are present in the world. Diakonia is a natural partner with mission in the 21st century. Justice is linked to diakonia in that it functions best when justice is at work. Justice wrestles with the underlying issues that make diakonia necessary. Diakonia without justice becomes anaemic. Justice without diakonia can be heartless and even destructive.

With this in mind, the report maintains a holistic understanding of the church's being and mission:

Worship (latreia) and proclamation (kerygma) are essential for nurturing the fellowship in the ecumenical movement through love and prayer.

Community (koinonia), witness (martyria) and service (diakonia) lend themselves to structure the interaction between the different sets of actors in the ecumenical movement. All these are important features intrinsic to the life of the church.

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The complex realities of today's polarised and fragmented world reinforce more strongly the need to challenge diaconal actors to confront and transform structures that perpetuate injustice, suffering, oppression and exploitation of humanity and creation. Diakonia is faith-based due to its distinct identity, and in its performance diakonia is equally obliged to be rights-based.

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Instead of presenting marginalised people as an object or target group for diaconal action, it spoke of "the diakonia of marginalised people." On the one hand, this refers to how marginalised people struggle for a better life; on the other, it points to the biblical accounts of "God's attention and caring love to people in situations of oppression and consequent deprivation. This is the diakonia of God: a diakonia of liberation as well as of restoring dignity, and ensuring justice and peace."

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The conference highlighted several theological arguments for this approach. It referred to the biblical witness that "points towards God who is always present in the struggles of those unjustly pushed to the margins of society" and that locates Jesus among the marginalised of his time. "To that extent, the margins are the privileged spaces for God's compassion and justice and of God's presence in vulnerability and resistance." Further, it rejected the tendency to see the margins only as places of disgrace and powerlessness; instead, it affirmed the necessity of recognising the demands, legitimate rights and power of marginalised people to transform the world. "They resist injustice and oppression in their own ways and through their struggle for life, justice, dignity and rights for themselves and for all, unveil the presence and power of God in their lives."

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Many of the new churches from charismatic or independent backgrounds have their own distinct learning history on social diakonia. This is often not phrased in any of the classical terms of “development language”, neither is this funded nor co-funded by state partners. A major part of this is the informal social support and basic social services systems performed by local churches (not by agencies). Diakonia and evangelism are not opposites in their understanding, but need to be kept as an integral whole. The spiritual dimension of development is as important as the social or material dimension.

Comments

Without explicitly mentioning it, this chapter captures the tension between the social forces at work within congregational life and those at work within agencies and faith-based organisations. The chapter also describes the tension that exists between the Global North and the Global South, where churches and organisations in the South are increasing their capacity and engagement, while mainstream churches in the Global North have generally been declining in both membership and influence for a long time. The churches that are growing in the Global South are often outside the established “mainstream denominations” that form the core of the WCC. Furthermore, the chapter attempts to develop the concept of “the margins” as it is used in the ecumenical movement. The concept has caused debate as it is based on the idea that there is a centre from which those on the margins are observed. The chapter attempts to describe the special power that exists among the most vulnerable and provide a theological justification for this way of describing power relations.

The chapter also discusses how concepts such as integral mission or holistic mission bring different church families closer together, as it is theologically demonstrated that diakonia and proclamation are integral parts of the church's identity.

The text is a few years old. The shift in power from north to south and from mainstream churches to more evangelical or Pentecostal churches and communities, as described, is even more evident now than when the text was written.

The power dynamics within ecumenical diakonia have also been affected by governments in the Global North cutting their funding to organisations working with humanitarian efforts or long-term international development work. This means that churches and communities have grown in their role as bearers of diakonia, compared to agencies.

Questions to discuss

- How do you understand the two concepts of holistic mission and integral mission? They are used in different parts of Christianity but describe similar ambitions. Do you see any tension between the concepts?
- In several Swedish cities, the largest Christian meeting places are linked to Pentecostal churches with roots in other countries. These congregations often go under the radar in mainstream ecumenical work. Do you have any experience of this? How do more established churches interact with the ‘new churches’ with roots in the Global South?
- Holistic mission has been coined as a concept to show the wholeness of the church's mission. For those who coined the term, it was a way to open up the understanding of the word mission and make its content more inclusive. For organisations that are mostly driven by secular language, the word mission can be a ‘stumbling block’. How is the concept of holistic mission received in your context? Do people take issue with the word holistic or the word mission?
- At the end of the chapter, the role of diakonia as a driving force for innovation and new thinking is highlighted. How does diakonia drive innovation in your context?

Chapter 4

Theological Reflection on Diakonia

For whom?

This chapter is central to the report and is aimed at those interested in how the concept of diakonia is derived from biblical texts, but also in how different church families view it theologically. The chapter explores the boundary between what the church does and what the church is.

Brief description of the chapter

Chapter 4 provides some basic theological reflection on diakonia. It sketches the use of the term “diakonia” and related vocabulary in the New Testament, and presents the term in trinitarian, ecclesial and missiological perspectives. It then reviews the role of diakonia as a dimension of Christian discipleship and concludes by discussing the relationship between diakonia and proclamation.

Selected passages from the chapter

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Jesus interprets his ministry with reference to the Son of Man, the messenger that God will send in the final age (Daniel 7:13), thus affirming that he is coming from above. However, he links this expectation to another messianic figure in the Old Testament, that of the suffering Servant of the Lord (Isaiah 53). Unlike the rulers of this world, he will not establish his kingdom by exercising power from above. His mission, or diakonia, is to be incarnated in the midst of human reality, walking around, teaching, “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (Matthew 4:23). It was indeed a ministry of transformation and empowerment. The religious and political authorities, however, considered it subversive, endangering the established order, and therefore decided to kill him.



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These passages emphasise both the relational dimension of the disciples' mission and the model Jesus himself has given them in words and deeds. It encompasses proclamation and action, the announcement of God's reign and the practice of restoring broken relationships and affirming the dignity of the marginalised. In today's language, we describe this as holistic mission. The ecumenical tradition uses the term diakonia to uphold the social and prophetic dimension of the church's mission, affirming it as an intrinsic part of the good news that Jesus brought to the world (Luke 4:16- 21), as messianic authority (exousia) with power to lift up, forgive, include and empower (Mark 1:27; Luke 5:24).

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This reading of the New Testament makes us arrive at understanding diakonia as a commission to fulfil an important task or mission, more specifically, God's mission in the world. According to the biblical view, God's love and sending to the world are the beginning of the church's diakonia.

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This opens up an understanding that sees diakonia in a trinitarian perspective, in the sense that roots it in the Christian faith in God the Father, the Creator, in Jesus Christ, the Saviour and Liberator, and in the Holy Spirit, the Giver and Upholder of Life.

This view not only maintains an intimate relation between the diaconal mission of Jesus and the diakonia of the church. It amplifies it – pointing to the organic link between the liturgy and diakonia, or as this is formulated in the report, Christian diakonia “flows from the divine liturgy,” it is a “liturgy after the Liturgy.” The Vancouver assembly (1983) was strongly inspired by this “eucharistic vision” and affirmed that diakonia as “the church's ministry of sharing, healing and reconciliation is of the very nature of the church.” As Christians experience the gracious gifts of sharing, healing and reconciliation at the Lord's table, they are commissioned to a lifestyle and to practices that bring these gifts to the world. In other words, diakonia in the world is “rooted in faith and nourished by the eucharist.” In many ways this corresponds to the expression “ministering at the table” in Acts 6:2. Diakonia is a visible manifestation of the relation between the being and the doing of the church. One of the consequences of this understanding is that diakonia cannot be an optional activity in the life of the church; it is an intrinsic part of its being.

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According to John 12:26, Jesus connects diakonia and discipleship: “Whoever serves (diakone) me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant (diakonos) be also.” The expression “where I am” refers to his sending to the world and his healing ministry. The relation to Jesus is both a gift and a task; his sending is also their sending into the world, with the promise of God's care and blessing: “Whoever serves (diakone) me, the Father will honour” (12:26b).

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In the history of the church, diakonia has always linked love for one's neighbours with the passion for justice and sustainability. It has become common understanding in world Christianity that this takes different forms which are complementary and cannot be played off against each other. These different dimensions of the mandate for a diaconal church and for diaconal discipleship are not expressed in equal manner in all circumstances, but depends on the cultural, political and institutional contexts of different churches. The following dimensions and different forms of diaconal minis- 50 Ecumenical Diakonia tries can however be found and affirmed by the majority of churches around the world – though with different degrees of professionalisation and institutionalisation:

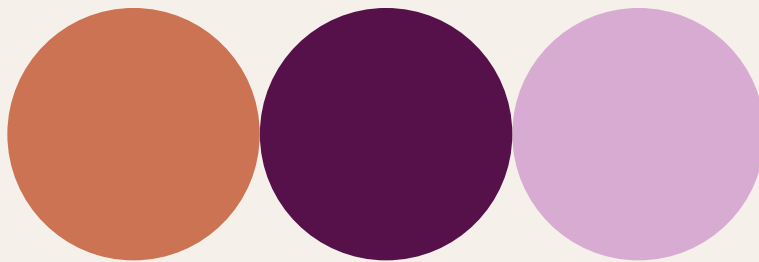
- Social diakonia as individual acts of care, healing and reconciliation in a local church or community
- Diakonia as institutionalised assistance for marginalised groups and those suffering, by churches or specialised diaconal agencies
- Diakonia as community work and empowerment for strengthening conviviality
- Political or transformative diakonia comprising of efforts to transform living conditions and political frameworks contributing to injustice and conflicts, addressing the whole of society in advocacy and lobbying work on behalf of those suffering
- Prophetic diakonia addressing imbalances of power, access and participation in societies, speaking truth to power, denouncing structural injustices
- Ecological diakonia addressing fundamental issues of the protection of the environment and of climate justice

Comments

This chapter highlights how central the concept of diakonia is to Christian theology and how it is shared by all Christian traditions (even if the term diakonia itself is not used everywhere). It unites what the church says and what the church does, or rather, it unites what the church does and what it is. Diakonia is not a question of morality but a question of identity and existence. Diakonia is also a way of approaching the Trinity in Christian theology, as it is rooted in all three parts: the Creator, the Saviour and the Helper.

Questions to discuss

- Is the concept of diakonia used in your tradition? If so, what does the term mean?
- Based on your own situation, how would you reflect on the fact that diakonia is not only what the church does but the very essence of being the church?
- If you were to relate the word diakonia to all three parts of the Trinity: the Creator, the Saviour and the Helper, how would you simply formulate that connection?





Chapter 5

The Changing Landscape of Diaconal Action

For whom?

This chapter is interesting for anyone who wants to follow how ecumenical diakonia is affected by the rapid changes taking place in the world. It focuses primarily on the relationship between Agenda 2030 and diaconal engagement.

Unfortunately, developments have now meant that much of the chapter is past its sell-by date. However, there is still value in the discussion about the conflict between economic growth and ecological sustainability, and generally between global goals and diakonia.

Brief description of the chapter

Chapter 5 begins by describing the changing landscape of diaconal action and the new faces of poverty in today's world. It presents the UN

Sustainable Development Goals as a relevant platform for diaconal engagement. The chapter indicates some specific themes as priority areas for diaconal action, such as migration and refugees, economic justice, climate justice, gender justice and health justice.

Selected passages from the chapter

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Globalisation brings the world together, a process that obviously has many positive effects; at the same time, it causes new divisions, mainly between those who are rich and those living in poverty. One of the serious effects of globalisation is the way economic and political power now is being exercised, emptying the role of local, national and international authorities and undermining their democratic legitimacy.

Instead, transnational structures that do not have to give account of how they are acting are expanding their power. For agents involved in development work, including actors in ecumenical diakonia, this means a shift from traditional aid to a struggle for justice. The face of poverty has changed; what is new is that large areas of poverty exist within middle-income countries. In many cases, growing poverty is a result of political mismanagement, corruption, warfare and climate change, and not because of lack of development.

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A strong civil society sector will have an important role in this endeavour. It will mobilise and organise people to engage in matters that are important for them, promoting justice for all. They represent horizontal structures of power in a society, counterbalancing the vertical power of the ruling elite. In many places, faith communities and diaconal agents have consciously assumed roles as agents within civil society, seeking to build active citizenship, and engaging in networks that work for a just, inclusive, participatory and sustainable society.

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In preparing for the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016, the ACT Alliance presented its vision for a humanitarian system in a world that “is experiencing greater disaster risks and a growing number of conflicts due to factors like climate change, rapid urbanisation, poverty, ecosystem decline and diminishing respect for humanitarian principles and International Humanitarian Law.” With a strong overall emphasis on placing people at the centre, it envisages “a bottom-up approach, where resilient communities define their own needs and where local actors (including people at risk themselves) lead the response.” This vision recognises the distinct role of faith communities and religious leaders in the work for a better world. Based on experiences from the field, ACT Alliance suggests that faith-based organisations (FBOs) that work closely within local communities can use their unique strength – the unifying and ameliorative power of shared faith – to facilitate disaster resilience. At the same time, it admits that religious traditions can be misused to create hatred and suspicion, and that they in some contexts resist change and suppress expressions of basic rights and freedom.

Comments

Rapid changes in the world around us mean that this chapter is no longer entirely relevant. Unfortunately, the negative trends described in the chapter have been reinforced in global politics, and the focus on common goals that dominates the text has virtually disappeared from the agenda of decision-makers. The chapter describes the concern about reduced democratic space that was strong in the 2010s. Today, ten years later, these fears have been realised. At the same time, the thematic issues addressed in the chapter remain, even more acute now than when the text was written. In no area has the situation improved. The chapter's discussion of the conflict of interest between economic development goals and ecological considerations is still relevant. The theme commonly referred to as ‘religion and development’ is mentioned briefly in passing. This topic is central to the entire report due to its focus on the intersection between development work and church/diaconal engagement.

Questions to discuss

- Agenda 2030, or the UN Sustainable Development Goals, is mentioned in the chapter as a collective commitment that affects both diaconal work and international development cooperation. What does commitment to Agenda 2030 look like in your context? How has it been affected by the decline in interest among decision-makers in recent years?
- Several important themes are mentioned in the chapter: migration and refugees, economic justice, climate justice, gender equality and health equity. Have these issues sparked engagement in your context?
- Drawing on your own experience, what advantages do churches and diaconal organisations have when it comes to working with the above-mentioned areas? Do you have experience of any particular theme?

Chapter 6

The Distinctiveness of Diaconal Practice

For whom?

This chapter is central to the report and is the part of the text that most clearly focuses on the report's main theme. It is therefore essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the main issues that the report attempts to address.

The chapter describes the tension between rights-based work and theologically motivated work. The text reflects on what it means to be a faith-based organisation (FBO) and points to the importance of bilingualism, i.e. the ability to speak both a rights-based language and a theological language, rooted in religious identity. The chapter highlights religious literacy, i.e. the ability to see the significance and influence of religion, as a professional skill, necessary for anyone working in religious contexts.

Brief description of the chapter

Chapter 6 reflects on the distinctiveness of diaconal practice, how its identity as both faith- and rights-based action forms its mission, objectives and methods. It presents diaconal assets, both tangible and intangible resources that are at hand for diaconal action and indicates the advantages of developing a diaconal language. Finally, it points to the importance of building diaconal capacity and presents core elements of diaconal professionalism.

Selected passages from the chapter

Page 68

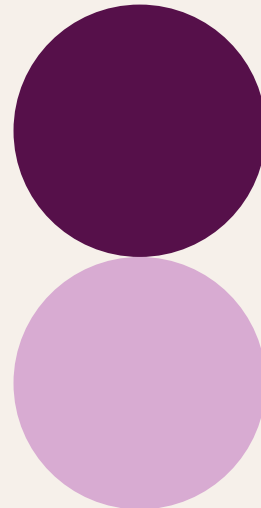
In chapter 4, we presented the basic elements of the theological nature of diakonia with the claim that diakonia expresses an intimate connection between what churches are and do. Here the focus is rather on how the diaconal identity takes shape in concrete action. In what way can people recognise their actions as diaconal?

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Diakonia has no hidden agenda. Christian faith affirms the commandment to love your neighbour without conditions, as the parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates well. In his practice, Jesus responded to human need. He never required adherence to his teaching or that those that he helped would have to follow him.

Page 68

What is distinct for diaconal actors is that they refer to religious concepts, in addition to secular, when explaining their action and its objective. This is an expression of the interdisciplinary nature of diakonia; it is social action rooted in socio-political knowledge and analysis, and, at the same time, it is faith-based and rights-based action. Its practice is guided by the norms and values of this basis. Diakonia thus requires the ability to express itself accordingly, using the kind of secular terminology that is required of disciplined social action as well as the language of faith in the form of disciplined theological language. Only then is it possible to communicate the distinctive nature of diaconal work properly, internally as well as externally, and, in addition, to carry out a broad and critical reflection on diaconal praxis.



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ACT Alliance has expressed uneasiness when applying the term “development,” and has added “transformational” to it, indicating that development cannot be limited to economic matters. It includes political, social and cultural components, all of which must be considered. In addition, transformation challenges all involved partners critically to examine their attitudes, lifestyle and patterns of action. In that regard, transformation has a clear theological connotation as it reflects the admonition in Romans 12:2 not to “conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind,” listening to God’s “good, pleasing and perfect will.”

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From a faith perspective, the future ultimately belongs to God. Diakonia is inspired by God’s promise of hope and future (Jeremiah 29:11). The kingdom that Jesus brought near, announces “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). That kingdom is still to come in its fullest sense. As an integral part of the church’s mission, diakonia shares the mandate to announce its coming, in the first place by promoting and anticipating its values. From this perspective, faith will always remain a fundamental resource for diaconal action, providing a spirituality of resistance against all evil forces – hope against hope, and confidence in the God of Life. From that same perspective, diakonia will always be committed to justice as an integral part of the hope God has given creation.

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Diakonia belongs to the very essence of being church and is an integral part of its mission. According to former LWF General Secretary Ishmael Noko, diakonia belongs to the DNA-structure of being church; the church can therefore not outsource diakonia to specialised ministries and organisations. They play an important role, not least in ecumenical diakonia, and as such, they are the work of the churches. Nevertheless, if the churches would leave the diaconal mandate to them alone, they would lose a fundamental dimension of their very being.

Page 70

Diakonia as faith-based and rights-based action

Faith is biblical, and its interpretation or application in terms of protection of human

rights is defined by agape. Faith gives both depth and passion to human rights. The depth and the passion find its expression in theological integrity, in spiritual depth, and in moral force, that purely secular approaches may lack. Faith communities believe that all people are created in the image of God. Faith communities will never stop affirming the dignity of all people. Human rights sharpen the eyes of faith, so that the structural scope of the needs of the world are seen. Human rights help to frame diaconal work that achieves lasting change for the better. It draws our attention to the universal scale; beyond our own borders to the regional and global scale. It prevents us from falling prey to particularism or sectarianism. Therefore, faith-based and rights-based actions affirm each other.

Page 71

The distinctiveness of faith-based organisations

Faith-based organisation (FBO) first appeared as a term in the USA in the 1970s. Today it is widely used for organisations that base their mission and values on religious faith when assuming roles as social agents. The World Bank has largely contributed to the recognition of FBOs since it in 1998 invited religious leaders to engage in a dialogue on the role of religious actors in development. FBOs, among them diaconal agencies, are important actors in civil society, in particular in development work. Both the UN-system and national governments include them in their working plans and are ready to finance their activities. There are many reasons for this. One is their reputation as professional and efficient actors on the frontlines of combating extreme poverty, protecting the vulnerable, delivering essential services and alleviating suffering; another is a growing recognition of the role of religion in development.

Page 72

Development agents need competence in matters of faith and religion. In the past, this has not always been the case, even for people employed by FBOs. The important point is to acknowledge familiarity with matters of religion and faith as an integral element of professional competence. For diaconal agents, it is the other way around: they should be aware of, and able to articulate in secular language the distinctiveness and core values of diaconal work when (critically) partnering with development agents. In other words, in order to establish fruitful partnerships with governmental and other secular organisations,

diaconal workers need to be 'bilingual', speaking both faith and secular language.

Page 75

In the past, many church-based diaconal agencies have been hesitant in using the term diakonia and in employing a “diaconal” language when describing their activities. A main reason has been the view that the diakonia terminology does not communicate well, in particular with outsiders, such as governmental back donors. In many contexts, the term diakonia remains unknown. They have therefore opted for using ordinary development language when writing applications and reports related to their work. On the other hand, it is notable that this secular language does not fully satisfy the need of expressing the identity of diaconal action. This becomes clear when governmental back donors ask faith-based agencies to give account of their added value and distinctiveness as development agents. The same question is asked by local churches, who ask what distinguishes the work of diaconal agencies from that of secular NGOs

Page 75

Diaconal language, in other words, implies the ability to use both religious and secular terminology, not as separate languages, but in an

interdisciplinary way. Its approach is dialectic in the sense that it recognises both the religious and the secular “dialects” as legitimate and necessary in the process of building diaconal professionalism, which means to be competent in its doing, its ability to analyse, to plan, to perform, to evaluate and to report. Being able to use more than one language strengthens the capacity to communicate with different audiences. It should, however, not be understood as speaking with two tongues, in the sense that the message will differ according to its secular or religious context. An interdisciplinary and dialectic approach implies critical communication between the two. The secular language will question the validity and range of the religious terms, and vice versa. This links to the fact that words are not able to capture reality in its fullness, as different words give a broader insight to understand the complexity both of human life and of social processes.

Page 76

Diaconal professionalism therefore enhances interdisciplinary knowledge and the development of skills that regard the human being as a whole person. Not only health workers recognise the importance of a holistic approach when intervening for the sake of healing and empowering an ill person. In a similar manner, when working for social change and for eradicating poverty,



this holistic approach makes a difference, as poverty has many sides, not only an economic and a political, but also a mental and a spiritual. For this same reason, diaconal professionalism should learn how to mobilise the rich variety of all diaconal assets, and not overemphasise some of them.

Comments

The strengths of churches in terms of diaconal work and the strengths of diaconal agencies or organisations are the focus of the entire report. The text urges churches and communities to view human rights as an integral part of their diaconal mission and their own identity. At the same time, it seeks to encourage faith-based organisations to see their own fundamental values as stemming from a theological tradition. Both types of organisations will become more authentic and thus better equipped for their mission if they meet in the border zone that can be called ecumenical diakonia. There, the language of faith becomes as important as the language of rights. Since the text was written, we have seen a change in the relationship and division of labour between churches and agencies, as funding models have changed, and less government money is going through civil society organisations. In several countries in the Global North, there are examples of faith-based organisations competing more successfully for government funding than secular organisations. Interest in the role of faith-based organisations has continued to grow.

Many faith-based organisations have been forced to tone down their religious identity as part of their interaction with government funders. Faith-based organisations, both in the Global South and the Global North, share this experience. This has been going on for so long that organisations have gradually lost their identity or become accustomed to a kind of self-censorship when it comes to expressing themselves based on their religious values. The focus in recent years on the added value of religious organisations has challenged this self-censorship, and many organisations are in the complex process of reclaiming their values and identity, as reclaiming their 'bilingualism' does not come easy.

Religious literacy and bilingualism are two different but partly overlapping concepts. In this text, religious literacy refers to the ability to see the role of religion in a given context. It can be a professional skill relevant to all actors, regardless of their own religious identity. This can be compared to bilingualism, which in this text refers to the ability to simultaneously embrace a rights-based language and a theological language. It is a skill that is primarily relevant to faith-based organisations that need to find their own identity.

The chapter has a longer section on diaconal assets. This refers to the tangible and intangible assets that are unique to diakonia. These may include history, innovation, communication skills, but also ethically sound narratives, rituals and the experience of belonging.

Questions to discuss

- Have you personally experienced religious literacy contributing to better results in your work?
- Have you experienced a lack of religious literacy causing poorer results in your work?
- Do you have experience of values-based work within organisations that operate on Christian principles? What could be challenging in seeking one's core values in a faith-based organisation?
- What do you see as the greatest asset for diaconal organisations?
- Is it an advantage or a disadvantage for an organisation to have a clear religious profile? Consider both the advantages and disadvantages in different situations!



Chapter 7

Contemporary Challenges

For whom?

This chapter is interesting for anyone who wants to gain a deeper understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of bilateral work through large collaborative organisations, or directly between organisations in the Global North and South. The chapter explores the different qualities of the types of engagement undertaken by churches and agencies. The terms bilateral and multilateral are used frequently in the text and refer to cooperation between two partners and between several different partners, respectively, often with coordinating organisations acting as channels for the cooperation.

Brief description of the chapter

Chapter 7 presents contemporary challenges and opportunities, wrapping up what we have learned

in the previous chapters. It deals with the challenge of shrinking financial resources and the importance of innovative practices in sharing resources, as well as highlighting the importance of partnerships and of building networks. Finally, it underscores advocacy as an integral dimension of diaconal work, affirming its prophetic vocation.

Selected passages from the chapter

Page 79

Throughout the history of the church, diaconal activities have depended on the generosity of faithful Christians, following the example of the Apostle Paul and the collection he organised in favour of the poor in Jerusalem.

Page 80-81

Inter-church aid was established by churches that were convinced that joint action would be more effective when addressing human need in the aftermath of wars. In addition, they wanted to testify to the unity of the church. Especially in times when warfare had caused hatred among peoples, they hoped that cooperation in offering aid would promote reconciliation and relationships of mutual trust. Ecumenical diakonia in its modern form thus started as multilateral action. Ecumenical agencies, located in Geneva, were responsible for coordinating the work that was supported by resources brought together from different countries and churches, and for implementing it in cooperation with local churches in the areas where people in need were assisted. Later, as church-based agencies began to build their professional capacities and were more involved in long-term development work, ecumenical diakonia changed its operational form from multilateral to bilateral action.

Page 80-81

Advocates of a multilateral approach to ecumenical diakonia will point to the following strengths:

- Such an approach connects more actors. Joint action affirms the unity of churches engaged in ecumenical diakonia, envisaging equal space for all partners, not regarding their size or economic strength
- Its processes have a broader effect, shared learning reaches more people
- It seeks coordination and cooperation in the implementation of diaconal activities
- It promotes mutuality in relationships and enhances more balanced power relations
- It represents a wider horizon for action, which makes it easier to include public witness and advocacy.
- Experience has shown that this multilateral approach also includes disadvantages:
- It may bring into being intermediate structures that makes the work less efficient, with time-consuming procedures
- Such structures will imply more costs for administration

- They may also lead to centralisation and to concentration of power, thereby hampering efforts to promote downward accountability and transparency.
- The advocates of bilateralism list the following advantages when applying this approach:
- Direct contact expedites efficient communication, which in turn facilitates active fundraising
- Institutional and personal relations are developed, and they may be strengthened by mutual visits and exchanging visions and experiences
- It provides closer and faster monitoring of project management
- It is easier to facilitate procedures that secure transparency and mutual accountability when implementing projects.

On the other hand, bilateralism also bring with it disadvantages:

- Asymmetry in power relations may contribute to maintaining the traditional division between “donors” and “recipients”, which in the past often developed structures of dependency and attitudes of submission to goals, objectives and methods as defined by the donor agencies
- Dependency on one single partner may have dramatic consequences if this partner suddenly withdraws its support or presents new requirements for partnership
- In cases where a local church or a diaconal agency in the Global South has established working relations with many partners in the North, this may require complex administrative competence, due to different regimes and different requirements established by their partners. Some advantages may become disadvantages, it seems, and vice versa. Ecumenical diakonia should therefore seek to establish structures that take into account the advantages of both multi- and bilateral cooperation in a way that honours the concerns of the partners, both in the Global South and North.

Page 82

The invitation to the “International Consultation on the Relationship between Churches and

Specialised Ministries,” in Malawi, September 2014, referred to “rising tensions within the ecumenical movement between the specialised ministries and churches in different parts of the world.” It expressed concern regarding “friction within the ecumenical family borne out of misunderstandings and a breakdown of meaningful communication.” There may be different causes behind these tensions. Some church leaders, especially in Africa, have expressed their perception of ACT Alliance in the first place as an alliance of agencies based in the Global North, and that in their activities they would rather work with secular NGOs than with local churches. This gave churches and their leaders a feeling of being bypassed, and of having their diaconal competence and work ignored. They therefore raised the question if ACT Alliance in its practice was an expression of the ecumenical movement and of all churches belonging to it.

The specialised agencies on their side claim that their mandate is wider than the churches; their target group is the poor and marginalised, independent of religious affiliation. They also refer to the professional standards that they are obliged to follow when implementing projects, responding to requirements of governmental back-donors. Local churches will often lack the needed institutional capacity, they claim. For such reasons, agencies often prefer professional local NGOs as partners. The Malawi consultation aimed to provide a safe space for constructive dialogue on these issues. It proposed actions points related to three areas: relations, values and foundations, and areas of cooperation. Regarding relationships, and in order to strengthen them, it recognised the need to:

- Be clear about our common calling, identities, mandates and the distinct roles of each. This is important in order appropriately to address misconceptions
- Develop and clearly communicate a joint understanding of the history and traditions of multilateralism and the sharing of resources in various contexts
- Acknowledge, value and uplift each other’s gifts and resources (tangible and intangible assets)
- Clearly communicate the distinct ways in which each of our organisations functions, including their respective contexts and constraints, and provide clarity about expectations and relevance to our relationship as we engage in ecumenical diakonia.

Page 83

Among the strengths of local churches is their rootedness in the context and ability to read what happens according to local expectations, value systems and experiences. Chapter 6.6 gives an account of some of the diaconal assets that local churches can activate when cooperating with specialised agencies. One important asset is the ability to mobilise volunteers, which may contribute decisively to securing local participation and a sense of ownership when implementing projects. Another is the moral authority of church leaders, which allows them to address critical social and political issues and engage people to struggle for a better, future integrating public witness and advocacy in diaconal work. Equally, churches should recognise the strengths and distinct assets of the specialised agencies. They bring insight from a broad field of practice and they have developed various kinds of competence, both related to theory and practice. Their knowledge includes ability to do social analysis, to elaborate clear plans of action, to identify appropriate methods of intervention, to monitor ongoing work, and to report and evaluate. In addition, they often belong to networks of professional agencies with their potential for sharing best practices and of engaging in joint action. Ecumenical diakonia will clearly benefit from connecting the competence of local churches and specialised agencies.

Page 83

Agencies should be encouraged to develop strategies for working more closely with churches. Professor Christoph Stückelberger, the founder of Globethics.net, claims that churches can often play a broader reaching role than single NGOs in transformation processes. He therefore recommends that agencies support processes that envisage strengthening democratic practices in the churches, developing responsible leadership, building competence, and creating corruption-free churches. Equally, local churches should be encouraged to have patience with specialised agencies and contribute actively to processes of fostering new synergies and connectivity. That includes recognising their distinct role and potential as diaconal agents, and looking for opportunities for connection and uniting efforts

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Page 83

This requires continued reflection on the true nature of partnership within ecumenical diakonia, acknowledging that it builds on mutual relationships that exist before and after partners act together. It further requires recognition of the variety of gifts and assets that local churches and specialised agencies bring with them when working together, and the strength of complementarity this richness represents for diaconal work. Not least, it requires transparency and mutuality throughout the process of working together, from planning to implementation. Transparency includes sharing of information at all levels, as often as possible, not leaving to one of the partners to decide when and what to inform. Mutuality means balanced power relations, in the sense that it does not reduce one partner to being an instrument of others.

Page 84

The WCC Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace invites “all people of good will” to join. This corresponds to a long tradition within diakonia, of seeking support from and cooperation with individuals and organisations outside the church’s own constituency, and with governments. Based on the view that all humans carry the image of God, diakonia is convinced that all are enabled to be God’s co-workers promoting the common good and a dignified life for all. The notion of “people of good will” should not be interpreted as if it refers to morally superior individuals. All are called to be “people of good will.” Unfortunately, not all opt to follow this calling, which should not stop the church from inviting them to join in

**Page 84**

Diaconal agents do not work with secular organisations with the aim of evangelising them. Their secular identity requires recognition in the same way that faith-based organisations expect their distinctive identity to be respected. Nor is the aim to Christianise public space. Our aim as Christians is “to make all areas within the public space freely accessible to everyone, without distinction of any kind, such as colour, caste, religion and gender.” This view is based on the theological understanding that God’s action in relation to creation cannot be limited to the church nor the action of Christians. God’s care for human beings manifests itself through the establishment of social, political and juridical orders, and of responsible leadership that defends human dignity and promotes justice and peace. Christians are called to active citizenship, and to engage in activities that enhance equal access to common goods, safety for all, especially for the vulnerable, and meaningful participation by and interaction among all groups in society.

These are all key issues on the agenda of ecumenical diakonia, and they challenge diaconal agents to work with “all people of good will,” which includes looking for opportunities for working together with secular organisations

Page 84

Diapraxis – working with people of other faiths

Today religion is increasingly recognised as an important social and political factor, and in matters related to development work. Some scholars describe “the return of religion” as a process of de-privatisation in which religious leaders commit themselves to contribute to the common welfare, others point to the necessity of including religious actors in civil society and in processes of building democracy in “post-secular society.”

The role of religion and religious leaders in development is disputed. Some regard them as reactionary forces that resist social change and that in certain situations provide fuel for social and political conflicts. Others point to their importance for mobilising people for responsible social action, and for promoting ethical discernment, with the consequence that religious actors may play a key role in working for reconciliation, justice and peace.

It is evident that development agents cannot ignore religion in their work. Religious literacy must be a part of their professional competence. This is especially important for FBOs and ecumenical diakonia, which should take a leading role in engaging people of faith in their work, and in working with religious leaders in processes of promoting the common good. In contexts of religious mistrust and tension, diaconal agents can provide safe space for joint action and reflection and thus initiate processes of reconciliation and transformation.

Page 85

In 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) signed a memorandum of understanding to cooperate in humanitarian work. This was the first official cooperation between a global Christian and a global Islamic humanitarian organisation, and it gives a clear message of the how people of different faiths can join forces based on shared visions and values.

Page 85

Advocacy is an integral part of diaconal work. It cannot be limited to a possible extra concern depending on given circumstances. The distinct identity of diakonia, its biblical roots and Christian vocation, compels ecumenical diakonia to be prophetic, to side with the poor and marginalised, to unmask systemic injustice and promote human dignity, justice and peace.

Comments

The meeting mentioned on p. 82, chapter 7.4, ‘International consultation on the relationship between churches and specialised agencies’ in Malawi, September 2014, was in fact the starting point for the work that ultimately resulted in the report *Called to Transformation*. This paragraph highlights the deep conflict that has existed between professionalised agencies and local churches. To summarise briefly, international FBOs did not consider local churches in the Global South to be sufficiently professional or competent. One can also sense between the lines a fear that corruption has sometimes occurred within local churches. On the other hand, local churches felt that international FBOs, through their close ties to secular donors, had lost their identity and their ability to use theological language and to be grounded in their core values. This is described in the report as bilingualism.

The report proposes a series of fairly general measures based on consensus and reciprocity but could have highlighted the critical and decisive areas of conflict. Agencies need to improve or even reclaim their bilingualism, and churches need to review their own competence and prophetic role. The process of producing a joint document to assist churches and agencies in this move towards cooperation was not entirely smooth. The draft report was referred back in 2019 and was not accepted as a joint report until the WCC General Assembly in Karlsruhe 2022.

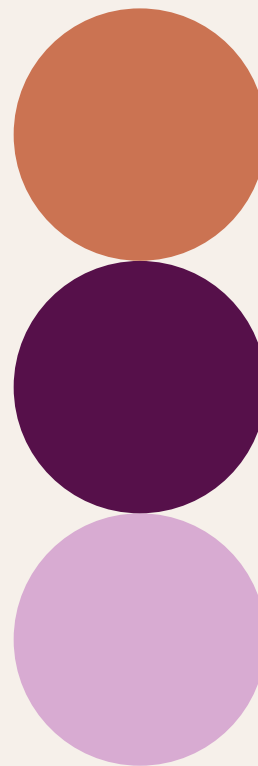
In the section on pages 83–84 concerning cooperation with secular organisations, there are a few points that are worth further reflection. Within the WCC sphere, there is often talk of *Missio Dei*, or God’s mission. There is a tendency in this reasoning to emphasise the universal over that which is linked to the church or the Christian sphere. There is thus an emphasis on ‘all people of good will’ and all good work as part

of God's mission and God's commission to the world. Evangelical theology more often emphasises the uniqueness of the church in God's mission. In other words, the text of the report does not fully capture the ecumenical complexity of the issue of cooperation with secular actors. This area is also one of the stumbling blocks when it comes to cooperation between churches and agencies.

Section 7.6 of the report mentions religious literacy as a professional skill necessary for anyone working in international development cooperation or ecumenical diakonia in religious contexts. The same section develops the concept of diapraxis as an example of a method for interreligious dialogue and cooperation. Interreligious dialogue within the ecumenical movement, together with, for example, global Muslim organisations, is described as an expression of the ecumenical movement's own religious literacy. That is, an understanding of the importance of religious actors. Religious literacy has thus paved the way for cooperation with other religious actors.

Questions to discuss

- The chapter begins by describing how declining economic conditions affect diaconal work. Apart from the obvious disadvantages, can you see any advantages to governments reducing their support for civil society? Are there any particular aspects to reducing support for faith-based movements?
- Sometimes the fundraising work of diaconal organisations provides a window into their identity and values. How do you see the fundamental values of different organisations reflected in their fundraising work?
- How do you and the people around you feel about collaborating with secular actors or actors based in other religions? What are the biggest benefits? What could be problematic?
- The report describes advocacy work as an indispensable part of diaconal work. How do organisations in your area view advocacy work? Do they use their voice to put pressure on decision-makers?



Chapter 8

Ecumenical Diakonia in a Confessional Context

For whom?

This chapter is interesting for anyone who wants a concise theological description of how diakonia is understood in different church families, including those outside the ecumenical movement.

Brief description of the chapter

Chapter 8 looks at ecumenical diakonia in different confessional contexts, showing areas of similarity and dissimilarity amongst the confessions, thus leading towards greater mutual understanding and learning.

Selected passages from the chapter

Page 88

This diakonia is neither a good moral act springing from the goodwill of a regenerated Christian, nor

an expression of compassion for the misery of humankind outside the church. The care of the churches for the world is not a vehicle for an uneducated humankind. The help of the churches are not primarily as philanthropic institutions. The act of diakonia of the churches is ecclesial, namely it is the overflowing of the grace which binds and moves their inner life in a total fellowship. In other words, diakonia to the world is the echo in the world of the word of God already accomplished in the charismatic church. It is the expression of the “*ergon theou*” (the work of God) in his Holy Spirit through the “*parergon*” (the work made or produced) of humankind within the world and for the world. Diakonia is the other voice of the truth made and given by God to humankind as communion/*koinonia*. It is the act which springs out of the continuously represented event in the church.

Orthodox diakonia also flows from the divine liturgy in which our offerings are sanctified by Christ’s offering and which requires our active



“cooperation” (synergeia) with God in the exercise of our free will which is rooted in our common “agreement” (symphonia) (Matt. 18:19). Diakonia is therefore an expression of the unity of the church as the body of Christ. In the same way each local celebration of the eucharist is complete and universal, involving the whole of creation, and is offered for the material and spiritual needs of the whole world.

Page 89

Lutheran theology strongly emphasises that Christians are not only Christians within the church’s worship and faith, or “God’s realm”, but they are called to live as responsible citizens in their respective societies, the so-called “worldly realm”. Good deeds, service to the world, diakonia, are, according to Lutheran theology, not only a practice within the Christian community, but, based on creation theology, belonging to the world. Christians are appealed to, to serve with all people of good will for the sake of humanity, not for the sake of salvation. Lutheran theology also emphasises that diakonia should never be an instrument of conversion, but has its own value and contributes to the witness about the good news in Christ.

Page 90

Some of the biggest Lutheran churches in the world, like the Evangelical Mekane Yesu Church in Ethiopia, have focused on the need to define the mission of the church as holistic ministry, where proclamation and service are interconnected and inseparable. This became a useful reminder for all Lutheran churches to avoid departmentalisation and a disconnection of the church’s service, in for example development departments, from the regular church life in congregations.

Page 94

A Roman Catholic understanding of Ecumenical Diakonia “The Church’s deepest nature is expressed in her threefold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (kerygma-martyria), celebrating the sacraments (leitourgia) and exercising the ministry of charity (diakonia). These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable” (Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 25).

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Liberative diakonia starts from the point of resourcefulness, even in situations where people

seem to be in dire need. AICs, especially in local contexts, are communities that start from a point of resourcefulness even in the midst of what is looked at as poverty. The giving, sharing and caring that takes place in local contexts where the AICs minister, is in itself a prophetic witness to the world – especially to those who live economic lives of hoarding. This witness highlights that that all of us can be well when we go beyond ourselves to care for the others around us. The sharing is done out of fellowship and community building that seeks shared dignity. This kind of sharing is based on the inner motivation and a deep sense of consciousness for a community that should be well. Liberative diakonia calls for processes that transcend ending poverty, to walking along-side all who have been left behind, until they break into abundance. Wholeness is at the centre.

Liberative diakonia calls for questioning what we have been doing, in the light of whether we are dismantling the foundations on which poverty is built and sustained. Liberative diakonia transforms the giver/recipient frameworks. It focuses on investment in people’s lives so that they can stand on their own and affirm their agency in the search and realisation of a community that is whole. It is this value system that calls the world to order by affirming the fact that the ‘The earth and all that is in it belongs to God’. This will bring us in the arena of development with humility, stewardship, and accountability to the people who for whom abundance of life must be made a reality.

Comments

This chapter reviews the different church families. It is interesting to note that the Orthodox description of diakonia differs from that of the Protestant churches in that it focuses more on the connection between the heavenly and the earthly. It speaks of an extension of the Eucharist, i.e. the Mass, which in itself expresses the essence of diakonia when the bread is broken.

The different church families that stem from the Reformation are quite similar in their theology, which is largely the theology described earlier in the report. Diakonia is not an activity but an identity for the church. The section on Lutheran theology naturally highlights the doctrine of the two kingdoms. That is, Christians are called to work in two different spheres, the spiritual and the secular. It is also interesting to note that in Reformed, Anglican and Methodist theology,

theology around diakonia also concerns the view of ministry, that is, the question of who should perform diakonia.

It may be interesting to note that the description of diakonia within the Pentecostal movement is very brief in the text. The section on Baptist diaconal theology and practice provides a richer description, where one can sense the theological idea between the lines: that communities and churches that emphasise the importance of lay people and often have a congregationalist view of the congregation (based on the local congregation rather than a church or denomination) are sceptical about cooperating with the state. There is a desire to maintain a distance from the executive power in society. This may be a distinguishing feature between churches that have an episcopal structure and which, historically, have sometimes been state churches, and communities that have been formed in opposition to a state church system. The last paragraph concerning the so-called Peace Churches could have provided a deeper theological understanding of the tensions that exist, in particular in relation to views on change, power and cooperation with or opposition to state actors.

The section on African independent churches takes a contextual approach to diakonia, and the concept of liberation diakonia is used in relation to the situation on the African continent.

The entire chapter on the different church families contains more of a description of what is being done than a reflection on the theologically important positions that influence the theology and practice of diakonia. These could be creation theology, views on ministry, views on the relationship with the state, views on violence, ecclesiology (theology concerning the nature of the church), etc.

Questions to discuss

- Do you identify with any particular church tradition and, if so, do you recognise yourself in the description in the text?
- The text mentions that several traditions have historically avoided the term diakonia, instead referring to social work, charitable work, etc. What is the situation where you are?
- Diaconal work or social work, has often historically been a starting point for cooperation and ecumenism. Can you give examples of this from your context?
- After reading the chapter, can you point to theological differences that need to be discussed in order for different churches to be able to cooperate fully? How religiously literate are people in your context when it comes to learning about other traditions in preparation for cooperation?



Chapter 9

Ecumenical Diakonia in a Regional Context

For whom?

This chapter is relatively time-bound and has therefore lost some of its relevance since it was written. However, it is interesting in its general descriptions of the differences between different regions and continents. It is particularly interesting for those who want to see how colonial history has influenced the development of churches in different parts of the world.

Brief description of the chapter

Chapter 9 describes ecumenical diakonia in different regional contexts, based on practices as well as socio-economic, social-political,

environmental and other challenges in each geographical area.

Selected passages from the chapter

Page 98

According to Marcelo Justo, “Despite the growth of the past decade and the application of redistributive policies, Latin America continues to be the most unequal region on the planet, beaten only by a region plagued by war and famine: Sub-Saharan Africa. The social advances are unquestionable. Over the last 15 years some 100 million Latin Americans have risen out of poverty. However, the distance that separates them from the richest has barely changed.

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This rather ambivalent scenario challenges the various churches to pursue an ecumenical diakonia which transforms themselves in the first place, in order to be “salt and light” (Mt 5,13-16), serving the “least of these” (Mt 25, 31-46), so to transform the various contexts, according to the values of God’s kingdom of “justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).

Page 99

The historical development of Christianity in the Caribbean has been fraught with contradictions. Thus, while the planters held the majority of the population in slavery and other forms of oppression, some representatives of the church sought to carry out acts of diakonia, particularly, but not exclusively in the areas of education and medical care. Although there is a valid view that the colonial intent of education was to maintain the status quo, some of the most respected educational institutions and hospitals in the region were founded and, in some cases, continue to be run by churches and their agencies. Among the harsh realities which are part and parcel of life in the Caribbean, are varying degrees of generational poverty and inequality, hostile global economic relations, gender-based violence, human trafficking, climate change and the dispossession of large tracts of land, faced especially by indigenous peoples. These realities demand certain specific responses from the church. /.../ An understanding of the contemporary Caribbean has to be underscored by the knowledge that the material poverty which is seen in the region today is a product of its harsh historical foundations.

Page 100

Ecumenical diakonia (in Europe) in its modern and contemporary form emerged in the aftermath of the world wars, in response to the needs of refugees and others victims of war. It led to the organisation of specialised agencies, such as Dan-Church Aid (Denmark) and Christian Aid (UK). As church-based entities, they sought ecumenical cooperation, often within the framework of the World Council of Churches, and they promoted professionalism and quality in their work within the public space. From the end of the 1950s these agencies widened their focus from European to global challenges. They engaged in development programs, and later also in issues related to justice and ecology. In many cases,

mission organisations manifested a similar commitment to ecumenical diakonia. Changes emerged from the 1960s onwards which may be considered both as strengths and challenges in today’s performance of ecumenical diakonia:

- a. Increasing public funding implied a growing dependency on governmental/secular principles and methods. The consequence could be loosening of the ties to churches and a “NGO-fication” of the agencies and their activities.
- b. Linked to this is seen a growing professionalisation, very often following the logic of secular development work. This would imply less space for local churches in implementing projects, as they would often be deemed to lack the required professionalism.
- c. Growing awareness of the political dimension and a more comprehensive approach in diaconal work opened opportunities for an increased focus on the prophetic dimension of ecumenical diakonia, and of including advocacy and public witness in all forms of its work.

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As a whole, Africa is endowed with natural resources, diversity of cultures, traditions and religions and a vibrant youthful population which are wellsprings of opportunities. However, these also create considerable challenges for churches and ecumenical institutions, not the least diversity in denominational and linguistic traditions and interreligious and ethnic conflicts. Furthermore, despite the huge diaconal commitment of the churches and ecumenical partners, unequal distribution of resources at the national level, weak governance, violence and ongoing exploitation of natural resources by powerful governments, and multinationals (with the backing of the small clique of leaders in the continent), thwart effective stewardship of the richness of Africa.

Page 103

The establishment of Amity in 1985 (in People’s Republic of China) offered a platform for the ecumenical sharing of resources with churches overseas. It was an opportunity to develop a new kind of postcolonial relationship that centred on equality, mutual respect and mutual consultation. This “new beginning” of an ecumenical diakonia nurtured mutual learning, equality and friendship.

It was accepted that the Amity Foundation was an independent Chinese organisation that upheld the three principles of self-management, self-propagation and self-financing. The ecumenical sharing of resources meant that all partners were equal, whether they were contributing finances, expertise, labour or service. Chinese Christians have also emphasised “servant-hood” and humility in diaconal practice. This keeping of a low profile and emphasis on participatory development has often impressed local governments and helped transform mindsets.

Comments

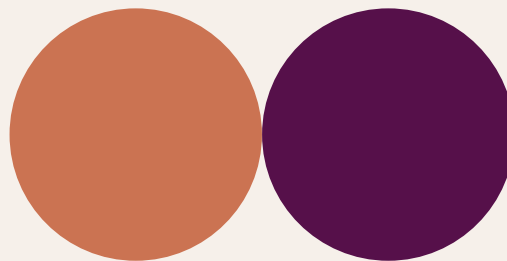
In several parts of the text, it becomes clear that the mission of diakonia is sharpened and explained through theology from the Global South. The after-effects of colonialism are evident and leaves a mark in theology as it is formulated in the poorest countries.

It is interesting that the description of diakonia in Europe largely coincides with the earlier description of the history of ecumenical diakonia.

Diakonia from a Chinese perspective is particularly interesting, as outreach social work has been one of the very few opportunities for churches in China to gain visibility.

Questions to discuss

- Can you discern any signs, in the text and in your own experience, that churches in the Global South have become the dominant force within Christianity over the past several decades?
- The report's extensive discussion of the relationship between churches and agencies is also an indication of tension between churches and FBOs in the Global South and the Global North. How do you think this relationship will be affected and change when states in the North reduce their support for civil society?
- Colonialism, and its aftermath, is a major part of the history of ecumenical diakonia. Do you have any personal experience of how the colonial legacy affects relations between different Christian organisations and communities?
- Is it still relevant to focus on the effects of colonialism in the Global South?
- Would you describe Christian actors as conscious or unconscious of the problematic legacy of colonialism?



Chapter 10

The Way Forward

For whom?

This chapter is of interest to anyone who wishes to identify future challenges for the ecumenical movement. It provides a concise summary of the entire report, but with forward-looking recommendations and challenges for churches and agencies, related to several of the major themes in the report. There is perhaps a high degree of specificity in the challenges. The chapter thus provides a description of the major issues that were seen as crucial and challenging for the future at the time the report was written. Much of this, but not all, is still relevant today.

Brief description of the chapter

Chapter 10 concludes this study by indicating the way forward. It invites the ecumenical movement, its member churches and related agencies to affirm the vision and the mandate of ecumenical diakonia, and finally proposes measures for strengthening the structures of shared action and networks of cooperation.

Selected passages from the chapter

Page 110

The kairos moment thus included the critical question of what it takes to be church in times of crisis, to reflect theologically, interpreting the signs, and to perform diaconal action that announces hope with justice and peace. This challenges churches, agencies and ecumenical bodies to:

- Facilitate space for interdisciplinary reflection on “the sign of the times” and for developing tools for interpreting theologically contemporary challenges as “moments of truth and hope”
- Deepen the understanding of prophetic diakonia, facilitating opportunities of sharing experiences and insight from diaconal practice
- Provide faith accompaniment to diaconal actors who work in situations of deep social and political unrest



Page 110-111

Affirming diakonia as a shared vision and mandate

This document affirms the ecumenical understanding of diakonia as an integral dimension of the church’s nature and mission. Chapter 4 presented the theological basis of this view, drawing insights from different confessional traditions and reflecting learning processes within the ecumenical movement. It affirmed the trinitarian dimension of diakonia, which means seeing it as an expression of the triune God’s salvific care for creation and humanity. It also underscored its ecclesial dimension, which means a call to all churches and Christians to engage in God’s holistic mission of healing, reconciliation and transformation. In addition, it emphasised the prophetic dimension of diakonia as a vocation to defend

human dignity, resist evil, and promote justice and peace. Ecumenical diakonia expresses the shared vision of churches, agencies and ecumenical bodies and their shared mandate to act together. This challenges them to:

- Affirm this shared vision and mandate in strategic planning, working documents and communication work
- Articulate the distinctiveness of diakonia as faith-based and rights-based action
- Recognise initiatives that enhance the coordination of diaconal work, such as the ACT Alliance and other ecumenical bodies, as an integral dimension of the ecumenical movement and as an expression of the shared mandate to engage in diakonia
- Enhance mutual recognition of roles and mandates, seeking coordination and cooperation whenever possible

Page 111

Diakonia is rights-based action, advocacy and public witness related to just causes are integral parts of diaconal action.

Page 111

Diaconal agents understand justice both as a theological and a socio-political issue. The first relates to the biblical message of God's saving justice, which calls all to engage in defending the dignity and the rights of the poor and oppressed. The second affirms the importance of establishing legislation that defends human rights and of opting for approaches that address people in vulnerable situations as rights-holders and those in power as duty-bearers.

Page 113

Diaconal capacity includes ability to articulate the distinctiveness of diaconal practice, as faith- and rights-based action.

Page 113

This challenges churches, agencies and ecumenical bodies to:

- Include capacity building in diakonia in their strategic and programmatic plans
- Offer training opportunities for joint training

and learning for employees and leaders, strengthening their diaconal competence

- Elaborate and provide relevant training material
- Encourage theological seminaries and other relevant institutions to include diakonia in their curricula and training programmes.

Producing diaconal and developmental capacity building will also include a substantial reconsideration of priorities of development agencies, with the goal of increased funding to be made available for study, training and scholarships projects in this area. These should aim to explore the integral relationship between theology and development, theology and ecumenical diakonia discourse, and theology and ecumenical social ethics, thereby enhancing the capacity building of churches in diakonia and strengthening their work in social services. A dissociation of theology from diakonia, development and social ethics would thus be detrimental to the effectiveness and distinctiveness of delivery of services. Social change is only sustainable if it includes norms, values and ethical concepts.

Page 115

Diakonia often assumes the role of "go-between." This chapter has pointed to a number of challenges that urge ecumenical diakonia to engage in innovative reflection and practice and to develop strategies and plans that affirm the shared mandate of churches, specialised agencies and ecumenical bodies. The tasks of affirming and facilitating mutual relationships, of coordinating diaconal action and of strengthening practices of cooperation are a vital expression of the role of "go-between." The spirituality of justice and peace must permeate ecumenical diakonia, its structure, its theoretical framework and its practice. It is a spirituality that in faith recognises justice and peace as God's gracious gifts, as liberating good news to all humankind, and it empowers us to join in the ecumenical Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

Comments

The forward-looking and concluding chapter formulates challenges for the ecumenical movement. It is important to remember that the entire report has been written to facilitate a rapprochement between what are known as

agencies and the churches and communities that are part of the ecumenical movement. The challenges formulated are particularly relevant to this process. Ecumenical diakonia is described as a tool for this rapprochement, as a useful bridge where churches and agencies can meet, affirm each other and formulate innovative strategies. The actual role of diakonia, to uphold creation and a dignified life for people, becomes secondary in the chapter. The challenges are thus presented more to make the ecumenical movement work than to challenge this movement to deepen its analysis and commitment to Missio Dei.

Questions to discuss

- In your context, which areas will be most important for diaconal work in the next ten years? Will there be entirely new areas?
- What are the most important messages that prophetic diakonia will need to convey to decision-makers in the next ten years?
- If local congregations are given a greater role in diaconal work, both locally, nationally and internationally, what are the advantages and disadvantages of this?
- If you have experience of tensions between churches/denominations in relation to agencies, i.e. organisations that carry out diaconal work, how will these tensions change in the future?



Addendum

The Diaconal Work of the Churches in the Context of COVID-19

This section is an addition to the rest of the text. Although the chapter contains relevant examples for diaconal work, theological reflection, etc., it is too situation-specific to be relevant to the broader approach of this study guide.

How has the playing field changed since Called to Transformation was presented?

Large parts of the report were written between 2016 and 2018. The sections concerning history and theological foundations are, of course, still relevant. However, much has happened in the world that affects the relationship between churches, denominations, and agencies active in international development cooperation, and that has changed the conditions for diaconal work in general. Conflicts and wars affect geopolitical relations, and countries in the Global North have changed their priorities when it comes to international development cooperation. As a result, the playing field and the rules of the game have changed dramatically in the years since the report was launched in Karlsruhe in 2022.

Had the report been written in 2025, increased poverty, food insecurity, conflict and violence, nationalism, authoritarian rule, regression in gender equality and increasing climate impact would have been even more pressing themes, with developments moving in an undesirable direction. Some themes would have been given more space: extreme concentration of wealth, disinformation and concepts of truth, artificial intelligence and digital surveillance.

It is particularly clear in Chapter 5, which deals with Diakonia in a changing landscape, that the world has moved from a state of weak optimism to an increasingly serious situation.

The entire document moves back and forth between two focuses that are simultaneously and interconnectedly affected by these changes in the surrounding world.

1. First and foremost, the process that forms the basis for the report, namely how churches and communities should strengthen their diaconal identity, how agencies should increase their bilingualism, and how the ecumenical movement should find ways to engage in constructive cooperation. Here, ecumenical diakonia is both a goal and a means.

2. The second focus is on the important task of diakonia to work for, among other things: dignified lives for vulnerable people, peace, and stewardship of creation. All of this as an integral part of the church's holistic calling.

Since 2022, when the report was launched, the relationship between government donors and civil society actors, faith-based or otherwise, has continued to change. The US has dramatically



cut back on its aid, and the same has happened in several European countries, albeit more gradually. This is also the case in several countries like Sweden, where the focus has shifted from long-term development cooperation through civil society to support in the local area (Ukraine) and initiatives with a political agenda that benefits national interests, either to influence migration or increase Swedish exports. Military spending is skyrocketing at the same time as aid is declining. The relationship between civil society and the public sector has also been renegotiated in terms of social work in Sweden.

At the same time, the positive process we have seen for many years continues, with churches in the Global South increasing in membership, financial capacity, and self-awareness. We are also seeing a more conservative stance among churches in the Global South and, in some cases, a distrust of the human rights agenda promoted by faith-based agencies, backed by government funding from secular state actors. This development will create tensions in ecumenical cooperation on a range of issues, such as LGBTQI rights.

All of this paves the way for a clear shift in initiative, change-driving forces, and power from agencies to churches and communities. This will

also require an even greater degree of religious literacy in order to understand the characteristics and special conditions that apply to cooperation with more conservative faith-based actors in the Global South.

Faith-based civil society actors, referred to in the report as agencies, will continue to play an important role in the future, even as government funding declines. However, the new situation will challenge the consensus on human rights and rights-based language that has been the main motive even for faith-based organisations. The theological work described in the report will become increasingly important as agencies work with churches and communities on more equal terms and engage in theological reflection together with these groups. This will affect how fundraising is conducted in the Global North. Both religious literacy and what is referred to as bilingualism in this text will continue to grow in importance.

The report can be downloaded from the website of the World Council of Churches oikoumene.org.



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