

### The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church

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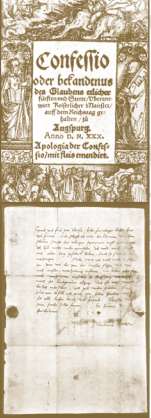


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# The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church



The Lutheran World Federation  
A Communion of Churches



# The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church

LWF Studies, 2006

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*Edited by  
Reinhard Boettcher*

*on behalf of*

*The Lutheran World Federation  
Department for Theology and Studies*

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**Editorial assistance and layout:**

Iris J. Benesch, LWF-DTS

**Design:**

Stéphane Gallay, LWF-OCS

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# Preface

In this booklet you will find a selection of articles and reports presented at a global consultation on the theme “The Diaconal Ministry in the Lutheran Churches,” sponsored by the Department for Theology and Studies (DTS) of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and held 2-7 November 2005, in São Leopoldo, Brazil. The consultation was the centerpiece of one of the Office for Theology and the Church’s study programs conceived as the second part of a program entitled, “Lutheran Identity in Ecumenical Relations.” The first part of the program focused on the episcopal ministry and was carried out jointly by DTS, the Office of Ecumenical Affairs and the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg and resulted in the publication *The Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church*.<sup>1</sup>

With the exception of the Anglican-Lutheran dialogue, which produced the document *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*,<sup>2</sup> the diaconal ministry has not been a major topic in interconfessional dialogues. Therefore, DTS was asked to carry out the diaconal study on its own.

A core group cooperated with the Office for Theology and the Church in determining the foci and methodology of the consultation, and LWF member churches were asked how, if at all, they order diaconal ministry in their churches. Prior to the consultation, the sixteen participants from LWF member churches had prepared reports on the diaconal ministry in their churches. Four of them, from Brazil, India, Norway and the USA, presented major papers at the consultation which have been included in this publication.

The final statement of the consultation moves into new terrain. While it neither locates diaconal ministry in the area of “lay ministry,” nor adopts the concept of the threefold ministry of bishop-pastor-deacon, it suggests viewing it as an integral element of the one (public) ministry of the church, the *ministerium ecclesiasticum* (CA V). Consequently, it advocates ordaining those whom the church calls into this ministry (CA XIV). This approach moves beyond the longstanding Lutheran tradition of reserving ordination for those called to proclaim the gospel and administer the sacraments. The statement concurs with the understanding that the one ministry of the church is carried out by those who publicly share and communicate the gospel which “teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this.”<sup>3</sup> At the same time, it holds that this is done in different



ways. Testifying to the Triune God's unconditional love for the broken world, which is what the diaconal ministry is basically all about, is as valid a way of bearing witness to God's grace and mercy in Christ as is proclaiming the gospel and administering the sacraments. Both ministries involve human activity, carried out on Christ's behalf in order to call forth faith. Both spring from and are based on the biblical witness, rooted in Christ's salvific work and authenticated by the Holy Spirit. Diaconal ministry which bears witness to the Triune God's faithfulness, love and grace is not only a response to faith but opens up and provokes questions of faith.

Moreover, the statement reads the Bible and reexamines the Lutheran confessional writings in light of today's pressing challenges. In a world inundated with trite words and manipulated language, the "church's body language" (as a Norwegian church leader put it), its diakonia, may gain increasing significance for the credibility of the church and its message. This observation draws our attention to the ways in which Jesus proclaimed God's coming kingdom: by preaching and teaching, but also by healing and integrating the marginalized and excluded. The participants felt a need to take these perspectives into account and to accommodate them in an understanding and practice of ministry, which is biblically sound, informed by the Lutheran Reformation and open to contextual variations.

Obviously the proposed understanding of diaconal ministry challenges deeply ingrained ecclesial power structures; therefore it may provoke perhaps even strong critique. This indicates that there is evidently more at stake than merely the issue of ministry. I hope that the responses and discussions will contribute to a more adequate ordering of the ministry of the church and to help sharpen the witness of the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation.

Reinhard Boettcher  
Secretary for Theology and the Church  
Geneva, 26 April 2006

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>*The Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church. A Lutheran Statement, 2002* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>The Anglican Consultative Council and the Lutheran World Federation, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity. The Hanover Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission* (London: Anglican Communion Publications, 1996).

<sup>3</sup>Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 40.



# Toward Lutheran Theological Understandings of the Diaconal Ministry

Reinhard Boettcher

## Background

Since the founding of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948, many churches have rediscovered and increasingly appreciated diakonia as a fundamental and essential component of their mission. At times, other terms such as social ministry or the church's involvement in struggles for justice and peace are used.<sup>1</sup> The diaconal ministry, as a distinct office in the set-apart ministry of the church, related to but distinct from the common ministry of all baptized believers (the term will be used in this sense here), has been the subject of some ecumenical dialogues and studies, notably the WCC studies, *The Ministry of Deacons*, in 1965 and *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, in 1982.

By and large, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has been in line with this development, taking a significant step with the global consultation on "Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World," Johannesburg, South Africa, November 2002. In their "Letter from the Global Consultation," the participants clearly stated, "Diakonia is central to what it means to be the church. As a core component of the gospel, diakonia is not an option but an essential part of discipleship."<sup>2</sup> But, in most Lutheran churches the desideratum that, "as a ministry, it [diakonia] should be fully integrated into the church's ordained, consecrated and commissioned ministries, as a reflection of the fundamental significance of diakonia for the being of the church,"<sup>3</sup> remains to be realized.

## Intent and purpose of the "São Leopoldo" consultation

Not all LWF member churches have a diaconal ministry and, if they do, there are vast differences as to how it is structured or ordered. Rather than calling

for a uniform pattern for the diaconal ministry, the 2005 consultation in São Leopoldo took stock of the existing models and identified a set of parameters demarcating a “space” within which an understanding of the diaconal ministry, as part of an overall concept of ministry, can be located. This understanding should be:

- Solidly based on the gospel as testified to in the Bible
- Accountable to and informed by basic tenets of the Lutheran Reformation
- Open to contextual variations.

In other words, “São Leopoldo” was expected to build on “Johannesburg” in such a way that it offered solidly grounded proposals for how to express the ecclesiological insight that diakonia is an essential component of the church’s being and mission at the level of ministry. It was hoped that LWF member churches could be challenged to reexamine critically the way in which they have structured their diaconal ministry, if at all, and to inspire possible changes in light of the needs and challenges churches face in their particular contexts.

### **The questionnaire**

In order to take stock of how the diaconal ministry is ordered a questionnaire was sent to all LWF member churches in December 2004. Twenty-three churches responded: four in Africa, one in Asia, fifteen in Europe, one in Latin America and two in North America.

The following are some typical models:

- Two small churches indicated that they had no diaconal ministry of any kind. They did not indicate that this might pose a problem and did not express the intention to establish such.
- There is no formalized diaconal ministry. Pastors as well as women/sisters (the terminology used is not consistent) are involved in the areas of social work and pastoral care.

- One small church does not have a diaconal ministry, but hopes to train people for it in the future. Ordination is envisaged.
- One very small church has the ministry of (male) deacon, but this is seen as an emergency measure because the church does not have enough pastors. Consequently, he is called *Pfarrdiakon* (pastoral deacon), and “is not ordained but commissioned.”
- Another small church has tried, but failed, to establish a diaconal ministry. The main challenge is to avoid regarding the deacon as a sub-pastor. Attempts are underway to create a sort of diaconal ministry for a specific mission. The contract is limited and there will be a certain liturgical recognition. Women work as chaplains in hospitals and conduct funerals.
- One church has deaconesses working in the areas of nursing and caring.
- For financial reasons, one small church does not yet have deacons. Should deacons be introduced they would have to work under the pastor's guidance.
- One church has deacons (female and male) who carry out charitable work, evangelization and mission as well as helping pastors with various activities. It also has deaconesses serving in the areas of care and nursing. Diaconal sisters are single or widowed women (responsibilities unspecified).
- Quite a number of churches have deacons who are involved in pastoral (e.g., preaching, teaching, administration of the sacraments) as well as social activities. In some cases they are ordained, in others they are not. They are recognized as exercising a ministry that is not on a par with the pastoral ministry.
- One church is moving in the direction of the threefold ministry requiring every local parish to hire a deacon. The relationship to the pastor as well as the bishop remains under dispute.
- One church (with a strong Reformed background) gives such prominence to the diaconal ministry that in future it might be appreciated as

being as central to the church as the pastoral ministry. This understanding is rooted in the conviction that the church and local congregations have a diaconal responsibility that the deacon is supposed to nurture.

## **Crucial issues at stake**

### ***What is diakonia?***

There is a long and powerful tradition of understanding diakonia in terms of lowly service, rendered humbly to those in physical and material need. In his book, *Diakonia. Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*,<sup>4</sup> John Collins challenges this notion. He asserts that in the Bible and in other sources, diakonia refers to a commission that someone undertakes on another's behalf, frequently connoting a transition from one "world" to another ("go-between"). One of the most striking examples are the apostle Paul's repeated references to his own ministry as diakonia (e.g., 2 Cor 5:18f.). This perception opens up new and wider perspectives for understanding the diaconal ministry.

### ***What does the Bible say about the diaconal ministry?***

This question raises a fundamental hermeneutical problem. It is an inadvertent temptation to project our own understanding onto biblical texts, expecting them to confirm what we are looking for, especially when a long and well-established tradition is at stake. Notwithstanding the fact that we read and interpret the Bible within the conditions of our human understanding shaped by our history and context, we are challenged to listen to the Bible ever anew and to be open to hear it speak in ways we do not expect. Listening to the Bible and wrestling with appropriate understanding and interpretation can be both complicated and facilitated by doing so with people who have different perspectives and assumptions.

In his article on "Biblical Theology for Diaconal Ministry,"<sup>5</sup> Erik Heen challenges the traditional interpretation of three classical New Testament passages that refer to "deacons." Acts 6, he argues, does not refer to the installation of deacons as we understand them today, but is a reflection of a conflict between different groups of Christians ("Hellenists" and "Hebrews"). Apart from Romans 16:1, Philippians 1:1 is the only passage where Paul uses

the term “deacons” without further comment on this type of ministry. 1 Timothy 3 refers to bishops and deacons, but the qualifications for them are very similar and the differences not spelled out. The New Testament texts, as disparate as they are both diachronically and synchronically, reflect various contexts and stages where a vast array of ministries were in place and interacted with each other without a clear pattern emerging from this pluriformity. Even the late Pastoral Letters, such as Timothy, do not suggest a distinct order of (special) ministry in general and the diaconal ministry in particular.

In hermeneutical terms this means that we cannot expect the Bible to deliver a clear-cut understanding of the diaconal ministry. We have to proceed differently.

***What does church history teach us about the diaconal ministry?***

Susan Wilds McArver,<sup>6</sup> offers a brief overview of the development of the diaconal ministry in the Early Church and the Middle Ages. The threefold ministry—bishop (overseeing a range of local congregations in a particular area), presbyter and deacon—emerges around 110 CE in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, and around forty years later in the Didache, a church order manual. By and large, over the next two centuries, deacons carried out responsibilities in four areas: liturgy, including assisting in the administration of the Eucharist; assisting the bishop, at times serving as his right hand and representative at church councils; serving the poor, e.g., by distributing alms; administering the church’s treasure (Laurence of Rome). Deacons were part of the church’s special ministry under the supervision of the bishop and thus responsible for a wider geographical area alongside the presbyters/priests who served in local congregations.

This constellation changed dramatically in the fourth century, the Constantine era, when the church gradually changed from being a sometimes persecuted minority to a state church. Tensions and competition between presbyters and deacons increased. The Councils, such as at Nicea in 325 CE, relegated deacons to inferior positions.

These increasing restrictions sharply limited the role of the deacon, reducing many of the traditional roles deacons had fulfilled in the past and elevating the role of the priest at the deacon’s expense. Presbyters took on more and more direct responsibility for sacramental ministry, while the responsibility



for the charitable work of the church gradually devolved into the increasingly popular monastic orders.<sup>7</sup>

Eventually the diaconate became only a transitional stage to the priesthood.

Alongside this development, women were increasingly marginalized. Not only were they relegated from the ministries of deacons, priests and even bishops, but the ministry of deaconess, responsible for caring for women about to become baptized, became redundant because of the decline of adult baptism in favor of infant baptism.<sup>8</sup>

***What role did deacons play in the (Lutheran) Reformation and tradition?***

Here the picture appears to be ambiguous. As far as the set-apart ministry is concerned, the key concern was to reestablish the ministry of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. This was to reflect an understanding of the church that is rooted in and centered around Word and sacrament (CA VII, V, and XIV). It was also a way of upholding the integrity of the message of justification by faith through grace alone, which had to be preached and celebrated in the sacraments. In light of this emphasis, the focus on the pastoral ministry comes as no surprise. At the same time, the Reformers were acutely aware that the church and Christian life reach beyond this word-oriented core concept. Not only were this set-apart ministry and the common ministry of all baptized believers—a basic tenet of the (Lutheran) Reformation—related, but there were also pointers toward the diaconal ministry.

Although human beings are justified by faith alone, that same faith is to be lived out in good works. One of the classical documents in which Luther spelled out this connection is his treatise on Christian Freedom (1520); the *Confessio Augustana* also devotes two articles (VI and XX) to this. In *The Cost of Discipleship*,<sup>9</sup> Bonhoeffer launched a scathing critique of his own Lutheran church in Germany for having distorted the doctrine of justification by separating it from obedience and discipleship.

Moreover, there are clear indications that Luther intended to reestablish the diaconal ministry as a distinct office with an unequivocally social and caring profile, albeit as a “lower order.”<sup>10</sup> Particularly elucidating is Luther’s sermon of 26 December 1523,<sup>11</sup> where he spells out what the church should look like. He enumerates pastoral care, preaching, prayer but also “care for

the body.”<sup>12</sup> This requires men who distribute (material) goods.<sup>13</sup> Thus, within the church, body and soul are cared for. Luther then comes up with a concrete suggestion: every town should be divided into four or five districts and a preacher and deacon assigned to each one of them. But, Luther laments, there are no qualified people around to do this.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly enough, Luther also complains about the deacons having been assigned liturgical functions in the Roman Catholic Church, insisting that their true responsibility is caring and providing for the poor.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, in his treatise on “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” (1520) he writes:

The diaconate is the ministry, not of reading the Gospel and the Epistle, as is the present practice, but of distributing the Church’s aid to the poor, so that the priests may be relieved of the burden of temporal matters and may give themselves more freely to prayer and the Word. For this was the purpose of the institution of the diaconate, as we read in Acts 5 (6:1-6).<sup>16</sup>

The Swiss Reformation, in particular in Geneva, established the diaconate as an integral part of the church. But the Lutheran Reformation prompted a development which did not allow a proper place for the diaconal ministry in the Lutheran churches. As late as the nineteenth century, people such as Hinrich Wichern relaunched attempts to provide a proper place for the diaconate in the German Protestant churches. The result was the reemergence of the ministry of the deaconesses, a pattern which found its way into many Lutheran churches in the Nordic countries as well as in other parts of the world, including in churches of the global South. The diaconal ministry still remains to be fully recognized within the overall structures of the ministry of the Lutheran churches.

### ***One or many (special) ministries of the church?***

The Reformation focus on the proclamation of the message of justification raises the question whether there is just one ministry (*Amt*) of the church, and if so, what it consists of. Or, are there different ministries, and if so, how do they relate to each other? The New Testament seems to suggest a plurality (e.g., 1 Cor 12:27ff.; Eph 4:11ff.). In the Early Church, the threefold ministry emerged as a dominant model in many areas. Luther could speak without difficulty about ministries in the plural, whereas Melancthon preferred to focus

on the one ministry of preaching the Word and administering the sacraments (CA V; and CA XXVIII deals with bishops on the assumption that the episcopal ministry is just a specific variant of the pastoral ministry).<sup>17</sup> In recent ecumenical discussions, (i.e., “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry”<sup>18</sup>), the model of the threefold ministry has been revived. Or, is there one ministry of the church that is lived out and exercised in different ways?

Closely associated with this is the issue of whether persons are set-apart by ordination, commissioning, consecration or other means. Is the diaconal ministry an integral part of this one ministry? If so, should diaconal ministers be ordained to it, or should ordination be reserved for the pastoral ministry of preaching and administering the sacraments and diaconal ministers be commissioned or consecrated? If so, what is the fundamental difference between ordination and commissioning or consecration, in light of the fact that the liturgical aspects are very similar?

Depending on context, quite a number of other ministries are carried out in many LWF member churches: evangelists, catechists, church elders, youth leaders, women leaders, cantors and many others. How do they relate to the one “special ministry” of the church (CA V)? What is specific and distinctive about the diaconal ministry over against the various ministries that call for special treatment?

***The priesthood of all baptized believers and the special, set-apart ministry***

How then is a special, set-apart ministry related to the common priesthood of all baptized believers? Is the former only derived from the latter, reflecting a sort of delegation, or is it a ministry in its own right? Where is the line to be drawn between them, in particular with regard to ministries of evangelists, catechists, women leaders, cantors, etc.? In how far might the diaconal ministry play a specific role in relating these two levels of ministry with each other? What might the figure of the deacon as a “go-between” mean in this context?

Another basic question is whether it is the deacon’s role to carry out a congregation’s diaconal work. Or, is s/he in charge of stimulating the church’s own diaconal potential and training the church to carry out its diaconal responsibility as an essential aspect of its overall mission? The deacon then facilitates rather than implements.

***What are the characteristics of the diaconal ministry?***

What then is specific and distinct about the diaconal ministry? The questionnaire mentioned earlier refers to numerous, very different responsibilities. Evidently it has not been easy to delimit it sharply from other ministries and to give it an unequivocal profile. In particular, two perspectives call for further clarification: the relation of the diaconal ministry to the “pastoral” responsibilities of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments, and the extent to which diaconal ministry should be anchored liturgically.

***Patterns of ministry: historically given or functionally to be “created”?***

There are basically two approaches to identifying, structuring and profiling patterns of ministry. One is to work on the assumption that under the guidance of the Holy Spirit particular patterns of ministry have emerged in the course of church history, perhaps even reaching back to the Bible itself, and to consider these patterns as normative for attempts to order ministry today. Along this line, the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox churches have, by and large, maintained a sort of hierarchically structured, threefold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon.

The second approach would be to proceed from the question, What is the overall mission of the church? What kind of ministry is needed to fulfill this mission today? This allows the church, at different stages of its history, to carry out its mission by means of different patterns of ministry, and recognizes that different contexts might call for different models of ministry. This approach is not oblivious to historical developments, but denies their normativity. More specifically, it takes them seriously as valuable examples to be taken into consideration. At the same time, it reckons with the possibility that in light of new historical and contextual conditions, new insights may open up new prospects for ordering ministry in service of the church’s biblically-grounded mission.

This methodological differentiation comes down to the basic issue of identifying the relation between Scripture and tradition: to what extent does tradition shape our understanding of the Bible and in how far do we trust the Holy Spirit to lead us to the truth ever anew when we read the Bible in light of new experiences? What does this mean for a communion of churches as diverse as the LWF both diachronically (historically) and synchronically (contextually)?

### ***Ecumenical implications***

With the exception of in the Anglican-Lutheran dialogue,<sup>19</sup> the diaconal ministry has not played a major role in the LWF's interconfessional dialogues. Nevertheless, LWF member churches have entered into various agreements with churches of other traditions, notably the Reformed and Anglican, where the ordering of ministry has been an issue, e.g., in Europe, the USA and Canada. How will the results of the consultation relate to these agreements?

### ***The diaconal ministry and power***

You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you [...]. For the Son of man also came not to be served [*diakonein*] but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:42-45).

What does Jesus Christ, the church's decisive point of reference for its practice and faith reflection, mean for the church's self-understanding, mission, witness and structures, including its ministerial structures? Many pastors feel threatened by an "upgrading" of the diaconal ministry, sensing that their ministerial monopoly (and power) might be questioned. Moreover, the autocratic leadership patterns some bishops display, contribute to suspicions against the threefold ministry. Very often hierarchical notions are emphatically denied and renounced, but church practice frequently speaks a different language.

There is also a gender dimension. Even if women are ordained as pastors, the majority are still men. Diaconal work, in contrast, is to a large extent carried out by women. In some churches, deaconesses (women) constitute a ministry of their own. There is a disproportion between those carrying out diaconal work and those holding leadership positions in the church. The former is heavily feminized while the latter remains a male-dominated domain.

Power is not to be denounced outright. Apart from Max Weber's understanding of power as the ability to impose one's will upon others, even against their wishes, power can also be understood as a force which unites people in their common struggle for justice and dignity. This understanding has been further developed in feminist theologies for instance. In this sense, power is being affirmed as a force of life for all. The decisive questions are, What kind

of power is exercised by whom, with what intent and for what purpose, under what conditions and with what results? Who benefits and at whose cost?

Intrinsically, the diaconal ministry seems to be related to power. How could the diaconal ministry empower the ministry of all baptized believers? How would this relate to the way in which power is being exercised within the church? In what sense might the diaconal ministry play a prophetic role within the church? What might be a ministry of shared power? Ultimately at stake is what it means to be a communion of churches who themselves constitute communion in the Pauline sense (1 Cor 12).

### ***The diaconal ministry between church and world***

Lastly, the church is sent into the world in order to bear witness to God's salvation for humanity and creation as a whole (Mt 28:16ff.; Rom 8:18ff.). But, time and again, it has become apparent that this is not just a one-way communication. The church is not just sent into the world, but is itself part of the world (see how it uses power). The church has reason to listen to the world and to learn from it, albeit critically (1 Thess 5:21). The church cannot claim to hold a monopoly in the struggle for justice, peace and dignity; sometimes worldly powers seem to be better at this. And, as especially women and youth can testify, sometimes this struggle needs to be fought against the church itself.

In how far could diaconal ministers play a crucial role in the communication and interaction between church and world? In how far could they make a distinct contribution to the church's mission to take the gospel to the world, but also make the broken world present within the church as an antidote to an arrogant ecclesial triumphalism? In how far could the diaconal ministry help the church stay connected with and committed to its Servant-Lord (Mk 10:45), follow him in humility and repentance and thus enhance the church's credibility in the world?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Klaus Poser (ed.), *Diakonia 2000: Called to be Neighbours: Official Report, WCC World Consultation, Inter-Church-Aid, Refugee and World Service*, Larnaca 1986 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987). Konrad Raiser (ed.), *Oekumenische Diakonie—Eine Option für das Leben: Beiträge aus der Arbeit des OeRK zur theologischen Begründung ökumenischer Diakonie*, Beiheft zur Oekumenischen Rundschau No. 57, (Frankfurt a.M., 1988).

<sup>2</sup>Reinhard Boettcher (ed.), *Prophetic Diakonia—For the Healing of the World*. Report, Johannesburg, South Africa, November 2002 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2003), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>John N. Collins, *Diakonia. Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup>Erik M. Heen, “Biblical Theology for Diaconal Ministry,” in Duane H. Larson (ed.), *From Word and Sacrament. Renewed Vision for Diaconal Ministry* (Chicago: ELCA, 1999), pp. 38-60.

<sup>6</sup>In *ibid.*, pp. 62-88.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>8</sup>For a more detailed account see Heinrich Holze, “Eine besonders wichtige Institution in der Alten Kirche,” in *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift*, vol. 2 (2001), pp. 198-206.

<sup>9</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995). First published in German in 1937.

<sup>1</sup> Hilton C. Oswald (ed.) *Luther's Works*, vol. 28 (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), p. 300.

<sup>11</sup>WA 12, pp. 692-698.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 693.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.* pp. 693f.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.* p. 694.

<sup>16</sup>Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 36 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 116, cited in McArver, in Larson, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 71. For a more detailed account of Luther's failed intention to reestablish the diaconal ministry, see Gottfried Hammann, "Martin Luther—das allgemeine diakonische Priestertum," in *Die Geschichte der christlichen Diakonie. Praktizierte Nächstenliebe von der Antike bis zur Reformationszeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2003), pp. 190-214.

<sup>17</sup>See Ulrich Kühn, "Aemter," in *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1989), p. 1217.

<sup>18</sup>World Council of Churches, *Faith and Order Paper No. 111* (Geneva: 1982).

<sup>19</sup>The Anglican Consultative Council and the Lutheran Word Federation, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity. The Hanover Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission* (London: Anglican Communion Publications, 1996).





# Responding to Poverty and Exclusion: The Diaconal Ministry in the UELCI

Rebecca Sangeetha and Anand Sebeyan Hemrom

## **Introduction**

Our concept of mission and diakonia is influenced and shaped by our understanding of Christian faith and theology as well as the imperative to translate that faith into our own contexts. In this essay we shall attempt to evaluate whether and how the diaconal ministry, as a structured ministry, can contribute to the mission of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in India (UELCI), a communion of eleven member churches. Each member church of the UELCI has its own unique cultural and historical context, with different mission histories and varied styles of ministry compatible with its own context and thrust.

First, we shall give an overview of the Indian understanding of Christian faith and theology and deal with the UELCI's understanding of its mission and diakonia and their relation to each other as reflected in the UELCI's ongoing life and ministry. Secondly, we shall look at how the UELCI has structured the ministry with which its member churches carry out their mission. The third section will point to the reasons why the UELCI might seriously consider introducing a separate diaconal ministry and envisage the distinct contribution that it might make. We will evaluate the contextual reasons which will inform the way in which the diaconal ministry may be structured. The fourth section will delineate the relation between the diaconal and other ministries.

## **A paradigmatic shift in theological orientation and mission**

A paradigmatic shift has characterized the UELCI's theological orientation and missiological priorities in line with the changing trends in Asian Christianity. The "classical" theological legacy of Western Christianity has to a large extent been

shared by Asian theology. By its very nature, such theology is predominantly dogmatic and has few practical implications. It is bipolar and has exhibited a biased emphasis on “other-worldly” realities, giving the Christian faith a heavenward orientation. Consequently, “life in this world” received little attention, in spite of the fact that the situation in Asia is marked by different forms of human suffering. This understanding of Christian faith and theology has resulted in a narrow and vague understanding of mission limited to evangelization with a view to converting people to Christianity. Mission did not address social problems such as poverty, exploitation, deprivation, human rights violations, etc. This trend, although prevalent within the Asian churches to this day, has been critically questioned and subverted, thus changing the face of mission by giving it a diaconal thrust.

Today we can observe conceptual changes emerging among theologians who perceive the existing trend to be irrelevant, anti-people and non-conducive to relevant mission and diakonia in the contemporary Asian context. As a result, the UELCI has evolved a new understanding of mission of which the concept of diakonia is an integral part. There has been a shift in mission emphasis from preaching the gospel to doing the gospel. “Charity diakonia” has been transformed into “social diakonia,” and mission and diakonia have become very closely related as a powerful witness not only to the church’s mission, but to its identity as a serving diaconal community.

## **The UELCI’s understanding of mission and diakonia**

Discerning the signs of the times the UELCI’s understanding of mission has focused on:

- *Kerygma* through corporate witness of its common faith in Jesus Christ from whom the church receives its mandate for liberation.
- *Koinonia* through which the member churches are facilitated to speak together on the fundamental concerns of the Lutheran churches in India and express their unity as a part of the universal church and the church in India.
- *Diakonia* through which the UELCI has explored ways to be God’s effective instrument for justice, inclusiveness and liberation of the oppressed.

Although the term diakonia is very much alien to ordinary Christians and even to some churches of the UELCI, it is being carried out in different forms. Following the global consultation, “Prophetic Diakonia—For the Healing of the World,” held in November 2002, in Johannesburg, South Africa, the UELCI has emphasized prophetic diakonia and understood diakonia as the praxis-oriented engagement with contextual issues such as the challenges arising from the caste system.

The UELCI is convinced that the gospel and its message are life-giving and liberating and sees it as its mission to bring this gospel message into dialogical encounter with the situation of the Dalits and Adivasis. It is hoped that the message of the gospel brings about transformation by way of awakening and energizing these communities from within. Thus, the UELCI’s mission is predominantly diaconal and prophetic.

We have seen that the UELCI’s mission has focused on *kerygma*, *koinonia* and *diakonia*. It has carried out these ministries through deacons, Bible women, catechists (evangelists), bishops, pastors and various other ecclesiastical ministries. Since mission and diakonia are mutually integrated, bishops, pastors and catechists (evangelists) involve themselves in these diaconal activities. For example, some pastors and even bishops of the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chotanagpur and Assam are firmly committed to social diakonia to which they feel called and ordained. It is they who have been championing the mission task of social diakonia.

The UELCI has also carried out its mission through its theological institutions and lay workers. For example, during the 1980s, the UELCI came up with the slogan “a bold theological vision in the form of Dalit theology,” with the view of awakening and empowering the Dalits. Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute pioneered this theological engagement in order to fight the Dalit cause from within and outside the church. This bold vision included the issue of gender justice and led to the inclusion of feminist theology in the curriculum. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Gossner Theological College formally developed Adivasi theology. It is pioneering the Adivasi cause with the objective of promoting theological activism among the clergy, the laity and to bring about social transformation.

Diakonia is carried out through the UELCI’s various departments such as the desk for Dalit and Adivasi concerns, the HIV/AIDS desk, the women’s desk, etc. While the Lutheran churches in India have so far not made provisions for a special, set-apart diaconal ministry, the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran

Church and the Arcot Lutheran Church have a full-fledged ministry of deaconesses. They are involved in caring for orphans and providing tailoring and other such vocational courses in order for women to become self-reliant. Mainly lay women and men have been trained to carry out the church's diaconal activities. Lay participation in diakonia remains central and inevitable although they are not formally consecrated or installed.

While diakonia as the ministry of liberation and empowerment has occupied a central place in the UELCI's mission, it has not been expressed in terms of a distinct, set-apart ministry. One should note the basic difference between diakonia and the diaconal ministry, a difference analogous to the difference between function and structure. Although the church in India does not have a structured diaconal ministry it undeniably engages in diakonia.

## **Reasons for introducing a diaconal ministry**

### ***Contextual and ecclesiastical***

The UELCI has identified itself as a people's movement whose role it is to become an instrument of liberation for the oppressed indigenous populations that constitute a major part of the Indian Lutheran churches. The UELCI's (diaconal) mission has been identified as being the liberation of the oppressed and the empowerment of local congregations so as to become communities of resistance and struggle, fighting against oppression, injustice and inequality. It is the church's prophetic role to reject and condemn continuing practices of discrimination and exclusion. Therefore, a diaconal ministry will definitely enhance the effectiveness of this mission.

### ***Biblical***

There are variations in delineating a pattern for the diaconal ministry on the basis of biblical evidence. Nothing conclusive can be gleaned from the Bible and throughout church history we have seen the ambiguity of the ministry of the deacon. The various understandings of the ministry of the deacon range from understanding it as a ministry of transition to the priesthood to one for meeting social and material needs. This leaves room for shaping the diaconal ministry in light of contextual needs and calls for an hermeneutical approach which moves

from the context to the Bible. Thus one can identify distinctive features of the diaconal ministry and move to the Bible in order to look for appropriate models.

In light of the UELCI's understanding of diakonia we shall look for biblical paradigms with diaconal features which can then be used to inform and transform the diaconal ministry. It is an approach that can be relevant to a context such as the Indian one because perceived needs call for functional responses rather than structural patterns of biblical models for mission and diakonia which emerged from ancient contexts.

Recognizing the contextual priorities of the UELCI's mission, a relevant biblical basis can be the story of the healing of the paralyzed man in Capernaum in Mark 2:1-12. The specific guidelines the story provides can be translated relevantly to the diaconal ministry in India.

The first point is that the "ministers" are from among the people. The structure of ministry should be closely involved with the community, so that ministers are fully immersed in their immediate environment. Therefore it should be laity centered into which priests can be co-opted as needs arise. At the same time it should be supportive of the (pastoral) ministry of the word.

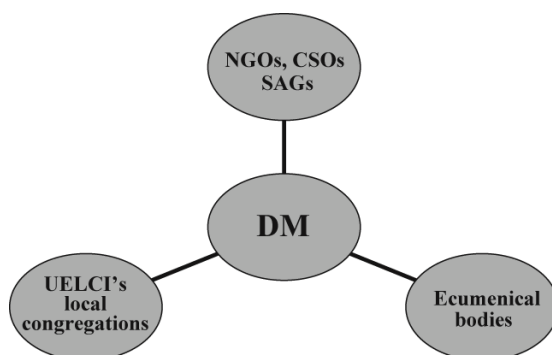
The second point relates to the nature of the diaconal ministry. The work of the four men involves being in solidarity with the victim (Mk 2:1-12). Being in solidarity with victims has a very Christocentric thrust. Jesus' whole mission is perceived as life-giving. His incarnation is associated with the promise of abundant life (Jn 10:10). This speaks powerfully to the church in its mission of following Jesus and points to the focus of the diaconal ministry. Jesus' message is one of hope within the context of Galilee, the site of the culmination of God's liberative activity. Nobody expected anything good to come out of the situation in Nazareth (Jn 1:46), but Jesus' message impinged on the Galileans' societal existence. After all, they constituted a mass of displaced people who had been forced to take up marginal professions such as carpentry, fishing, shepherding and manual labor in the vineyards in order to make a livelihood.

In this context, Jesus' ministry was one of service (diakonia) in order to energize and empower. In Mark's story of the four friends, Jesus recognizes praxis or transformative action as faith. On the basis of an interaction between the Bible and the Indian context, the diaconal ministry could function as a catalyst by way of which human lives are transformed by bringing them to Jesus Christ's liberative potential. On a biblical basis, the diaconal ministry is holistic, aiming at social, psychological and economic healing. The challenge is how this can be envisaged and implemented in concrete terms.

## The diaconal ministry: possibilities and challenges

Prophetic diakonia is carried out in relation to various contextual issues ranging from gender issues, HIV/AIDS, Dalit and Adivasi concerns, to development and poverty, globalization and water conservation, all issues of serious magnitude. If all these concerns were brought together under a single diaconal ministry, the question would be one of identifying priorities. Each issue has to be treated in its own right. Therefore, the diaconal ministry in India could serve as an authority to help the UELCI's various departments to engage more critically with these issues and give legal and policy-centered support to tackle them. If the nature of diakonia in India is essentially empowerment and critically engaging with the discriminatory, marginalizing and alienating tendencies of public and economic policies, then the diaconal ministry would ensure that this diakonia is carried out more effectively.

The distinct contribution such a diaconal ministry could make to the effectiveness of the church's mission is underlined below. To this end, there is a need to network with other organizations and bodies with similar agendas. The diaconal ministry could contribute to networking with other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs) and social action groups (SAGs). This will not only help to strengthen the church's struggles, but also ensure that a dialogical thrust is part of its ministry.



Links with other ecumenical bodies at the local level would also be established and nurtured. Thus the diaconal ministry could create networks to promote

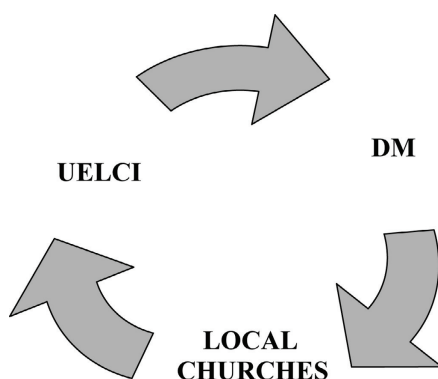
the interaction between congregations of the UELCI's member churches, secular organizations, church based organizations which together could engage with issues in a more concrete, dialogical and effective manner.

### ***The didactic mode***

Didacticism has been an important manifestation of the UELCI's ministry of empowerment. The UELCI has focused on awareness raising programs and conscientization and several seminars and consultations on such topics as church development, water, women and media. The Dalit and Adivsi struggles have confirmed the importance of this *modus operandi*.

The diaconal ministry's contribution to a sort of pedagogical diakonia is to engage the congregations at the grass-roots level, and to empower them to address their own issues. It can translate this teaching into oral and performative styles to reach communities which are not text centered. The pedagogical model can be reformist as well as revolutionary.

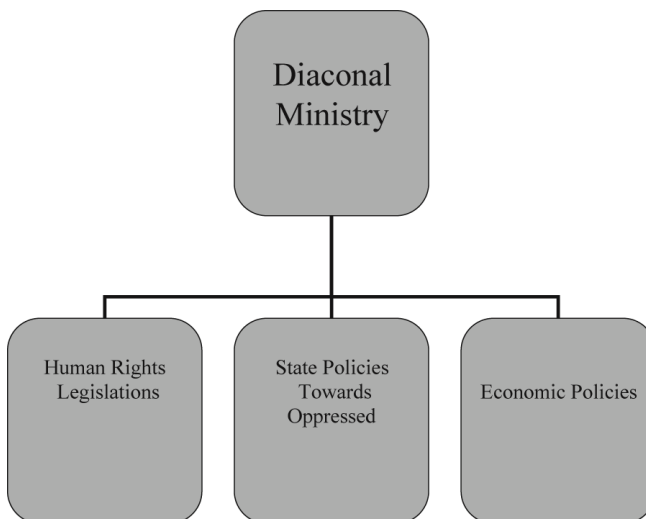
The introduction of a separate diaconal ministry can mean that this ministry is then responsible for empowering and equipping grass-roots congregations with knowledge about various crucial issues. Moreover, according to the pedagogical model, the diaconal ministry can facilitate the dialectic communication between member churches and the UELCI. It can facilitate a fuller learning cycle which can critically inform and enhance the practice of it.





***Protest and resistance***

Protest and resistance entail involvement in resistance movements that oppose the state or any structural system that contravenes principles of justice and peace. The UELCI's response to the anticonversion laws of fundamentalist governments as well as its challenging the social structure of caste and confronting alienating economic policies are examples of this mode. This engagement directly involves the UELCI acting explicitly as the church there where violations of human rights occur. In this mode, the diaconal ministry can make a difference if it involves in-depth research of social and economic policy and legal provisions for marginalized groups. The function of such a diaconal ministry would be proactively to engage with economic, social and gender-related policies of the government, or if there are no relevant policies in place, to work toward the introduction of such. This can occur through social analysis, up-to-date knowledge of policies and development modules. It is a subversive critical mode in the sense that it takes the side of the marginalized and oppressed and analyses any issue from their perspective. Such an engagement can ensure that the vulnerable are not made scapegoats of public policy.



## **The relation between the diaconal ministry and other ministries**

The diaconal ministry could help the church to sharpen its mission. I could envision it being a ministry either for “lay” people or for the clergy. People engaged in secular professions can choose to be ordained as diaconal ministers. Pastors can opt for a specific focus on the diaconal ministry. By retaining its separate identity, and not being co-opted into other dominant forms of ministry, it can challenge the churches from within, help the churches to develop strategies for empowerment at the empirical level and, on a solid basis, critically tackle state policies, local developmental projects and economic schemes.

## **Conclusion**

One has to recognize the UELCI as a people’s movement and its mission as predominantly being emancipation and empowerment. Hence the diaconal ministry can contribute to the UELCI’s mission as a ministry that:

- Critically sharpens the UELCI’s mission strategy
- Helps local churches constructively to network and engage with other secular and ecumenical bodies fighting similar agendas
- Critically influences the government’s social and economic policies from the perspective of the marginalized
- Enhances the effectiveness of the UELCI’s awareness and conscientization activities by “infiltrating” local congregations.

On the whole, the diaconal ministry can contribute to encouraging churches and communities at local levels to involve in diakonia and thus to become creative and constructive communities striving for an holistic life for all. With its strong Christocentric theological imperative it can help churches to become authentic life-affirming bodies of faith.



# “We Didn’t Know They Existed...”: The Diaconal Ministry in the ELCA

Nancy E. Gable

At the rite of consecration to the diaconal ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), the bishop addresses the candidate as follows:

The Church calls diaconal ministers to speak God’s Word, the gospel and the apostolic faith, to God’s world. It also calls them to speak the needs of God’s world to the Church. This call is a call to public witness and service that exemplifies Christ-like self-giving and leads the Church and all its baptized members to witness to Christ in the world. Diaconal ministry reflects the historic call of deacons to serve those most in need on behalf of the Church. You have been called to the diaconate to give leadership in the Church’s mission to proclaim the gospel through word and deed. Therefore serve the needy, care for the sick, comfort the distressed, and through words and actions, witness to God’s love for all people. In the exercise of diaconal ministry cross every barrier that stands between the Church and its ministry in the broader world. Seek out those places where the gospel of Jesus Christ meets human need. Serve Christ with pastors and bishops, other diaconal ministers and associates in ministry. Empower, equip and support all the baptized in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Lead us all in proclaiming the gospel in witness and service.<sup>1</sup>

The key phrases from the bishop’s address are filled with a call to action, i.e., to **speak** God’s Word to God’s world; **speak** the needs of God’s world to the church; **lead** the church and all its baptized members to witness to Christ in the world; **serve** those most in need in the name of the church; **serve** the needy; **comfort** the distressed; **cross** every barrier that stands between the church and its ministry in the world; **seek** out those places where the gospel of Jesus Christ meets human need; **serve** with pastors, bishops, other diaconal ministers, and associates in ministry; **equip, empower and support** all the baptized; and **lead** us all.

In my current ministry, I equip empower and support the baptized as they consider their baptismal vocation and the possibility of pursuing theological education and service in the ELCA's public ministry. Many times I assist these people to cross barriers that they perceive as standing between their current life situation and their potential service in ministry. Additionally, I spend time working with diaconal ministry students as they plan course schedules, consider field education locations, interact with church officials during the preparation process and interpret the diaconal ministry to the baptized. Previously, my service in ministry included service in congregations and camping ministry.

Also, I am a doctoral candidate at Pennsylvania State University in the Doctor of Education program in the field of adult education. It is from within this framework that I approach this topic—a practitioner of diaconal ministry in the ELCA, trained in theology and education, now adding the dimension of doctoral study in the public sector field of adult education. I am not a biblical scholar, although I constantly exegete and critically reflect on Hebrew and Christian Scripture, always through the lens of diakonia. I am not a scholar of theology, although I spend time reading Luther's writings, a variety of systematic theology textbooks, and because I firmly root faith formation and faithful living in the sacrament of baptism. I am not a trained church historian, although I love history and have a strong interest in the nineteenth-century German deaconess movement (a response to the Industrial Revolution), that movement's journey to the United States of America in the 1800s and its continuing development through the ELCA Deaconess Community and ELCA diaconal ministry.

As a doctoral candidate in adult education, I have focused my dissertation on the research and evaluation of, and reflection on, the practice of ELCA diaconal ministry as a form of adult education. Within the context of North American adult education, my philosophical framework is grounded in the critical paradigm, highly informed by feminist theory; my theoretical framework attempts to bridge the field adult education theories and praxis with my church fields of biblical study, Lutheran theology, ELCA polity and diaconal ministry praxis. The research question for my dissertation, as currently stated, is, Are ELCA diaconal ministers emancipatory adult educators? My doctoral educational program requires empirical research as a part of the dissertation process and to that end my research framework is heuristic research that will lead to grounded theory for ELCA diaconal ministry. That vocabulary is basically foreign to most North American theologians and requires some translation and interpretation.

Heuristic research is distinguished by the researcher’s effort to discover the meaning and essence of a particular human experience of which s/he is part, to which s/he is committed, for which s/he has a passion. As a longtime practitioner of the diaconal ministry this research approach comes naturally to me; I continually reflect and consider the nature and meaning of diaconal ministry and strive to clarify its role in the ELCA in the hope that others grow in understanding its place in the larger ministry of the baptized. I did not set out to undertake grounded theory as a part of my dissertation process. However, only one qualitative empirical study on ELCA diaconal ministry has been done since the 1993 birth of the roster, and that study resulted in no theories. To that end, when no theory exists in a field I have learned that undertaking any research means that grounded theory is an expected outcome of the researcher’s work.

What is an emancipatory educator? For those familiar with Paulo Freire’s educational framework the following comments are a brief review that I hope accurately reflects his view and practice. Paulo Freire was born in Brazil in 1912, and became a high school teacher of Portuguese. In the mid 1940s, he and his wife, Elza, were impressed by the work of the Brazilian Catholic action groups and committed to work with the poor and illiterate in Brazil. Exiled from Brazil in the late 1960s, the Freires made their home in the USA where Paulo taught at Harvard University. In 1970 he moved to Geneva, Switzerland, where he was a special consultant to the World Council of Churches in the office of education. Aware of the many differences between the social classes, Freire developed a literacy teaching method which promoted critical thinking about prejudices, authoritarian relationships between teachers and pupils, and the role of memorization as an essential component of the education process. A primary goal of Freire’s education philosophy is what John Elias considers bringing “the people to a comprehension of the oppressive reality of their lives.”<sup>2</sup> Freire’s philosophy is situated within a larger framework of education for radical social change, education that is focused on personal empowerment and social transformation; for Freire it was important for adult learners to consider deeply embedded biases, beliefs, assumptions of life and values.

In the USA, Freire found a colleague in Myles Horton, whose educational perspective was transformed as the result of his teaching of Bible classes in rural western Tennessee through the Presbyterian church. Like Freire, Horton locates his understanding of the goal of education in the area of social change. He trusted in people’s ability to develop the skill to work collectively for the

purpose of solving social problems in their context. As a friend and mentee of Reinhold Niebuhr's, Horton studied the Danish folk school movement as he struggled to design an American educational center that would teach leadership to people who were not in power positions in either US politics or US culture. The Highlander School, which Horton founded near Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1932, now the Highlander Research and Education Center in Knoxville, Tennessee, embodies Horton's belief that education leads to social action. For example, in its early days the school defied the segregation rules of many southern US state and local governments by teaching thousands of blacks and whites to read as well as to challenge entrenched social, economic and political structures of their segregated society.

Who is an emancipatory educator? In my understanding an emancipatory educator is one who "serves the needy; comforts the distressed; crosses barriers; seeks out those places where the gospel of Jesus Christ meets human need; equips, empowers, and supports all the baptized [...]." <sup>3</sup> My praxis of diaconal ministry and my study of adult education serve as a solid foundation for an understanding of ELCA diaconal ministry.

Finally, let me give a brief description of someone grounded in the critical paradigm, in my case a grounding that is highly informed by feminist thinking. As a critical theorist, when I enter a room to hear a presentation, or participate in a meeting, or experience worship, I immediately recognize and analyze existing power structures in leadership. I realize that in most instances people in these leadership positions do not recognize the existent power structures. Antonio Gramsci, a well-known critical theorist, refers to this as hegemony, a condition in which a society's ideas, structures and actions are dominated by a single class. In the ELCA, power structures are dominated by white, western European/North American, male, clergy thinking. Often this bias, or hegemony, is not consciously designed but the result of the church's history and millennia of church practice.

The feminist perspective is based on an understanding of life that is primarily relational and focused on the affective (or emotional) dimensions of learning. This is in contrast to a focus on rationality, and the autonomous or individual learner.

While there is no place in Luther's Confessions where he writes of a diaconal order or his desire for a particular group of people to function as diaconal leaders, I do believe that one finds insights to Luther's understanding of living the baptismal vocation in any number of his other writings.

After struggling for many years with the challenge of rooting the diaconal ministry within the *Confessio Augustana*, I came across the work of Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, a Lutheran theologian who teaches in the area of ethics at Seattle University’s School of Theology. Moe-Lobeda operates from a critical paradigm, informed by feminism, but is primarily a liberation theologian. In her book, *Public Church for the Life of the World*, she writes:

Rightly claiming Luther’s answer (justification by grace alone through faith alone) as true for all time, we have centralized and sacralized Luther’s question, the burning question in the public ethos of his day, as though that question were the burning question of our day also! [...] Faithfulness to God’s mission is thwarted if we live in theological responses to the burning questions of a bygone context, to the exclusion of the compelling questions in our own. The danger is of limiting the gospel. If sin and human brokenness from God’s generous love assume different faces in different epochs and cultures, and if we are to proclaim the gospel in ours, then we must discern those faces in our contexts.<sup>4</sup>

These words provided a key to unlock the door of what seems to me a driving need of many to root the diaconal ministry within the *Confessio Augustana* (CA) in order for it to be authentically Lutheran, as if all of the understandings of ministry and of Lutheran theology were locked within these texts. It may be that it is not only impossible to locate an understanding of, or call to, the diaconal ministry within the Book of Concord, but also that this driving need violates one of Luther’s central tenants of the reforming faith, that of context. Are we misdirected when we restrict the search for a theological grounding of a recognized, public ministry called diaconal ministry in writings faithfully prepared and shared with a vastly different church some 475 years ago? I will now critically consider how Lutherans might inhibit living the gospel of Jesus Christ through what I would call “Lutheran theological blinders” that potentially limit the need for continuing consideration of what Lutheran ministry is and a growing awareness of the variety of people affected by brokenness and sin.

Moe-Lobeda asks the Lutheran church, particularly the ELCA, to consider its role as a public church—something Luther valued. In a direct and refreshing way she reminds the reader that for Luther a fruit of the sacrament of Holy Communion was a sense of community that tends to human



needs, privileging those of society's vulnerable. She sees this gift of bread and wine, Christ's body and blood, as the charge to the baptized to see and hear that this is given *"for them as persons and to them for the healing of the world!"*<sup>5</sup> In their drive to root an office of diaconal ministry in the CA, have the Lutheran churches lost sight of the possibility that questions about the shape of ministry and the role of diaconal ministry can be asked anew in today's context? Can these questions be viewed as authentic to Lutheranism but not bound by our sacralizing of Luther's writings?

One place in Luther's writings where I recognize the call to diakonia is in his 1530 letter, "On Translating: An Open Letter."<sup>6</sup> It is important to put the writing of this letter into its context of the backlash and questions being asked about Luther's translation of the Holy Scripture into German. Throughout this letter in its English translation, Luther reflects on the crucial role of the translator, the "skill, energy, sense, and brains"<sup>7</sup> required in a good translator, ironically noting that the critics of his translation have taken refuge in that very translation in order to learn the German language. Reflecting on the process he and a few others utilized in translating the book of Job, Luther utilizes agrarian imagery:

Now that it is translated and finished, everybody can read and criticize it. One now runs his eyes over three or four pages and does not stumble once—without realizing what boulders and clods had once lain where he now goes along as over a smoothly-planed board. We had to sweat and toil there before we got those boulders and clods out of the way, so that one could go along so nicely. The plowing goes well when the field is cleared. But rooting out the woods and stumps, and getting the field ready—this is a job nobody wants.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Luther notes that the act of translation requires "a right, devout, honest, sincere, God-fearing, Christian, trained, informed, and experienced heart."<sup>9</sup>

My understanding of the practice of diaconal ministry is deepened as I reflect on these passages partly because I recognize that my role in diaconal ministry is akin to that of Luther's description of the preparation of the field. In our denomination, diaconal ministry is about two things: first, my living my baptismal vocation and, second, my equipping others to live their baptismal vocation. To those people deeply embedded in Lutheran theology, it is counterintuitive to think that Lutherans struggle to live baptismal vocation. However, this is a reality I face in my professional as well as my personal life.

Recognizing that I have “a right, devout, honest, sincere, God-fearing, Christian, trained, informed, and experienced heart,”<sup>10</sup> as a diaconal minister I work with people to remove the tree stumps, the boulders, the clods of soil that block their understanding of the gifts they have to live the baptismal vocation.

Consider my mother: she and my father brought me to the font at baptism and faithfully followed through on the promises they made for me that January day in 1956. Over the years, Mother has taught Sunday School and was part of two search committees as her congregation sought a new pastor. Today she serves on various congregational committees, serves as a lector, is an assisting minister for liturgy, prepares children for First Communion, and talks extensively with me about any number of biblical and theological questions. However, a few years ago her good friend’s twenty-eight-year-old daughter struggled with cancer and died. Mother shared with me that she felt incapable of being a minister to this friend who was locked in a faith struggle and, later, in grief. I was astounded that this gifted and committed woman of faith expressed such thoughts and feelings of inadequacy in relationship to her baptismal call. Yes, one possibility was jumping in and offering to minister to this friend. Of far more importance to me, though, was my diaconal-equipping role through which I am called to assist Mother in the realization that while her friend needed the care of a pastor, she herself was quite capable of providing profoundly caring ministry to her friend. We talked about the many concrete ways she could provide ministry: meals, grocery shopping, offering ample opportunities for getting this friend out of her home for some fresh air and conversation, some books that they could share and discuss, Scripture texts that could offer support. We even practiced the way Mother would pray with this friend.

A second place where I believe Luther’s writings articulate a call to leadership through diakonia is in his letter to the Rev. Dr Johann Hess, pastor at Breslau, “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague.” The late Timothy Lull reflected on this writing as one of several writings that exposed Luther’s “reforming energies”<sup>11</sup> as he strove to walk his life’s journey securely rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ within the deep and challenging questions that Christians faced in his day, questions that continue to challenge today’s Christians. In addition to telling the reader that no Christian can be a neighbor and ignore that neighbor’s earthly, physical needs, Luther instructs us that “no neighbor can live alongside another without risk to his safety, property, wife, or child.” Luther is also quite clear that persons in leadership positions in the

church—“those who are engaged in a spiritual ministry”<sup>12</sup>—are called to remain in the midst of the plague, standing resolute in the face of death. Here Luther’s and Moe-Lobeda’s perceptions intersect: recognizing that serving Christ is made manifest through service to neighbor means daring to care for the vulnerable and that this caring puts us, our physical well-being and our understanding of life’s certainty at risk.

Again, my understanding of the practice of diaconal ministry is deepened as I reflect on this letter. Consider the bishop’s address to the candidate in the rite of consecration which calls the diaconal minister to:

Christ-like self-giving [...] serve those most in need on behalf of the church  
[...] serve the needy, care for the sick, comfort the distressed [...] cross every  
barrier.<sup>13</sup>

It is a call that I carry with me in many situations each day of my life. It is embodied as I sit with a school board diversity task force where everyone but me knows one another and does not take the time to do the basic tasks of hospitality with someone who looks like them and talks like them. Do I choose to address this or sit passively; how do I call them to care for those whom they seek to serve through my experience of isolation and feelings as an outsider? It is embodied as I work in my warm water physical therapy group days after Hurricane Katrina struck the US Gulf Coast and I hear the exercise therapist say about the residents of New Orleans who were trapped in the Superdome and the Convention Center, “It’s their own fault. They just should have left the city. Why should we take the time to rescue them?” That morning the call to diaconal ministry required that I find a way to broaden that person’s awareness of the poverty issues that so ravaged these people’s lives, not allowing them to find a way out of the city of New Orleans, trapping them in the rising waters. It is embodied when I repeatedly challenge the architects who are redesigning the interior of our main campus building to find out if a person with a physical disability, especially one whose mobility is enabled through the use of a wheelchair, has been asked to examine the building’s blueprints. Yes, I heard that the blueprints match code—my question is, Have we learned from a person with a disability if this new design rises above mere codes to hospitality and the opportunity for active participation in the community’s life? It is embodied when I take the time to talk with that seminary student about her use of language in a sermon or prayers

during chapel to find out if that student is aware of how that language was experienced by someone on the margins of the power structure of the church, the mainstream member of the identified faith community.

I would like to turn to the writings of a New Testament colleague of mine, Dr Richard Carlson, whose specialization is Pauline theology and whose commitment to the development of diaconal ministry is long standing. In his earliest work focused on biblical study on diaconal ministry, *Biblical Theology for Diaconal Ministry*,<sup>14</sup> he writes:

Thus from a Pauline perspective, diaconal ministry is a functional ministry stemming from our embodied reality in Christ [...]. On the one hand, the Spirit is producing the same fruit in diaconal ministers that it produces in each baptized Christian. Diaconal ministers do not have the corner on the market for love or joy or kindness [...] diaconal ministers are given particular gifts by the Spirit for implementing or stewarding particular ministries in the body.<sup>15</sup>

Emerging perspectives of his continuing study and deepening understandings of diaconal ministry are found in the manuscript he prepared for an April 2004 presentation to the North American Association for the Diaconate. Commenting on his extensive word study of Pauline writings (excluding the pseudo Pauline writings) he suggests that the basis of Paul’s theology for the study of diaconal ministry lies not in Paul’s linguistics, but rather in his pneumatology, while the model for the praxis of diaconal ministry is constructed on what Christ has done in his life, death and resurrection. Inviting the reader and hearer to a better understanding of Galatians 5 and 1 Corinthians 12 and 13, Carlson shares that the fruit (not fruits) of the Spirit “first creates and continually generates love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” noting that this “fruit of the Spirit empowers God-pleasing, life-giving conduct which stands in direct antithesis to the works of the flesh which involve unchecked aggression and self-indulgence.”<sup>16</sup> Reminding us that in Paul’s theology of church there is no ontological difference between “the office of bishop or pastor or deacon or Sunday School teacher or greeter in the narthex or church treasurer,”<sup>17</sup> his article concludes with three motivating implications for the ministry of the diaconate. First, paralleling in New Testament study what Moe-Lobeda expresses as concern that today’s Lutheran church has sacralized Luther’s questions, Carlson suggests that:

for the diaconate to limit the understanding, legitimacy, and scope of its ministry to how the office may (or may not) have functioned in the New Testament era is to seek legitimacy in demonstrable institutional histories and to forget that the Spirit is the source and energizing source for the diaconate.<sup>18</sup>

Second, he posits that the ecumenical concord that is shared in expressions of the diaconal ministry is not reliant on comparable job descriptions or matching rites of authorization, but rather in the life we share in the body of Christ. Third, he clearly states that through the understanding of Paul's pneumatology the church can realize that the establishment and praxis of a diaconal ministry does not threaten or intrude on the ministry of the baptized, but rather enhances it.

I was asked in this essay to give some thought to the prophetic dimension of diakonia, especially as it is found in the Old Testament. This task comes quite easily to me as several years ago I was invited to preach on Ash Wednesday and, in preparation for the opportunity, I "discovered" the depth of prophetic diakonia in Isaiah 58:1-12, one of the Old Testament lectionary options for Ash Wednesday in the Revised Common Lectionary. In my experience the Ash Wednesday Old Testament text typically heard is the other option of the Revised Common Lectionary, Joel 2:12-19. However, in Isaiah 58 we hear an exceptional invitation to consider the role of prophetic diakonia, described by Kjell Nordstokke as relating the essential character of diakonia, establishing that the task of prophecy "is part of the mandate and authority that God has given the church and its diakonia."<sup>19</sup> A major portion of that God-given mandate and authority is the role of prophetic diakonia to speak courageously to the uncovering of injustices, then to preserve and secure justice. Like the Old Testament prophets, especially as I read in Isaiah 58, practitioners of diakonia are called to speak challenging but honest words to those in religious authority, words that confront the *status quo* and ask the hearer to consider personal biases and prejudices. There is no better time than Ash Wednesday to hear these words, for this day marks the beginning of the church season throughout which Lutherans are called to reflect on and consider what it means to be baptized, what it means to live a Godly life until the day of Jesus Christ.

Please read Isaiah. The translation I am quoting here is the Tanakh Translation of the Jewish Bible:

1Cry with full throat, without restraint; raise your voice like a ram’s horn! Declare to My people their transgression, to the House of Jacob their sin. 2To be sure, they seek Me daily, eager to learn my ways. Like a nation that does what is right, that has not abandoned the laws of its God, they ask me for the right way, they are eager for the nearness of God: 3“Why, when we fasted, did You not see? When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed?” Because on your fast day You see to your business and oppress your laborers! 4Because you fast in strife and contention, and you strike with a wicked fist! Your fasting today is not such as to make your voice heard on high. 5Is such the fast I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, a day when the LORD is favorable? 6No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. 7It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin. 8Then shall your light burst through like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly; your Vindicator shall march before you, the Presence of the LORD shall be your rear guard. 9Then, when you call, the LORD will answer; when you cry, he will say: here I am. If you banish the yoke from your midst, the menacing hand, and evil speech, 10and you offer your compassion to the hungry and safety to the famished creature — then shall your light shine in darkness, and your gloom shall be like noon-day. 11The LORD will guide you always; He will slake your thirst in parched places and give strength to your bones. You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters do not fail. 12Men from your midst shall rebuild ancient ruins, you shall restore foundations laid long ago. And you shall be called “Repairer of fallen walls, Restorer of lanes for habitation.”<sup>20</sup>

I shall share a bit about its context. I do not claim to be a biblical scholar. I claim to be someone who studies Scripture and leads Bible studies using a variety of tools and methods. This section of Isaiah is from the third section of Deutero-Isaiah and was most likely composed in the time after the return of the Judeans from Babylon to Jerusalem, when the Judeans were frustrated that their return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple were not as glorious as hoped. They ask why the promises of glorious restoration have not been accomplished. The God of Israel speaks through the prophet in this text, suggesting that rituals are observed only for the ceremony, and not in

true humility, and instructing the Judeans what a true fast day would look like.

When I lead the study of this Scripture passage with adults in any variety of gatherings I read to them verses 1–5 only, and then ask them to work in small groups to identify exactly who is speaking and what is going on in this text. After we return to the large group for conversation I read to them verses 6–12 and as I read I watch for facial responses; most often I see furrowed brows or tightened lips. Sometimes I am aware of non-verbal responses like an intake of breath or a slight gasp. Yes, participants take the time critically to reflect on and discuss verses 6–12 and the entire passage but I believe the message of Isaiah 58 is clear to modern Lutheran Christians in the USA. Additionally, I believe the call of diakonia in our Lutheran baptismal vocation is readily apparent to the participants. They are quite capable of easily plowing the prepared field—all that I need to do is remove the tree stumps, the boulders, the clods of soil that block their understanding. As a diaconal minister I become the go-between as Nordstokke calls us, the bridge as most diaconal ministers in the ELCA describe it.

This text could be especially striking to US Christians because of this nation's recent experience with two cataclysmic hurricanes along the Gulf Coast, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Perhaps this text is particularly striking to me as I think about the issues of deeply embedded poverty and racism that these hurricanes brought into public view. Perhaps the challenges embedded in these verses are eerily prescient as I heard the words spoken by the former director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Michael Brown, within days of Hurricane Katrina's devastation of the city of New Orleans: "We're finding more and more people coming out of the woodwork. They're appearing in places we didn't know existed." I live in a country where politicians clamor to claim Christianity as the foundation of the nation. Unfortunately, the fight over which understanding of Christianity leads to the destruction of ecumenical unity, to judgment of righteousness, to finger pointing, and to loudly-spoken claims of God's particular favor. At this time in my country's history, we have the opportunity to step outside of our tendency to see to our business, to stop oppressing our laborers, to end our fasting in strife and contention, to share bread with the hungry, to invite the wretched poor into our homes, to break yokes, to clothe the naked [...] we didn't know existed.

Too often, US Christians, perhaps others, confuse charity with justice. Consideration of this entered my thinking the day I listened to the National

Public Radio program, “Speaking of Faith,” on September 18, 2005, within hours of working on a Bible study based on this Isaiah text. This program features conversations about belief, meaning, ethics and ideas, particularly in the United States. On this day the program’s title was “Seeing Poverty After Katrina,” and featured a discussion with David Hilfiker, physician and cofounder of Joseph’s House in Washington, DC, a supportive and nurturing house for formerly homeless men with terminal illnesses. In his discussion of charity and justice Hilfiker asked, Do I want the best for my neighbor? and suggested that people “give charity for ourselves because it is the right thing to do for our spiritual help—we decided where it goes, and we’re on the top, they’re at the bottom.” Contrast this with his statement on justice: “justice is working to change the structure so that charity becomes less necessary.”

This Scripture text is illustrative of the call to prophetic diakonia, what Moe-Lobeda calls the biblical concept of neighbor love, a love that cannot be disassociated from biblical norms of justice, what Nordstokke refers to as the living service of the church for the healing of the world, Jesus’ diakonia. It is what Hilfiker calls justice. Moe-Lobeda, Nordstokke, and Hilfiker agree that essential to the seeking of justice is getting close to the poor and the ill, as well as questioning the political and religious structures of the time. It is the call to challenge social structures and to examine how the church puts programs into action. Nordstokke reminds us that although diakonia is grounded in the religious sphere it can take place in the public sphere, and therefore it must be conscious of its sociopolitical role and ready to speak out when necessary. Lutheran Christians are reminded of the subtle but important difference between service empowered by God and not powerful social action. Moe-Lobeda uses these words:

Evangelical critique and resistance begin with compassion and discernment and the latter’s call to critical seeing. From there, critique and resistance take a myriad of forms: prayer; fasting; public speaking; worship; prayerful vigils; public celebrations; civil disobedience; educational outreach; dialog in neighborhoods and congregations; legislative and electoral advocacy; public protest; theatre, art, music, and poetry; consumer advocacy through boycotting; and more.<sup>21</sup>



## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, The rite of consecration of diaconal ministers (1997), retrieved January 25, 2005, from [http://www.elca.org/dm/worship/liturgies/rites/ministry/pdf/consecrate\\_diaconal.pdf](http://www.elca.org/dm/worship/liturgies/rites/ministry/pdf/consecrate_diaconal.pdf), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>John L. Elias, *Paulo Freire: pedagogue of liberation* (Malabar: Krieger Pub. Co., 1994), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>ELCA, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup>Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Public Church for the Life of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), pp. 47 and 48.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup>Martin Luther, "On Translating: An Open Letter," in Helmut T. Lehmann, *Word and Sacrament I*, vol 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), pp. 175-202.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>Timothy F. Lull, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), p. 743.

<sup>12</sup>Martin Luther, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague" (1527), in *ibid.*, pp. 736-755, here p. 738.

<sup>13</sup>ELCA, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 2.

<sup>14</sup>Richard P. Carlson, "Biblical Theology for Diaconal Ministry," in Duane H. Larson (ed.), *Ministry From Word and Sacrament: Renewed Vision for Diaconal Ministry* (Chicago: ELCA, 1999), pp. 28-37.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>16</sup>Richard P. Carlson, *Understanding the Diaconate as the Spirit’s Fruit and Gift*, Unpublished manuscript, 2004, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup>Kjell Nordstokke, *Diakonia—A Global and Ecumenical Perspective*. Unpublished manuscript, 2005, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup>A. Berlin and M. Z. Brettler (eds), *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp. 899-901.

<sup>21</sup>Moe-Lobeda, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 71.



# The Diaconal Ministry. A “Shared Ministry” in the IECLB?

Ruthild Brakemeier

## **Background**

It is impossible to understand the diaconal ministry in Brazil without understanding its history. Brazil is a vast country and the members of the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB) represent less than half a percent of the population (0.4 percent, 716.000 people). The Portuguese, who discovered Brazil in 1500, were Roman Catholic and did not tolerate any other confessions until the end of the nineteenth century. Lutheran immigration to Brazil from Germany dates back to 1824. With Protestant immigrants coming from the Lutheran, Reformed, United and other traditions, the unification of the evangelical communities was difficult and came about only in 1962.

In the early years, German immigrants lived very isolated lives and shaped their religious life according to their own understanding. The model they had at hand was that of their clubs, which people with similar interests joined in order to pursue common goals. All members were equal, sharing rights and duties. In the Evangelical Lutheran communities this mentality is still alive today and influences how the ministry is understood. There were only very few pastors around to carry out official acts such as Sunday services, baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals, and no other church professionals to assist the German immigrants in such practical issues as health care and education. Therefore, the pastors were asked to teach the children and provide pastoral care in times of illness.

In 1913, the first deacon, trained and consecrated in Berlin Spandau (Johannesstift), was sent to a parish in central Brazil. He helped German immigrants to build a bridge and contributed to the region's agricultural development by irrigating the dry land. Furthermore, he introduced beekeeping, taught at the school and provided general counseling and support. When

he moved to another region where there was no pastor, he was ordained as a pastor. A further eleven deacons, who came from the same institution in Germany, were later also ordained as pastors.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a growing number of deaconesses were trained in health care and education in Germany. A “motherhouse” was founded in Wittenberg, Germany, with the special purpose of training and sending nurses, midwives and teachers to Brazil to serve the immigrant community. The first deaconesses, trained in Wittenberg, also arrived in southern Brazil in 1913. The two world wars interrupted the sending of deaconesses, which at one point exceeded seventy in number. The motherhouse, founded in São Leopoldo in 1939, became the home and training school for deaconesses in Brazil.

In the past, deaconesses were highly regarded as good professionals and some church leaders recognized that they were carrying out a ministry in the church. In Germany, as in Brazil, Theodor Fliedner’s model of the diaconal ministry was largely regarded as the only valid one.

## **Theodor Fliedner’s concept of the diaconate**

Until today, Fliedner’s concept remains strongly imprinted on the understanding of the diaconate. Fliedner (1800-1864) considered himself as the restorer of the apostolic deaconess ministry. He was convinced that at the time of the apostles, and afterwards in the Early Church, women deacons had been working beside male deacons. In 1840, in a letter addressed to emperor Wilhelm IV in Berlin, Fliedner explained that he does not request “external ecclesiastic dignity”<sup>1</sup> for the deaconesses who care for the sick in the recently founded institution. But, that he expects that while they “care for the poor,”<sup>2</sup> they should serve in the spirit of the apostolic deaconesses. For him, Phoebe was such a deaconess. He always emphasized the humble character of serving, but wanted the deaconesses to be shining examples of Christian life. It seems that later Fliedner even changed his mind about the “external ecclesiastic dignity.” In 1850, he told the deaconesses to “rejoice [...] since the Early Church considered deaconesses to have clerical status, you are allowed the same.”<sup>3</sup>

When Fliedner consecrated the first three deaconesses in 1839, he reminded them that, “out of love for Jesus, deaconesses are servants of the Lord Jesus, servants of the sick and servants of each other.”<sup>4</sup> This threefold order formed

the image of the deaconess and lasts until today: a deaconess has a ministry in the church, she has a profession and belongs to a community.

In 1856, twenty years after the establishment of the deaconess community in Kaiserswerth, the Oberkirchenrat in Berlin asked Fliedner to write a statement about diakonia and the diaconate.<sup>5</sup> In his statement, Fliedner raised the question about where and how to locate the diaconate in the church: “Must the diaconate not be organically connected with the constitution of the congregation or, for the time being, still be planted in the soil of free association?”<sup>6</sup>

For Fliedner, the organic integration of the diaconate into the congregational structure was crucial. He argues that pastors should have the apostolic humility to recognize when they are overextended and that they do not always have the “wisdom to address the physical needs of the members in the congregation as faithful Christian lay people have.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore they should employ people who have the expertise and time to care for the parishioners’ physical welfare. He affirmed that:

The Evangelical Church no longer has the right to deprive the congregation of the diaconate. On the contrary, the church has the duty to install it where it does not yet exist, and enclose it in the constitution, if it rightly wants to boast about being based on the apostolic church, and if it wants to strengthen the ministry, whose greatest strength is the faithful care of the poor and the sick.<sup>8</sup>

Notwithstanding his insistence on the integration of the diaconate into the church structure, Fliedner defended the importance of free association and the independence of the diaconal ministry and diaconal community. He argued that certain services exceed the capacity of a deacon who has to strive for his own survival.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the energies, gifts and goodwill extant in the congregations need to be brought together in Christian love. The diaconal communities would also be the places where the deaconesses would get the qualifications demanded of a deacon in Act 6:3, i.e., a “good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom [...]”. This initial vision of free association evolved into the motherhouse.

The ministry of the deaconesses stood in the tradition of “free association” and was therefore not integrated into the church structure. Nevertheless, after completing their training in the motherhouse, representatives of the church sent the deaconesses in the name of God to assume special tasks. Thus the diaconate grew up parallel to the church, although the deaconesses always felt themselves to be full members of it.

## **The development of the diaconate in Brazil**

Although deaconesses were invited to come to Brazil, and a motherhouse was founded there, the number of Brazilian deaconesses never exceeded seventy-eight and the diaconate never fully developed. There were many reasons for this of which I shall list three:

- The deaconesses' lifestyle was similar to that of a Roman Catholic religious order. It demanded celibacy, the wearing of a garb, etc. and was therefore not attractive to young women.
- People in congregations were rather introverted and did not see the need for diaconal work.
- There was no theological reflection on the importance of diakonia and the diaconal ministry.

Impulses for change came during the 1960s and 1970s. In the years following WWII, a rapidly developing, cruel capitalism left millions of Latin Americans impoverished. Expressions of protest were labeled communist, which in turn fostered hard-line military response and dictatorships. Serious human rights violations provoked strong reactions among Christians and gave birth to liberation theology, which became an ecumenical movement. Liberation theology strongly influenced members of the IECLB who began to look beyond their own church spire. While at first they spoke about their "social responsibility," they soon discovered that diakonia was the right word for the commitment they wanted to express.

Even with the emergence of democracies in the late 1980s, liberation theology did not lose its importance for diakonia. Similarities in their goals include:

- The effort to overcome the traditional disconnection between the spiritual and secular.
- The partnership between theology and disciplines other than philosophy, i.e., sociology. Diakonia has to be familiar with people's social, political and economic contexts in order to be effective.

- A similar methodology. Liberation theology and diaconal theological reflection are rooted in praxis. Reflection draws on practical action and experience. Different life situations help to understand the Bible.
- Liberation. The gospel is always liberating and the apostle Paul uses the word liberation about one hundred times.
- A special concern for the realities of poverty, oppression and exclusion.
- A new ecclesiological concept. So-called lay people should participate actively in the church's witness.
- Prophetic dimension. The church has the task to heal, but also to prevent evil. It has to speak out against unjust structures.

It took time for the IECLB to find a balance between two strong theological currents: the socialpolitical and the evangelical. The diaconal ministers, deaconesses and deacons were involved in this controversy and had to take position.

In 1974, the deaconess community started a biblical diaconal course in order to improve the training for the diaconal ministry. At the end of the course, students could decide whether they wanted to belong to the deaconess community or the newly established diaconal community, which had none of the characteristics of a religious order. The church recognized the course and approved the consecration of each diaconal minister.

Over the next decades, the community of deaconesses moved away from the original model and changed lifestyle. Deaconesses were allowed to marry, had to be financially independent and were no longer sent to places of service but could choose these places themselves.

In order to clarify their position in the church, the members of the two communities worked out a common order, which was approved by the church. According to this order, deaconesses and deacons are called “diaconal ministers” (*obreiros/obreiras diaconais*).

In 1988, the church created the department of diakonia in order to further the development of diaconal work, mainly in the congregations. From then on, the word diakonia was increasingly used by the church.

Theological reflection resulted in the statement *Shared Ministry*, which was approved by the 1992 Church assembly and guides the different minis-



tries of the IECLB. Accordingly, the pastoral and diaconal ministries are equivalent and part of the one ministry of the church.<sup>10</sup>

## The concept of shared ministry

From the beginning, the Brazilian church adhered to the traditional *Confessio Augustana* (CA) understanding of ministry, and restricted the ministry of publicly proclaiming the gospel to pastors. There were deaconesses and deacons but, according to the tradition, their ministry was subordinated to the pastoral ministry. While pastors were ordained by the head of the church, diaconal ministers were consecrated by the head of the motherhouse.

In the course of time it was rediscovered that when we consider Jesus' mission on earth, practicing diakonia is as important as preaching. Jesus preached through words and signs of love. Preaching and teaching do not occur only through words.

As a result of this broader understanding of preaching and teaching, CA V was reinterpreted so that the ecclesiastical ministry that teaches<sup>11</sup> the gospel includes the diaconal as well as other ministries. In the first place, this ministry is given to the whole church, in the second, it is given to individuals called by the church in various ways publicly to preach and teach the gospel.

## Consequences

Underlying this concept is the understanding that there is only one ministry and that each baptized member takes part in the responsibility for sharing and communicating the gospel. Nevertheless, the church has to call people who are willing to do it publicly (and permanently). In order to be able to assume this responsibility, these people have to be selected, prepared for their specific task, examined, authorized and commissioned/ordained by the church.

Beside the spontaneous diaconal activity of all believers, having some people especially prepared to carry out diaconal work, in other words, diaconal professionals, enhances the church's ministry. The congregation may call on them to assume special tasks. As such, they are also commissioned, but their responsibility is locally defined and therefore limited.

People whom the church calls to assume public responsibility must have a clear call from God. It is confirmed in the public act of ordination. As the diaconal ministers participate in the ministry of publicly sharing and communicating the gospel, the term consecration was deliberately replaced by the term ordination.

Today the IECLB has four ordained ministries: the catechetical, diaconal, pastoral and missionary. Ordained ministers are not a “higher” class of people (*clerus*); they only carry out the function of (publicly) teaching the gospel on behalf of the church. Therefore, all candidates for the ordained ministry have to study theology. One of the practical consequences of this decision was that the church assumed responsibility for training the candidates for each ministry. For future diaconal ministers, bachelor degree courses in theology with an emphasis on diakonia are taught at the theological seminary in São Leopoldo.

## **The responsibilities of the diaconal ministers**

According to article 3 of the Statute of the Shared Ministry, a deacon/deaconess is allowed to lead a worship service and to administer the sacrament, even if these functions are not within his/her prime competence. The common and specific tasks are defined in different articles of the statute.

All four (ordained) ministers are responsible for:

- Stimulating, preparing and enabling members to develop their gifts for the growth of the congregation, promoting human welfare and proclaiming the evangelical voice in public life
- Providing theological orientation, advice and pastoral care to members
- Promoting reconciliation between members
- Visiting members and strengthening unity
- Cooperating in missionary initiatives beyond congregational borders
- Seeking the integration of the ministries through mutual respect, theological reflection and planning

- Coordinating their ministries in cooperation with the congregational council
- Cooperating in administration.

The specific responsibilities of the diaconal ministry are to:

- Stimulate acts of love and service to people in need
- Promote diaconal spirituality among members
- Form groups of solidarity or service in the congregation
- Carry out diaconal activities in institutions such as hospitals, homes for children or the elderly and others
- Participate in ecumenical activities that aim to protect human dignity and justice, supported by the congregation
- Uphold congregational initiatives that aim to prevent or heal human suffering and removing its causes
- Cooperate in the implementation of social projects.

### **Biblical basis**

The apostles were the leaders of the congregation in Jerusalem. As they witnessed Jesus' resurrection, this leadership was not transferable. With the geographical expansion of the gospel, the apostles were overextended. Therefore, the congregation chose seven men to help the apostles with their responsibilities (Acts 6:1-7). In addition to the task of "waiting on tables," they probably assumed the main responsibilities in the local church.

The installation of a "College of Seven" was a practice in the synagogues. The text of Acts 6 belongs to a time when there was no separation between diakonia of the word and diakonia of waiting at tables. The different

functions in the first congregations depended directly on the gifts of the Spirit. The structure of the congregation was still fluid and “charismatic.”

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, *episcopos* (bishop) and *diaconos* (deacon) appear side by side. Closely linked with each other, the two exercised local leadership functions in terms of preaching, teaching, caring for the poor and prisoners, or representing the congregation. Romans 16:1-2 expressly refers to a female deacon, Phoebe.

With time, the tasks became more and more distinct. While the bishop assumed the role of supervisor of the congregation, or cluster of congregations, the deacon became his right hand. Timothy’s late pastoral letter lists the bishops’ and deacons’ duties which have a number of similarities.

Historical research going as far back as the first century has shown that there were men and women, called deacons, who carried out ordained leadership responsibilities. Ordination was conducted by the bishop at the altar, with prayer, the laying on of hands and the invocation of the Holy Spirit (*epiclesis*). It conferred responsibilities for baptism, the distribution of Holy Communion and catechetical work and was clearly distinct from the blessing of the minor orders such as sub-deacons and lectors.<sup>12</sup>

Summarizing we could say: the Bible does not give us a blueprint for the diaconal ministry as we understand it today. Nevertheless, the gospel gives us reason enough for the diaconate to be part of the church’s ministerial structure:

- There are special needs that call for leadership. In a world such as ours human needs cannot be faced without a major effort on behalf of committed people, who assume special responsibility.
- There are different gifts, given to us by God, waiting to be fully employed by complementing each other. The ministry of living them out is given to the whole church, but they call for leadership, nuanced according to gifts and responsibilities. The concept of “shared ministry” aims to provide a structured framework for this.
- When we look at Jesus’ mission we cannot conclude that preaching is more important than healing, or that faith only comes out of preaching. The testimony through word and deed does not permit an hierarchy.

## The need for a diaconal ministry in Brazil

There is a great need for a diaconal ministry in Brazil for the following reasons:

- There is the tendency to be exclusive. The German immigrants lived very isolated lives in their “colonies” and because of their Protestant faith they were not recognized as proper citizens. Consequently, a mentality of excluding all those who were different prevailed within the congregations. This mentality conflicts with diakonia, which is by nature inclusive. In order to change, qualified leadership is needed.
- There is the tendency to work without reflecting. In Brazil, the Pentecostal churches, which emphasize emotional experience, are increasing in numbers and influence. The Lutheran faith, however, includes reflection. “Diakonia is mainly practice, but every practice related to life is challenged by the complexity of life.”<sup>13</sup> In order to be more effective, it is important for the church to have people who reflect, albeit critically, about what is being done and how it is being done. Diaconal ministers, well prepared professionally, should promote reflection on the church’s diaconal mission.
- There is the tendency to keep quiet when there is the need to raise a prophetic voice or to act in a prophetic way. Brazil is marked by glaring social asymmetry. Diaconal ministers should have the courage to pioneer change.
- There is the tendency to make a distinction between spiritual and secular life. People worship in the sanctuary and have difficulty integrating their spirituality into their daily lives. Moreover, they hesitate to bring their daily lives into the sanctuary. Diaconal ministers should connect the two dimensions assuming liturgical functions in the worship services and bringing spirituality into daily life.

## **Evaluation of the present situation**

Although in 2002, the IECLB theoretically approved the integration of the diaconal ministry into the church structure, there is still a gap between theory and practice and some members do not yet understand the changes. There are others who still have difficulties accepting the concept of shared ministry. And then there are those who are indifferent regarding the church's mission and structure. Consequently, there are not yet enough congregations that are willing to call diaconal ministers. So far the IECLB lacks a strategy for implementing the shared ministry in the congregations.

Many congregations are getting poorer. As a result, a diaconal minister cannot be employed alongside a pastor since there is not enough money to pay for both. Furthermore, it is not certain that in future there will be enough financial support for diaconal education.

Beside these difficulties, there is the question about how to prepare for the diaconal ministry. The question is whether it is necessary for diaconal ministers to complete full theological studies in addition to a second university program that prepares them for their profession. Will it be possible in future for students to invest the time and money for two programs?

Another question involves the issue of community. The strong link between ministry and (deacons' and deaconesses') community life no longer exists. In future, it will be possible to belong to a community without actively exercising a ministry in the church. In the same way, it will be possible to be a diaconal minister (deaconess or deacon) without belonging to a community. The question is what shape community life will take in future?

These and other questions will remain with us for some time. However, we are hopeful that the diaconal ministry will become firmly rooted in the IECLB. In addition to the reasons already given, the Roman Catholic Church and other churches are setting examples of how to assume responsibility as Christians in the world. Whereas as members of the small IECLB we must be conscious that we cannot transform the world we must, like the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), do the best we can in our specific context.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Vom Diakonissenwerk. Name und Grundgesetze,” in Georg Fliedner, *Theodor Fliedner Durch Gottes Gnade Erneurer des apostolischen Diakonissenamtes in der evangelischen Kirche, Sein Leben und Wirken*, vol. 3 (Urkundenbuch) (Kaiserswerth a. Rh: Verlag der Diakonissen-Anstalt, 1912), p. 80,

<sup>2</sup>He used the term “Armenpflegerin im weitesten Sinn,” as he understood that the deaconesses in the Early Church cared for the poor in the broadest sense.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Gerhardt, *Theodor Fliedner, ein Lebensbild*, vol. 2 (Urkundenbuch (Kaiserswerth a. Rh: Verlag der Diakonissen-Anstalt, 1937), p. 547 (author’s own translation).

<sup>4</sup>Haus-Ordnung [sic] und Dienst-Anweisung für die Diakonissen in der Diakonissen-Anstalt zu Kaisersweth, in Fliedner, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 143.

<sup>5</sup>Gutachten über die Diakonie und das Diakonat, and den Oberkirchenrat zu Berlin, erstattet durch Pastor T. Fliedner zu Kaisersweth, in *ibid.*, pp. 115-140.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p.125.

<sup>9</sup>Some parishes in the regions around the Rhine were more strongly influenced by the Calvinist tradition. They had (male) deacons who worked as volunteers and helped the pastors with diaconal matters in addition to their professions as businessmen, craftsmen and farmers. In addition the parishes began to employ deacons specially prepared for special tasks. In order to distinguish them from volunteer deacons, they were called “Hilfsdiakone.”

<sup>10</sup>All ordained people are called *obreiros* (male) or *obreiras* (female), with the specific adjective: pastoral, diaconal, catechetic. In the text this term is translated with “minister.”

<sup>11</sup>The Latin Word is *docere*.

## **The Diaconal Ministry. A “Shared Ministry” in the IECLB?**

<sup>12</sup>Cf. John Wijngaards, *No Women in Holy Orders? The Women Deacons of the Early Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup>Kjell Nordstokke, “Profissionalidade diaconal: a sua razão e lógica,” in Gisela Beulke (ed.), *Diaconia, um chamado para servir* (São Leopoldo: Editora Sinodal, 1997), p. 10.





# Ecclesiological Reflections on the Diaconal Ministry: A Norwegian Perspective

Stephanie Dietrich

## **Background and introduction**

This essay is based on the preparatory material and discussions during the Church of Norway's (CoN) General Synod, meeting in November 2004. The General Synod was asked to deal with the question of how the diaconate<sup>1</sup> might be understood in relationship to the overall ministerial structures. While this essay will primarily deal with the theological situation and discussion in the context of the CoN, the reflections will hopefully contribute to a global Lutheran reflection on the understanding of the diaconal ministry.

My starting point is an ecclesiological one: preaching the gospel implies caring for our fellow human beings. Diaconal work is a part of the nature of the church; such an understanding of the church ought to be reflected in its ministerial structures.

In September 2004, before the motion on the understanding of diaconal ministry was taken to the General Synod, the Church of Norway (CoN) Bishop's Conference concluded that:

[...] the church is not subject to one authoritative pattern according to which the ordained ministry must be ordered at all times. It is called to pass on and preach the gospel to its age. The church is at liberty to order the ordained ministry and organize the tasks of the ministry according to what best serves this mission.

The gospel is preached and witnessed through word and deed. Our age calls for a credible word. The church is therefore challenged to testify to Christ's gospel. In light of today's ecclesiological situation, the diaconate is of particular interest. Organizing and clarifying the diaconate as part of the or-

daigned ministry might strengthen this ministry and thereby contribute to the renewal of how the church communicates the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

Caring for body and soul, for the whole person, is the diaconal church's and diaconate's main task. It is, however, important that the diaconal ministry is not reduced to mere practical care. In the same way that Christ met people in word and deed through proclamation and healing of body and soul, the church's diaconal identity is about care for the whole person. Witnessing to the gospel occurs with and without words.

### **Diakonia and the diaconal ministry—the church's body language**

Society has always needed the church's diaconal action. In our day and age, oversaturated with information and words and a church whose role and official position have increasingly become peripheral, the diaconate, as "the church's body language," is often the church's most important communication of the gospel.

For many today, the road to a merciful God goes via an encounter with a merciful church. In many congregations, it is the diaconate that leads new people into the fellowship of the congregation. The church as Christ's body does not only have words, but also actions and signs to point to Jesus' love which can redeem and set people free. The lost fellowship (*koinonia*, *communio*) is now recaptured not only with the gospel's words about fellowship, but also with actions that establish fellowship. The diaconate is the church's most important way of communicating the gospel in a time when people can often experience that they are overwhelmed by words. There is a positive undercurrent of humane compassion in a culture otherwise characterized by people's selfishness and individualism. The diaconate is a way in which solidarity has survived locally, nationally and internationally.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Terminology***

In the New Testament, the Greek words *diakonia* and *diakonos* are used in a variety of ways and refer, on the whole, to the service to others. Interestingly, *diakonia* is used as a term for the apostles' ministry, care for the poor,

ministry in connection with meals and the special ministry of deacons. In ancient texts, the Greek word *diakonos* often describes a bridge builder, one who brings together different tasks.<sup>4</sup>

John 12:26 calls all Jesus' followers *diakonoi*. In the Latin Bible, diakonia is translated as *ministerium*, which is derived from *manus*, hand. A minister is to be understood as a servant, a subordinate who helps his or her superior and one, who in contrast to slaves, is still a free person and exercises her/his ministry out of her/his free will. In contrast, German and Norwegian translations of *ministerium*, *Amt* and *embete*, can easily be associated with priestly powers and administrative structures and thus compromise the meaning of diakonia/ministry.

## **The diaconal ministry in light of church history**

### ***Emerging ministerial structures***

No uniform pattern for ministry can be found in the New Testament. At the congregational level, ministerial patterns seem to have varied according to circumstances and the congregation's needs. No matter what title the different ministries were given, their purpose was to proclaim God's Word, to transmit the gospel, to nurture and strengthen faith, life and service in the congregation and to safeguard and promote unity in and among these. These tasks have remained the same throughout the church's history, but the shape of ministerial structures has changed along with the church's needs.

Historically it is correct to say that during the first centuries CE, in many regions, the threefold office of bishop, priest and deacon became the generally accepted pattern in the church, and that in many churches it has remained so until today.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the threefold pattern is not an established and unchangeable order, but ministerial structures must be evaluated every time based on every church's tradition and needs, so that they are most conducive to the church's mission in a given context. We will revert to this crucial insight.

### ***The Lutheran Reformation***

The Reformers decided that ordination is not a sacrament, but that the ecclesiastical office is to be understood as a ministry serving the church by proclaiming the Word and administering the sacraments. *Confessio Augustana*

VII implies that the office is necessary for the church, but refrains from explicitly referring to it, let alone further specifying how to shape it.

During the Reformation, there was, on the one hand, a renewed focus on the ecclesiastical office as being in charge of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. This was a counterpoint to the concept that it was the priest's task to administer the sacrifice of the mass. On the other, the first Lutheran church orders (Johannes Bugenhagen, Church Order for Denmark, Norway 1537, 1539 and 1542) included an ordered "care for the poor" as a part of the church's four mandates in accordance with Christ's command. This mandate itself did not unfold in a specific diaconal office.

Lutheran Reformation ecclesiology makes clear that the church's ministry of care is an integral part of the church's mission and therefore part of the pastor's ministry.

Luther was opposed to deacons exercising liturgical functions and envisioned a division of tasks within the congregation, in particular in larger ones, where the pastor would be responsible for proclamation and the deacon for welfare related work. However, this division was not made and the task of caring was integrated into the pastor's work.

## **The diaconal ministry and the church**

### ***A Trinitarian understanding of the church and diaconal ministry***

God has revealed Godself to the world through God's creative works and presence in creation, in the incarnated and resurrected Jesus Christ and in God's life-giving and liberating Spirit. The Triune God is present in the world and the church, and the church is called to mirror God's presence in its structures and through its ministry to the world. The diaconal ministry is placed at the center of the Trinitarian faith. The church's diaconal actions are not just good works "in creation." They must be seen in connection with Jesus Christ's compassion, his healing of the sick, the casting out of demons, his reaching out to those marginalized and excluded and eventually his death and resurrection and in connection with the Holy Spirit who gives life and liberates Christians to be present in the world as salt and light, and to speak out freely and prophetically against injustice and evil in the world. Through the church and its servants, Christ is present as the "sym-pathetic," i.e., he who stands

beside those who are in need and who suffers with them. The church, as “Christ’s body,” is present in people’s lives. In the last instance, it is not the church or people who act, but Christ himself through his body, the church in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Such a Trinitarian understanding of God corresponds to a Trinitarian perspective regarding the church’s nature and its ministerial structures. The diaconal ministry must be interpreted and understood inside this frame of reference, as an answer to faith in the Triune God.

An interesting feature in the history of the diaconal ministry is that diakonia was understood as a connecting point between the church’s preaching the Word and administering the sacraments on the one hand and the world on the other: bread which is broken at the Eucharist and shared with the poor and needy. Diakonia has worked to make visible Christ’s presence in the world—both in- and outside the church. It is therefore appropriate to understand the diaconal responsibility, which is carried by God’s people, as a responsibility as important as prayer and worship: care for the whole person. Therefore, it would be wrong to place diaconal ministry just “in- or outside” a worship service oriented understanding of the church’s life.

One might consider, whether today, the Lutheran understanding of the diaconal ministry, as a purely caritative ministry outside the worship service, (see Luther’s opposition to deacons’ exercising liturgical functions) should not be reviewed. Maybe, by connecting the diaconal ministry with the worshipping congregation, one could highlight both the church’s task as a diaconal church and point to the heart of the diaconal ministry, namely fellowship with the suffering and resurrected Christ in word and sacrament.

The themes of the 2003 assemblies of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) relate to the church as a healing community. In an ecumenical context, speaking of the church as a healing community refers to the church’s diaconal identity. The New Testament stories speak about Jesus healing the sick and sending out the disciples to heal the sick (Mt 10:7). Today, the church’s healing action covers more than just the healing of the sick. The call to a healing ministry has to do with healing at many levels: healing of memories; care for difficult stages of life; work against stigmatization, oppression and political injustice; work in the service of reconciliation. The church as a healing community is mirrored in its identity as a diaconal church where proclamation and diaconal action go hand in hand.

***Unity and diversity of ministry within the ministerium ecclesiasticum***

In order to fulfill its mission the church needs workers at many levels. It is certainly not the workers who constitute the church, rather the church is established by God so that God's gift of grace can reach people. God calls the church to "ordain" people to administer the means of grace so that the church can be built up. Therefore, the church needs workers such as pastors and deacons, who can equip its members and thus help the church to live according to God's Word. There is no ministerial hierarchy. All ministries are called to serve the church. The various ministries are, however, different. Some ministries are essential for the church to be church, while others belong to the notion that the church must always meet its contextual needs. According to the Lutheran tradition, the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments are essential elements for the church, and with them the ministry responsible for exercising them.

The Lutheran tradition has emphasized the one (public) office, the *ministerium ecclesiasticum* which attends to the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments in accordance with CA V, "The Ministry of the Church":

So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel, that is to say, in those who hear that God, not on account of our own merits but on account of Christ, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace on account of Christ. Galatians 3 [14b]: "So that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."<sup>6</sup>

Traditionally, CA V has been understood as referring to the office of the pastor, but it is possible to interpret the article further, among other things through a more comprehensive interpretation of "teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments." We might understand this dual formula as saying that it is the church's essential mission to bear witness to the gospel of Christ, to share and communicate it so that it can create and be responded to in justifying faith. But this witnessing, sharing and communicating occurs in various ways: in preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments, but also through sharing Christ's love in diaconal service. Thus, the diaconal ministry would

be an integral part of the one ministry of the church which publicly proclaims, teaches and witnesses to Christ.

Luther's "cleaning up" of what he understood as being Roman Catholic distortions in the ecclesiastical ministerial structures was based on his reformatory understanding. In the context of the sixteenth century, the decisive question was, How can the church order its ministerial structures in such a way that they serve the church's mission to bear witness to God's grace in Christ?

The simple fact that there is a *ministerium ecclesiasticum* in the church that takes care of proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments should be considered as being divinely established (*iure divino*). But how the church orders this ministry in practice is up to human, more accurately, ecclesial decision (*iure humano*), and can therefore always be accommodated to the church's situation and needs.

It is therefore in accordance with Luther's main concern and the Lutheran tradition to reconsider the church's ministerial structures from the perspective of what orders will best allow the church to carry out its mission. This mission includes the church's diaconal witness anchored in God's Word, in holy baptism and the holy Eucharist. Hence there are solid reasons for considering the diaconal ministry as being an integral part of this one ministry of the church.

### **Excursus: Good works and justification through faith alone**

We need to read *CA V* in connection with articles *VI* and *VII*. *CA VI*, "Of New Obedience," makes clear that works are not the foundation of salvation, but a natural part of the Christian life.

Likewise, they teach that this faith is bound to yield good fruits and that it ought to do good works commanded by God on account of God's will and not so that we may trust in these works to merit justification before God.<sup>7</sup>

This understanding of the relationship between justification and good works (the term "sanctification" is not expressly mentioned), a classic theme in Lutheran theology, has also been discussed in the international Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue, which resulted in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, where it says:



37. We confess together that good works - a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love - follow justification and are its fruits. When the justified live in Christ and act in the grace they receive, they bring forth, in biblical terms, good fruit. Since Christians struggle against sin their entire lives, this consequence of justification is also for them an obligation they must fulfill. Thus both Jesus and the apostolic Scriptures admonish Christians to bring forth the works of love.<sup>8</sup>

One might dare say that the proclamation of the Word, the administration of the sacraments (*CA V*) and good works (*CA VI*) are essential elements of the Christian's and the church's call (*CA VII*). They are juxtaposed, even though in their very specific order they complement each other, without compromising the belief that justification is the Triune God's work alone.

We are created by God and in God's image, saved through Jesus' death and resurrection and brought to life through the Holy Spirit. The Triune God works in and through the baptized believers who constitute the church. Good works are a result of God's presence in the church. We are clothed in Christ, and in our diaconal work we become Christ for our neighbor. In our struggles for peace and justice, God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, prompts the church's diaconal action. Christ is the light of the world (Jn 8:12) and therefore, we are called to be a light to the world (Mt 5:14). Similarly, Christ calls and liberates us to be the salt of the world (Mt 5:13).

## **The priesthood of all believers and the ordained ministry**

### ***Baptism as a common consecration for all Christians***

In baptism, all church members have been called to ministry for Christ and their fellow human beings. Christ who through his own baptism entered his own ministry, calls the baptized to the ministry of the church. To be a servant does not first and foremost imply selfless humility, but obedience to a call to ministry as Christ's coworkers and followers.

In order to build up the church and to bear witness to Christ publicly, God has instituted an ecclesiastical ministry (*CA V*). Being part of it implies being part of the church's spiritual leadership, a serving fellowship, and taking responsibility for the building up of the church.

As a case in point, in its ordination and consecration liturgies, the CoN underlines the notion of the priesthood of all believers as the foundation for all the specialized ministries in the church. All are priests and are to offer themselves with their entire life to service for God:

In baptism we were incorporated into the people of God and we were all consecrated to be servants for God. For the Scripture bears witness that all of God's people are a royal priesthood, a holy people, a people who are God's possession, that we shall proclaim his great deeds, he who called us from the dark to his wonderful light.<sup>9</sup>

Following this, the specific ministry to which the respective person is being consecrated is identified.

The biblical language used is interesting. 1 Corinthians 12:13 says, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." Just as the body's limbs are connected and work together in mutual service of the body, the church's members serve in fellowship to build up the body of Christ. It is through the multitude of ministries that the whole and individual parts can function. 1 Peter 2:5 talks of the baptized as living stones who build up a spiritual temple and spiritual priesthood. The church's corporate responsibility for the gospel, in which all members of the church partake, is described in the New Testament as sacramental ministry. In 1 Peter 2:9, Christians are called "[...] a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

The Greek word for priest, *hiereus*, which in Rev 1:6 is also used to speak of all Christians, normally implies sacramental and sacrificial functions. The sacrifice all Christians who are a part of the priesthood of all believers are to offer is not a sacrifice of reconciliation and salvation,—this sacrifice has already been offered through Christ, the High Priest (Heb 4:14; 9:11)—but rather a sacrifice of praise in response to what God has done for our salvation (e.g., Rom 12:1).

The Christians' sacrifice is to place their lives at God's disposal through thanksgiving and service in love (Heb 13:15-16), through prayer (Rom 8:3-4), through service for people in need and through witness. In the New Testament, the term *hiereus* is used to designate either Christ or all baptized believers. It is never applied to a specific group of church ministers such as pastors.

Another term frequently used in this connection is Christian lay people. The New Testament sometimes describes the church as *laós*, the people. In this way, lay people is a title of honor that signalizes being Jesus' disciples and belonging to God's church. Unfortunately the term lay people has often been used as a designation for those who are not ordained pastors or without theological education. In this way (defining the baptized members of the church negatively over against the "priest"), it is used to construct dividing lines and hierarchies. Thus all the baptized are at the same time lay and "priests," called to offer themselves to the ministry (service) of the church in their daily lives.

***The issue in context: Luther and the Reformation***

During the Reformation, the priesthood was central to the life of the church. There was, however, a need to rethink the concept of priesthood. In the Middle Ages, the priest's central task was the holding of the daily mass. This would not necessarily involve the presence of the congregation or preaching the gospel. This context must be seen as the background to Luther's and the Reformation's critique of the understanding of the priesthood.

Luther's own concept must be seen between two extremes. On the one hand, he criticized the phenomenon just referred to. On the other, he condemned the fanatics in his own ranks who wanted to abolish the priesthood entirely. Luther, in contrast, considered the church as enjoying "evangelical freedom," allowing for orders according to the church's need. The church's essential mission, so Luther, is to free people's conscience with the Good News of the gospel of God's grace in Christ, through Word and sacrament. From this perspective he strongly criticized the "priesthood" for saying "mass in hiding." At the same time, he made clear that the church needs the ordained ministry to take care of the pure proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

**The ordained ministry: stemming from the church or instituted by God?**

What does it mean that some are ordained to the ordained ministry, when all Christians are already priests through their baptism? Luther developed the concept of the priesthood of all believers as the basis for the special office of the pastor. While in his earlier works the ordained ministry is an expression

of the church's need for structure and leadership in public, Luther emphasizes in his later works that the office is established by God, "from above," so to speak. According to Philipp Melanchthon, who was instrumental in the formulation of the Lutheran confessions, the priesthood of all believers is a "sacrificial priesthood," *sacerdotium*, where Christians are responsible intercessors for others, while the special office, *ministerium*, is established by God to serve the Word, with emphasis on education. To teach in public requires a call to and installation in the (special) office or ordained ministry.

In the Lutheran tradition, the office can, on the one hand, be seen in light of the priesthood of all believers. For practical, order-related reasons and to ensure that the life of the congregation is nourished, the congregation entrusts the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments to especially chosen people. On the other, within this same tradition, it is also possible to hold that Christ himself has established the (special) ministry.

These two ways of understanding the office belong together and do not necessarily exclude each other. In any case, the office belongs to the nature of the church and is in a sense essential for the church precisely because it is called to share the gospel and to administer the sacraments. Because the office serves the church it is indispensable for its mission.

### **The "diaconate of all believers" and the ordained diaconal ministry**

If diakonia belongs to the nature of the church, then it is logical to include the diaconate/diaconal ministry in a multidimensional ordained ministerial structure. As Christ renders himself present through the pastor's administration of the sacraments, so Christ renders himself present through the deacon's caring ministry.

In order to clarify the relationship between the "diaconate of all believers" and the (special) "diaconal ministers" (as they are called in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, *cf.* Nancy Gable's essay in this publication) or deacons, one might make reference to the relation between the priesthood of all believers and the ordained pastor. All baptized believers are called to share (preach, teach) the gospel in their daily lives. The ordained pastor is called to do so publicly in order to nourish and equip the congregation so that the baptized believers are able to carry out their witness in their daily lives. Similarly, it is the deacon's responsibility to

take leadership in nourishing and equipping the believers, so that they can participate in the congregation's diaconal witness. Thus, relating the respective ministerial responsibilities to each other would safeguard each agent's peculiar contribution to the mission of the church and to highlight their interdependency.

We nevertheless need to face up to the question, Will the introduction of the diaconal ministry into the one *ministerium ecclasticum* threaten the ministry of "lay people" involved in diaconal work and service? Will it increase the distance between the ordained and those who are not ordained thus reinforcing hierarchical patterns? Will such an arrangement lead to clericalism (too many ordained) and institutionalism (too much congregational work being done by full-time church employees) in the church?

The international Anglican-Lutheran committee, meeting in Hanover in 1996, produced the report, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*.<sup>10</sup> It raises the concern that the position and task of the deacon should not get in the way of the lay people and the Christian church's mission to serve God in faith and life. According to the report, the diaconate should have "a multiplying effect, leading others to their own specific tasks of service."<sup>11</sup> Deacons should be guides for all of God's people when it comes to their ministry in the church and world and should be part of the inspiration for and coordination of volunteer efforts in the church.

### **The relationship between the diaconal and pastoral ministry: worship service and the Lord's Supper<sup>12</sup>**

What is the place of the diaconal ministry within ministerial structures and how is it related to the pastoral ministry?

Deacons are not only sent by the church to the world, but also come back to the church. They bring with them experience, knowledge and theological insights from their work among the people. Deacons are called to integrate their diaconal experience into the worshipping congregation. In other words, the congregation's worship service and human experiences outside worship are in a necessary cycle of exchange with each other. Diaconal work that is not anchored in the life of the congregation is purely social work. But, worship life needs to be anchored in the cries of people who need help and support in different ways.<sup>13</sup>

Since it is usually the pastor who exercises leadership in the worship service the liturgical role of the deacon needs to be clarified.

In its 2004 resolution, the General Synod of the CoN recalled that from the Reformation onwards the caring ministry has been a part of the pastorate. This was reflected in the old CoN ordination liturgy (1920), where “care for the infirm and the poor and the helpless” was more explicitly linked to the pastoral ministry than it is today. While care is still one of the pastor’s tasks there has been a shift toward his/her main tasks, the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. This development leaves room for identifying the diaconate as a part of the ordained ministry.

In the follow-up to the synod’s decision in 2004, it became very clear that the administration of Holy Communion should not be the test case for whether someone is in- or outside the ordained ministry. This would clearly be in opposition to the nature of the Eucharist, as the meal of communion with Christ, each other and the whole church. In addition, it would compromise the insight that the administration of the sacraments is not a right, but a service within the church that is entrusted to the ordained minister. Therefore, it might be possible to say that the deacons, through their ordination to the *ministerium ecclesiasticum*, can in principle administer the sacraments, but that they usually would not do so, because the main emphasis in their service lies somewhere else.

In the CoN, deacons are responsible for administering Holy Communion to the sick and dying. The administration of the Eucharist within a “public worship service,” is still the pastor’s, not the deacon’s, area of responsibility. The deacon’s liturgical functions during the worship service usually do not include administration of the sacraments.

## **“Consecration” and “ordination”**

Upon the congregation’s selection and the examination of the ordinand’s suitability, the church calls a member of it to the public ministry through the act of ordination. This fundamental structure can be applied to all the church’s acts of consecration, be it to the ministry of pastor, deacon, catechist or cantor. Calling and consecration belong together. In the act of consecration, the church’s external vocation meets with the personal vocation of the one to be consecrated. The act of consecration makes the call to the individual visible for the whole congregation.

Based on the General Synod of the CoN’s resolution in 2004 it is reasonable and theologically sound to apply the term ordination also to the consecration of deacons because of their integration into the ecclesiastical office.

## Concluding remarks

The LWF global consultation on “Prophetic Diakonia—For the Healing of the World,” Johannesburg, 2002, defined diakonia as a core component of the church’s mission. The member churches of the LWF are challenged to move a step further and to break the monopoly of the pastoral and episcopal ministries and to establish a full-fledged diaconal ministry beside it in order to express the ecclesiological insight of “Johannesburg” on the level of ministry. The Lutheran tradition emerged in a context where focusing on the ministry of preaching the justifying gospel of God’s grace and administering the sacraments as God’s means of grace was undoubtedly called for. Without rescinding this focus, but in light of new experiences of the church in new contexts where diakonia has been rediscovered and reconfirmed as belonging to the core of the church’s mission, it is time to revisit our ministerial doctrine and practice. In this article I have tried to demonstrate that there is ample room for readjusting our ministerial structures so as to reflect contemporary experiences with and insights into the church’s mission as witnessing to God’s kingdom in a variety of ways. Establishing the diaconal ministry alongside the pastoral ministry could be a contribution to this end.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>In the following article diaconate and diaconal ministry are used synonymously.

<sup>2</sup>Church of Norway Bishops' Conference, 32/04 Resolution. Author's own translation. Norwegian text at [http://www.kirken.no/Besluttende\\_organer/nyhetDet.cfm?pNyhetId=678&pNyhetKat=2&pVedtakId=146](http://www.kirken.no/Besluttende_organer/nyhetDet.cfm?pNyhetId=678&pNyhetKat=2&pVedtakId=146).

<sup>3</sup>Gunnar Stålsett, "Diakonattet i Den norske kirke—en dimensjon ved det kirkelige embete," speech delivered at meeting of bishops, May 2004, at [http://www.diakonforbundet.no/website/open\\_document.jsp?id=1862](http://www.diakonforbundet.no/website/open_document.jsp?id=1862)

<sup>4</sup>See John N. Collins, *Diakonia. Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), which has shown that the original meaning of the term *diakonos* in Greek is to be a go-between. In his research, Collins made clear that the term *diakonos* in the New Testament and Early Church did not apply to the incumbent of a humble, selfless ministry in a way which might today be considered questionable and objectionable, but what is most important is that the service cannot be separated from the sender. No one calls her/himself to a ministry, nor is it an ethical or pious requirement, but it is characterized by the fact that it is the Lord who calls to it. This understanding of the term *diakonos* is important for several reasons: it emphasizes that diaconal ministry is not about the individual's merit, but a ministry on a mission from the Lord and because it is an important corrective to an individualistic understanding of ministry.

<sup>5</sup>In the 1982 Faith and Order Report "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" this is emphasized in the following way: "In the fulfillment of their mission and service the churches need people who in different ways express and perform the tasks of the ordained ministry in its diaconal, presbyteral and Episcopal aspects and functions." (III. Forms of ministry, pt. 22, p.43), at [http://www.msgr.ca/msgsr-3/BEM\\_MINISTRY\\_03.htm](http://www.msgr.ca/msgsr-3/BEM_MINISTRY_03.htm)).

<sup>6</sup>Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 41.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>At <http://www.elca.org/ecumenical/ecumenicaldialogue/romancatholic/jddj/declaration.html>.

<sup>9</sup>Church of Norway Ordinal, "Vigsling til Prestetjeneste," in *Gudstjenestebok for Den norske kirke Del II, Kirkelige handlinger* (Oslo: Verbum, 1992), p. 163.



## The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church

<sup>10</sup>The Anglican Consultative Council and the Lutheran World Federation, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity, The Hanover Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission* (London: The Anglican Communion Publications, 1996).

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, para. 56.

<sup>12</sup>As in previous sections, I need to leave aside references to the structure of the threefold ministry (bishop, pastor, deacon) which has been discussed in some Lutheran churches, in particular in the (European) Nordic and Baltic states. At the General Synod of the CoN in 2004, it was emphasized that the threefold structure of ministry is not chosen as a suitable pattern for the organization of the CoN's ministerial structures, mainly because it is associated with an hierarchical understanding of the ordained ministry, and because it is understood as a threatening factor against the unity of the one *ministerium ecclesiasticum*.

<sup>13</sup>*Cf.* Eurodiaconia's document: "To Be and to Do. Diakonia and the Churches," Brussels 2005, p. 15, at <http://www.eurodiaconia.org/pages/projectgroups.htm>.

# The Diaconal Ministry in the Lutheran Churches<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Under the auspices of the Department for Theology and Studies (DTS) we, representatives of sixteen member churches of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), gathered in São Leopoldo, Brazil, under the theme, “The Diaconal Ministry in the Lutheran Churches.” We discussed our varying experiences with the diaconal ministry, challenged each other’s concepts and struggled with different theological perspectives. Thus the voices from the member churches were heard. As mandated by the LWF Council, we sought to identify theological parameters for demarcating a space in which an understanding of diaconal ministry can be located that is (a) solidly grounded in the Bible; (b) informed by the Lutheran Reformation; and (c) open to contextual variations in both church and society.

## The context

In line with a widely shared ecumenical conviction, diakonia has always been at the heart of the LWF’s identity. Taking into account recent developments and insights, a global LWF consultation, held in 2002, in Johannesburg, South Africa, on the topic “Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World,” defined diakonia in light of today’s challenges. It “recognize[s] diakonia as a core element of what the church is all about,”<sup>2</sup> and reaffirms diakonia as essential to the church’s being and mission. At the same time, the traditional understanding of diakonia as the humble service to those in need, carried out in a spirit of self-denial was challenged and further developed. It lifted up diakonia as the prophetic critique of economic, political and cultural structures that produce and perpetuate suffering and violence, and as advocating for societal conditions conducive to a life of respect and dignity.

Building on the Johannesburg consultation, it was our objective to reflect on how the basic conviction that diakonia is central to the life and mission of the

church can be adequately expressed in its public ministry through the diaconate. Thus we undertook to carry out a task which “Johannesburg” left open:

As a ministry, it should be fully integrated into the church’s ordained, consecrated and commissioned ministries, as a reflection of the fundamental significance of diakonia for the being of the church.<sup>3</sup>

We are convinced that, for a number of reasons, the importance of diakonia within the church’s witness has grown in recent years. Most LWF member churches find themselves in diverse sociopolitical and multifaith contexts and sometimes in minority situations. The effects of economic globalization, which in many communities erode the very basis of life, and the need to give account of their Christian faith in the face of growing secularism and neo-liberalism, pose new challenges to the church’s witness. In addition, the church’s credibility can no longer be taken for granted. In the age of mass communication, where societies are inundated with words and images, diakonia might assume a new credibility. Under these conditions, the diaconal ministry can be an especially effective way of expressing the love of God.

## Terminology

Discussing terminology is complicated by the fact that different key terms are being used in different ways, carrying different meanings in different contexts. The problem is further aggravated by the need to translate these terms. Therefore, we will briefly set out in what sense we are using these terms, being aware that they might be used elsewhere in a different way.

We understand diakonia as referring to a core component of the essence of the church and its mission in the world. Diaconal witness is the manifestation of diakonia in the life of the church in which every Christian is called to participate through baptism in daily life as an expression of the priesthood of all believers. Diaconal ministry is a specific expression of the one ministry of the church (*ministerium ecclesiasticum*, CA V). The one ministry of the church is given by God (*iure divino*) charged with proclaiming and teaching the gospel publicly in word and deed (*public ministry*). Deacons and deaconesses/diaconal ministers are individual Christians called, trained and recognized by the church to serve its mission through the diaconal ministry. Pastors are indi-

vidual Christians called, trained and recognized by the church to serve its mission through the pastoral ministry of publicly preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. In some churches, the administering of the sacraments is part of the diaconal ministry. Commission and consecration are the liturgical acts through which the church, praying for and trusting in the Holy Spirit, recognizes individual Christians as bearers of an office carried out on its behalf. Ordination is the liturgical act through which the church, praying for and trusting in the Holy Spirit, recognizes individual Christians as bearers of the one ministry of the church (*ministerium ecclesiasticum*, CA XIV).

### The diaconal ministry in the Bible and church history

God is present in the world as Creator, Savior and Life-giver. The church mirrors God's presence in its ministerial structures and through its ministry to the world. Diakonia and diaconal ministry make visible the Triune God's presence in the world. Faith in the Triune God is the basis for our understanding of the public ministry of the church.

As Lutheran churches we base our understanding of diaconal ministry on the Scriptures. The ultimate point of reference is Jesus Christ himself. The canon of diaconal ministry is Jesus' self-designation as a "deacon": "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). Notwithstanding the categorical difference between Jesus' redeeming self-giving and the church's witness to it, diaconal witness and diaconal ministry are called to embody God's love for the world acted out in Jesus' life, witness, death and resurrection.

Jesus' ministry was to bear witness to the kingdom of God on earth that sought to give the world life in its abundance. This constitutes the core of his mission (Jn 10:10). He did so in various ways: he preached and taught God's grace and called to repentance; he healed the sick and cast out demons and evil forces that inflicted suffering on human beings; he reached out and identified with those who were marginalized and excluded. His healing and liberating ministry provoked the opposition of those who had a vested interest in maintaining the *status quo*—to the point of suffering and death.

In testifying to God's kingdom, diaconal witness and ministry are informed and shaped by Jesus' ministry. Participants shared how diaconal witness and ministry can render Christ present among those who struggle for dignity and survival.

In studying the history of the diaconal ministry starting in the Bible through the Early Church and throughout the church's history, it is clear that there has not been one unilateral understanding of this ministry. The New Testament does not describe a single ministerial structure that is a suitable pattern or norm for all times. Paul's letters and the Acts of the Apostles refer to a vast variety of functions within the church (1 Cor 12:7ff.). Even the later writings of the New Testament do not clearly distinguish between offices and keep ministerial structures flexible (1 Tim 3:1ff.). Clearer patterns emerge only in post-apostolic times. As of the second century, a threefold model of ministry (deacon, bishop, presbyter/pastor) gradually became the dominant model in many regions where the church had been established. In the Early Church and the church of the Middle Ages, church ministry in general, and diaconal ministry in particular, underwent profound changes. To a large extent, the latter degenerated into a transition to the priesthood and many diaconal services were carried out by religious orders.

## **The diaconal ministry and the Lutheran Reformation**

There are a number of reasons why the Lutheran Reformation did not result in establishing a full-fledged diaconal ministry. Among others, good works had to be protected against the misunderstanding of being meritorious. The (Lutheran) Reformation strove to rediscover and reaffirm that God has saved humankind in Jesus Christ by grace through faith alone. The dynamic of salvation is rooted solely in God's activity. At the same time, human activity, liberated from the power of sin through Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit, can be appreciated as bringing forth good works albeit without any meritorious character (see Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, as well as CA VI and XX). Secondly, while Luther had intended to establish the diaconal ministry in the congregations, he refrained from doing so since there were no "adequate people for carrying out this ministry."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in sixteenth-century Germany, diaconal activities were largely carried out under the auspices of the secular authorities in the understanding that doing so was their Christian duty. Nevertheless, in some parts of northern Germany, as well as for example in Strasbourg, attempts were made to establish a full-fledged diaconal ministry alongside the pastoral ministry.

We assume that the potential of our Lutheran tradition has not yet been fully exhausted. The one (public) ministry of the church (CA V and CA XIV)

is divinely instituted. Nonetheless, in light of ever changing historical realities, the church must address the task of ordering it anew. As we have seen, the biblical witness itself as well as the history of the church, the Lutheran included, reveal that there is no uniform or universal pattern of ordering the public ministry. In carrying out its mission, the church has had to face contextual challenges which, in turn, have shaped its (public) ministry.

Traditionally, the understanding of “teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments,” the distinct responsibility of the church’s ministry (CA V and CA XIV) has been restricted to preaching and administering the sacraments as undertaken by the (public) pastoral ministry. At the same time, too often diaconal witness and service to one’s neighbor have been ignored. We have heard with great interest and joy that some LWF member churches acknowledge that the gospel is being preached, taught and witnessed to also in other ways, including through the diaconal witness. Hence, they have included the diaconal ministry in the one (public) ministry of the church. We are aware that different models are in place according to the church’s respective historical, societal and ecumenical contexts. Some member churches have introduced the threefold ministry of deacon, pastor and bishop, while others have established a shared ministry. In both, the one ecclesial ministry unfolds in different ways. Some member churches perceive the former model as having hierarchical connotations, while others regard it as an appropriate way of structuring their ministry. In the latter model, both expressions of the one public ministry are perceived as being equally recognized.

While those churches that have some form of diaconal ministry generally consecrate or commission their diaconal ministers in one way or another, most of them deliberately fall short of ordaining them; ordination is reserved for pastors. In light of the striking similarity between the rituals and liturgical elements involved, it is unclear what distinguishes ordination from other forms of commissioning. We believe that ordaining diaconal ministers would reflect that the diaconal ministry is an integral part of the one ecclesial ministry. Through the act of ordination the church recognizes the ministry of the deacon and prays to God for the gift of the Holy Spirit. In some contexts, secular society acknowledges and recognizes this spiritual authority. Resistance against ordaining diaconal ministers may not only be inspired by theological reasoning, but also by the determination to defend dominant power structures and gender inequalities.

## **The diaconal ministry and the priesthood/deaconhood of all believers**

Through baptism persons are initiated into the priesthood of Christ and thus into the mission of the whole church. All the baptized are called to participate in, and share responsibility for worship (*leitourgia*), witness (*martyria*), and service (*diakonia*) [...] Ordained servants of the church carry out a specific task in the service of the mission and ministry of the whole people of God.<sup>5</sup>

Just as the pastoral ministry does not exempt the communion of baptized believers from sharing the gospel in their daily lives, so the diaconal ministry does not exempt Christians from the call to diaconal witness. On the contrary, diaconal ministers are not alone responsible for carrying out diaconal witness. Rather, it is their responsibility as leaders to inspire, equip, train and guide congregations and the church as a whole to carry out their diaconal witness. As one participant put it, “The diaconal ministry is called to lead the church to become a diaconal church.” Thus we can legitimately speak of the “*deaconhood of all believers*”—an analogy to the priesthood of all believers.

## **The diaconal and the pastoral ministries**

Ordering the (public) ministry of the church implies being conscious of the commonalities as well as the differences between the pastoral and diaconal ministries. Both serve to teach, share, communicate and bear witness to the gospel. Whereas the pastoral ministry proclaims God’s saving grace in Christ and announces God’s coming kingdom, the diaconal ministry bears witness to the gospel by expressing God’s love for the world by caring for those in physical, social and spiritual need and advocating for societal structures which promote justice and human dignity. While preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments render Christ present in Word and sacrament, the diaconal ministry represents Christ in his reaching out in love to those who are vulnerable and excluded. Rather than striving for superiority, the bearers of both ministries ought to perceive their ministries as being complementary.

## **The diaconal ministry and the Eucharist**

Diakonia is deeply integrated with proclamation of the Word and sharing at the table. Thus it is rooted in the sharing of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. Fully incorporating the diaconal ministry in the worship service, in particular in the celebration of the Eucharist, without relegating it to an inferior position, might be an appropriate way of symbolizing the interrelatedness of the two expressions of the one ministry.

If diaconal ministry is carried out in the name of the church, then it is only rightly carried out in the name of Christ and to the praise and glory of God. The revival of a specific liturgical role for deacons in some churches points to the witness and worship which occur throughout their ministry.<sup>6</sup>

## **The diaconal ministry between church and “world” and the issue of power**

God calls the church to share the gospel with the world. Therefore, the church and its mission are not self-sustaining, but founded in the Triune God and find their aim in the world. In this sense, the church in general and its public ministry in particular are “go-betweens.” The diaconal ministers/deacons/deaconesses reach out to the excluded and marginalized on behalf of the church and bring their experiences into the midst of the community of faith. Thus the church and its mission are solidly grounded in the world, its hopes and fears, its joy and suffering.

Although the church and its ministry are a creation of God’s Word and Spirit, they are also part of the world whose dynamics permeate the church in painful ways. Asymmetrical power structures, domination, the misuse of power and corruption plague also the church. Some participants shared how those in high positions within the church try to defend their ministerial monopoly by downplaying the contribution of the diaconal ministry and relegating it to an inferior service. The fact that in most churches the (public) pastoral ministry is still a “male” domain, while diaconal witness and service are predominantly “female,” raises fundamental questions about the equal recognition and participation of women and men in the public ministry.

Commissioned by Jesus Christ, the Servant-Lord, the *diakonos* (Mk 10:45), the healer of the vulnerable, the liberator of the marginalized and excluded,



the diaconal ministry is particularly sensitive to these dynamics. Moreover, the diaconal ministry is responsible for empowering the disadvantaged, enabling them to use their own potential, helping them to stand on their own feet and meaningfully to contribute to the mission of the church.

## **Conclusion**

We call upon the member churches to reexamine the ways in which they have ordered the ecclesial ministry and, in particular, to do so in such a way that the diaconal responsibility of their mission is adequately expressed. We are convinced that establishing or strengthening the diaconal ministry and providing training and formation that would facilitate its equal recognition with the pastoral ministry would be an appropriate way of acknowledging and meeting this challenge. This might imply raising the awareness of congregations and pastors regarding the importance of the diaconal ministry and its implications for cooperation in the one ministry of the church.

In many contexts the church is in crisis and in need of reexamining its mission. We do not consider establishing a diaconal ministry to be a universal remedy. Nonetheless, since the one ministry of the church is key for carrying out its mission we are convinced that the diaconal ministry can make a distinct contribution to making it more credible and effective, being aware that God, through the power of the Spirit, will have to guide and authenticate the church's mission and witness.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Final Statement, LWF global consultation on “The Diaconal Ministry in the Lutheran Churches,” São Leopoldo, Brazil, 2–7 November, 2005.

<sup>2</sup>Reinhard Boettcher (ed.), *Prophetic Diakonia: “For the Healing of the World,”* Report, Johannesburg, South Africa, November 2002 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2003), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>*Cf.* WA 12, p.693.

<sup>5</sup>*The Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church. A Lutheran Statement*, 2002 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2003), p. 12, para. 13.

<sup>6</sup>“The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity. The Hanover Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission,” in *Anglican Lutheran Agreements. Regional and International Agreements 1972-2002, LWF Documentation 49/2004* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2004), p. 190, para. 52.



# Voices from the Regions

## **Argentina: The Evangelical Church of the River Plate**

*Cristina Kilian*

[...] The 1998 synod described the diaconal ministry as follows:

[...] a commitment to life, understood as a gift from God. It is one of the main aspects of the mission of the church of Jesus Christ. In other words, the church gives witness to the living presence of the resurrected Jesus, when it adopts the defense of the integrity of life through the proclamation of the Word, the sacraments, and the witness of faith of each of its members [...].

In this sense, the diaconal ministry has been established as such in order to promote and coordinate the testimony of God's love of the world through actions, giving specific answers where human rights and the protection of the environment [...] are not upheld, and where acts of solidarity are necessary in the face of human suffering.

The dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s paved the way for “diaconal politics” (organizations for refugees, human rights and a new commitment to indigenous organizations). For the church, the most important consequence of its members’ new commitment was a broadening of its horizon. Diaconal commitment was no longer limited to church members in need. Nursery schools where children of working mothers (not church members) were cared for emerged, as did other community projects. Diaconal institutions (such as children’s homes) opened their doors to all. This openness also affected the way in which diaconal ministers are trained. Today, those who apply for a diaconal ministry training course must have a pedagogical, social, medical or ecology related tertiary or university degree. The church will then provide professional theological training, management training and training in planning, monitoring and assessment.

Those who aspire to become ministers are trained in theology. I believe there to be a need for more specific theological training for deacons which is expressly related to diaconal issues and responds to the challenges faced by

society (political, economical, cultural, social, ecological, pastoral and in terms of human rights).

I think that it is very important to be able clearly to define the role of diakonia and its relationship to proclamation. The constant tension between the two is due to the fact that our church has not clearly defined what it understands by mission. If it is a part of mission, diakonia should assume the responsibility for specifying its witnessing action according to the context. In this sense diakonia evangelizes, and proclamation, considered an essential part of mission, depends on the Word being acted out. But, what does this mean in everyday life? How do we give expression to these statements?

The diaconal ministry has consolidated itself as a ministry alongside the pastoral ministry. Its incumbents have the same rights and obligations as those of the pastoral ministry (similar wages, statutes for each ministry, etc.); they are authorized to hold services including the Eucharist, and all other pastoral duties (weddings, funerals, baptisms, confirmations, etc.), provided there is no pastor (male or female) in the community; it has its own statutes, which take into consideration the special characteristics of this ministry and the issues that are shared with the pastoral ministry. At the Instituto Universitario de Estudios Teológicos, the church offers training for the diaconal ministry. Candidates must have completed their theological studies. [...]

## **Botswana: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Botswana**

*Eva David*

[...] The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Botswana has not yet established a special diaconal ministry although it has trained and ordained seven deacons. The first deacon was ordained in 1995 and, for practical reasons, installed as a pastor in 2002. Five deacons are serving in the congregation as leaders, administering the sacraments (baptism and Holy Communion).

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Botswana is silent about the diaconal ministry. This leads to confusion and a lack of understanding among those who do not differentiate between the pastoral and the diaconal ministry. There is still a need for clarity. Gender issues are also a concern since all deacons are female. They are considered helpers to the pastors or are working under the office of the pastor. They do not have their own office.

HIV is prevalent in Botswana; therefore the churches are urged to take part in the fight against HIV. Each congregation needs to have a deacon to carry out this service. [...]

## **Canada: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC)**

*Monika Denk*

[...] The ELCIC is the result of a recent merger of two church bodies (1986), one of which had a consecrated office of diaconess.

The term “diaconal minister” was chosen to be inclusive of men and women, and the term “lay” was for clearly limiting the word “ordination” to pastors.

Since September 2005, after recommendation, review and approval of committees and the National Church Council, the use of “lay” has been discontinued in recognition of the “rostered status” and the title “deacon” has replaced the term “diaconal minister.”

Canada has a strong tradition of funding and delivering health care and social services through government services. Lutherans have largely been satisfied with this system. Where Lutherans have developed typical diaconal ministries providing health care and social services, they have been satisfied to hire employees without diaconal training. Neither the church nor the agencies pressed for a greater development of the diaconal ministry beyond typical government employment models.

Pastors have held a primary and central role in the leadership of the ELCIC and its predecessor bodies. Deacons have been regarded as a threat to pastors rather than a complement to Word and sacrament and a way further to expand and fulfill mission and ministry.

The World Council of Churches’ (WCC) document on the model of the threefold order of ministry has contributed to the impetus and establishment of the diaconal ministry in the ELCIC.

Geography has also been a developmental factor. One of the places where we see deacons assisting and enabling the laity, bishops and pastors to carry out their mission is when deacons are assigned pastoral and sacramental duties, such as for interim ministries when a regularly ordained pastor is not available. Although it has a solid historical precedent, is consistent with furthering the mission of the church, and furthers the

cooperative and interdependent roles and relationships of all the laity, including bishops and pastors, this is the most controversial of the roles deacons are engaged in.

Deacons having sacramental duties are generally perceived as “substitute pastors,” but the biblical and ecclesiastical foundations of this deserve to be better recognized. The perception of the deacon as a substitute pastor often overlooks the role and responsibilities of the bishop, and the historical precedents of the deacon being an extension of the bishop and part of the bishop’s team. [...]

## **Finland: The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF)**

***Matti Repo***

[...] At present there is no need to fight for establishing or continuing a diaconal ministry in the ELCF. According to the Church Order, every local parish is obliged to hire at least one deacon or deaconess. However, some characteristics in the present ministerial structures need to be clarified since they affect the identity of the diaconal ministry itself. Unfortunately the diaconal ministry is often regarded as the church’s independent charitable service without proper connection to the church’s sacramental life. The deacons and deaconesses, although deeply committed, do not have a natural link to worship. This not only obscures their spiritual self-understanding, but also damages the diaconal dimension of the church’s sacramental character. Deacons and deaconesses are allowed to assist the pastor administer the sacrament, but this is based on their being church members. The local vicar can invite anyone deemed appropriate to give a sermon or to assist in the Holy Communion. Thus it seems difficult for those in the diaconal ministry to recognize their charitable ministry as a continuation, or practical dimension, of sacramental worship.

Another problem is the paltry understanding of diaconal ordination in the ELCF. Since the diaconal ministry is regarded as being essential for the church, the issue of the proper ordination of deacons is of vital importance. Although deacons and deaconesses are episcopally consecrated in the ELCF, there is no necessary link between the liturgical act of consecration and their practical work in a parish. The deacons are clothed in an alb. The presiding diocesan bishop lays his hands on each candidate, prays for the gift of the Holy Spirit

and puts a stole on each candidate's shoulder. This act includes all the elements of an ordination, yet it remains disputed whether the candidates become members of the ordained ministry or not. The consecration takes place immediately after the candidates have completed their studies either in the diocesan cathedral or in some major church building in the town where the institute is located. This practice is reminiscent of the *Mutterhaus* model although, since as early as 1927, the consecration of deacons has been conducted by a bishop rather than a representative of the institute. However, a person can receive episcopal consecration upon concluding his—or usually her—studies at the institute without ever actually entering the church's ministry. Some become nurses in a hospital, while others find another profession. On the other hand, those serving in a parish do not have a properly approved position in the church's ministerial structure but are regarded as lay persons.

During the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, the diaconal ministry has been articulated in the context of interpreting diakonia as the humble and unselfish serving of Christ in the neighbor: Christ present in the hungry and the poor, the sick and the needy, etc. (*cf.* Mt 25). While there is nothing wrong with or questionable about this good Christian attitude, it must be made clear that this is motivation for all Jesus' followers, not anything particular to those ordained to be ministers. "Love thy neighbor" is not an appointment to ministry; it is everyone's vocation in the common priesthood of all believers.

In this sense, the narrative in Acts 6 should not be used uncritically in relationship to the diaconal ministry. In the narrative, the seven men are called and sent to take care of the (Greek speaking) needy in the Jerusalem congregation. Through the apostolic imposition of hands and the prayer to the Holy Spirit (*epiclesis*) they are also authorized to proclaim the gospel, to baptize and to take care of the church funds for supporting the needy. According to newer exegesis, the ministry of deacons in the Early Church is not characterized by the humble and meek "serving at the table" but, on the contrary, it can be described as a ministry of an emissary, a "go-between," a servant sent by someone higher.<sup>1</sup>

Many deacons and deaconesses have come from a spiritual background with an emphasis on Christian ideals of humility and meekness. The traditional concept of the diaconal ministry, according to which the deacons and deaconesses have been educated in the institutes inside the ELCF, has not been helpful in realizing the ministry's prophetic character.

The strengths of the present concept are in good training as well deacons' commitment to serving those in greatest need. However, too often this means



working solely among the older people in the parish since they are easier to contact, while younger people with other problems (disoriented youth, helpless young parents, the unemployed, alcoholics, drug addicts) fall through all supporting networks. While deacons/deaconesses are very involved in pastoral counseling, the ties of their ministry to worship life are too occasional and sparse. This diminishes the spiritual dimension in their service.

Besides the approximately 1500 full-time deacons and deaconesses, the ELCF employs an equal number of full-time youth ministers, who have been trained with the deacons, (concentrating on questions of Christian education), but who are not consecrated according to any rite. Their contribution to the church's diakonia is considerable, also in relation to its charitable and social dimensions. On the whole, these ministries were established after WWII. Lacking the history of nineteenth-century diaconal institutes, their ministry seems somewhat more flexible and hence better suited to adapting to contemporary social challenges. But again, the problems of their integration into the church structures are even more evident: the position of their ministry in a local parish is not secured in church legislation, and their connections to sacramental life are as sparse as those of the deacons. The ELCF is currently working on these problems and aims to integrate the youth ministers into the diaconate. Moreover, the church is moving into a clearer understanding of diaconal ordination and adopting a pattern of threefold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon.

Summing up I would suggest: first, it is crucial that all local parishes have one or more deacons to take care of the social responsibilities and to enhance the Christian upbringing of children and youth. Second, deacons need to be ordained and integrated into the church's ministerial structures. Third, their ordination already indicates that the diaconal ministry has a connection to worship life and is itself a vital dimension of the gospel, rooted in the sacramental and liturgical self-understanding of the church. [...]

## Germany: The Evangelical Church in Germany

### *Petra Thobaben*

[...] Diakonia is the mandate and expression of the congregation's way of life. The *communio sanctorum* is the lived presence of Christ in the Eucharist and in brotherly and sisterly love. Diakonia results from Christ's pres-

ence and the concerns for the social community. Diakonia is professional and needs to be organized in such a way that it meets the congregation's needs. Diaconal activities and services are anchored in the congregation. Diaconal work depends on its roots within the congregation. This elementary relationship must be maintained and supported.

Even if in some churches the diaconate is ordered on the basis of church law, its indispensable ecclesiological dimension comprises the whole congregation. The diaconate highlights the reciprocal dependency of service to God and service in the community. The diaconal task and, therefore, a particular way of life are combined in the diaconate.

The diaconate is part of the elementary unity of Christian faith expressing faith and social involvement. Just as spirituality and reflection belong to the Christian faith, spiritual deepening and theological qualification form a part of the diaconal task. Social competence and professional ability are preconditions for the diaconal task as lived faith.

Those who have agreed to take on specific diaconal responsibilities and obligations can be officially employed by the church in a diaconal capacity. A precondition for this is professional training, including theological qualifications. Belonging to a diaconal community strengthens diaconal identity and lived spirituality. Diaconal communities are communities in the diaconate. [...]

## **Indonesia: Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP)**

*Nelson Siregar*

[...] Since 1971, the deaconess' position has been formally accepted in the HKBP. Deaconesses are consecrated by the church leader and have the same rights and tasks as others in the church such as pastors, teachers, preachers and "biblevrow" (bible women). Nowadays, deaconesses lead a congregation replacing the teacher/preacher as its leader. The consequence is a blurring of the deaconesses' specific diaconal responsibility carried out with professional skill. This has resulted in the reducing of the church's role to helping the poor, the marginalized, the uprooted and oppressed.

During Holy Communion (*cf.* Acts 2: 42 – 46), there has always been a visible awareness of developing solidarity with others. That means, celebrat-

ing Holy Communion demonstrates a social aspect and carries a diaconal dimension. Paul was upset when he found that the poor were set back during Holy Communion (1 Cor 11:17–33). This explains that Holy Communion is not about eating and drinking, but a matter of the church's social role and its spirit to be in solidarity with the poor. Therefore, Holy Communion and diakonia (the church's social role) are closely interrelated.

Taking this as a starting point, it seems that historically the church in its liturgy has held together praying, preaching and diakonia. This is why deacons have to be involved at the altar, to serve at the Lord's Table. Liturgy is the starting point of diakonia. Maybe this is why according to church tradition one can become a pastor after having been a deacon. And, conversely, someone who has no experience of or interest in diakonia is not suited to becoming a pastor. The task of the bishop, as the successor of the apostles, is not only to pray and preach. The bishop is also responsible for diakonia, and the deacons/deaconesses are his colleagues. [...]

## **Japan: The Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church (JELC)**

*Emi Harada*

[...] The JELC does not have a formalized diaconal ministry or deacons. There are social activities in various fields, involving pastors and laypersons who work together with non-Christians. This in itself is a witness.

There are two reasons why there is no diaconal ministry in the JELC. The first is an historical one. According to Japanese law, religious organizations, social welfare organizations, educational organizations (schools), etc. must be independent of one another, that is, separate juridical entities. Each body is administered independently, and it is difficult to maintain personal or financial connections between church and social welfare bodies. The second one is financial. Social welfare bodies are allowed to receive subsidies. Since these are taken from taxes, the welfare bodies are required to be separate from a particular religion. That makes it difficult for Christian institutions to reveal the spirit of Christianity in their work.

The challenge we face is that the awareness that diakonia is not an option, but an essential part of discipleship, has not yet infiltrated the JELC deeply or widely enough. [...]

## Malaysia: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia

*Margaret Abishegam*

[...] I believe that it is not enough to tell non-Christians that Jesus loves them without actually demonstrating God's love through our deeds, namely diaconal service. Every church, Lutheran or otherwise, should set up a diaconal ministry which will not only enable the church to be a shining witness to God in this dark world in which we live (Mt 5:16), but also obey our Lord's commandment to provide for the hungry and thirsty, the strangers, the naked and sick, the prisoners (Mt 25:35 & 36). [...]

## Nigeria: The Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria (LCCN)

*Japheth Mallum Mishikir*

[...] Before I started work on this paper, I was convinced the LCCN has neither deacons nor deaconesses. However, after some research and interviews, I came to the conclusion that the LCCN has a diaconal ministry, but that it is practiced differently from other churches. Within the LCCN, there are a number of special ministries in place each one of them focusing on a distinct aspect of the church's mission: the pastoral ministry, catechetical ministry, evangelical ministry, presbyterian ministry, ministry of Elders, missionary ministry.

Many local churches indirectly incorporate the roles of the office of the deacon into those of the Elders. In *Tithe and Offering in the Church*, I suggested that the Elders should ensure that the tithe and offerings should be used to take care of widows and orphans, the disabled and the poor, the strangers. Therefore, the LCCN has been carrying out diakonia as an essential dimension of its witness to the gospel, but according to a different model from the diaconate outlined in Scripture. I am convinced that the LCCN practices diakonia in disguise.

The seven men (Acts 6) were elected to serve at the table. They were to see to the needs of the murmuring Hellenist widows who were neglected in the daily distribution (diakonia). Acts 6:1-6 explicitly tells us that their first responsibility was serving at tables. However, in the following chapter one interesting fact transpires. After the election, the distinction between the roles of the two among the seven and those of the apostles soon became blurred. We read that immediately following the naming of the *diakonos* (deacon), Stephen carried out great won-

ders and signs among the people and his opponents could not withstand the wisdom and spirit with which he spoke (Acts 6:8-10). The same Stephen also delivered a lengthy sermon in Acts 7. Immediately after Stephen's death, Philip went to preach the Word, perform signs of healing (Acts 8:4-12), and baptize the Ethiopian eunuch after explaining Scripture to him.

One can say, without hesitation, that in the New Testament the deacon's role is more than merely attending to the needs of individuals or serving at tables. In addition, they also preached the Word. One of the church fathers, John Calvin, said that the deacon's duty is meeting people's physical needs. I agree with this idea, for it is just like saying, "let there be specific area of specialization," "let there be proper division of labor," "let there be professionalism, let us develop expertise." This does not mean that one cannot also perform additional duties when and where necessary.

The original meaning of the term "deacon" is "one who waits at tables." In Luke 10:40, Martha was busy with diakonia, or serving at the table. Therefore, although we have emphasized the idea of specialization, the confining of the deacon's work, task or role to material concerns only ought not to be unduly stressed. The spiritual and physical must go together, but it is impossible for one effectively to handle the two together at the same time. This was what the apostles discovered they could not do.

An especially designated diaconal ministry in the LCCN would provide an atmosphere in which the church would be able to identify, analyze and categorize its contexts as well as the diaconal response called for. As noted earlier, the LCCN has been engaged in diaconal work in such a way, that elements of diaconal ministry are assigned to other office bearers. With an established diaconal ministry, the church would be able to live out, articulate and interpret its diaconal services in schools, hospitals, orphanages, nursing homes, prisons, refugee camps, remand homes etc. and the church itself and thus to bear witness to the reality of God's in-breaking reign in Christ. [...]

## **Sweden: The Church of Sweden**

*Ninni Smedberg*

[...] In 1999, following the decision regarding the Church of Sweden's new role and new church order, the church synod decided completely to inte-

grate the diaconate into the ministry. The local manifestation of the Church of Sweden is the parish, the primary unit within the church. The functions of the parish are to worship, teach and to exercise a pastoral/diaconal and evangelistic ministry. The intention is that people might come to faith in Christ and live in that faith, creating and deepening a Christian community. The kingdom of God will thus be extended and creation restored.

As members of one and the same body, the entire people of God are called to spread the gospel. Baptism is the basic consecration to service and to share in the common mission of the church. The church's ordained ministry exists to serve within and on behalf of the church. Ordination takes place within the church's fellowship and the ministry so conferred is exercised in the parish. Individuals are called and ordained to lifelong ministry in order to build up the spiritual health of the parish and to equip it for its mission in the world. It does not take away the responsibility from the laity, but exists to enliven and promote the church's mission in response to God's call.

The office of bishop is a sign of the church's continuity throughout the ages, its unity and worldwide communion. Together with the diocesan council (*domkapitel*) the bishop is responsible for seeing that the church's doctrine and order are adhered to; his/her role also includes being a leader and source of inspiration for the diocese. The bishop ordains women and men to the various functions of the ordained ministry and is a shepherd for them as well as for the parishes of the diocese.

The office of priest is a sign that the church and the Christian faith receive their spiritual nourishment from the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. As *verbi divini minister* (servant of the divine word) the priest, faithful to his/her calling, should proclaim the gospel purely and clearly, bring new members into the church through baptism, lead the celebration of Holy Communion and pronounce God's forgiveness giving the congregation comfort and hope. The priest should build up the parish, teach the faith, provide pastoral care and equip its members for witness and service to the world. The priest is at the same time servant and shepherd of the parish.

The deacon is responsible for carrying out acts of love and mercy, particularly toward the vulnerable. Tasks vary depending on local needs, the structures of the parish and diaconal priorities. The ministry is focused on works of charity. Wherever there is human need the deacon should intervene and encourage others to take responsibility.

Diaconal responsibility is naturally anchored in acts of worship. Having recovered the diaconate as a special commission in the church, it is important that the anchorage in worship service be maintained. The diaconal ministry, commissioned to proclaim the gospel in deeds, has its starting point in the fellowship of the means of grace in worship. Together with the ministries of bishop and priest it is a natural part of the constitutive ministry of the church (*cf.* CA V).

Deacons remind the church of its calling to serve in the world. By struggling in Christ's name with innumerable social and personal needs, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in the life of the church. They share in leading the worship of the congregation: for example by reading the Scriptures, preaching and leading the people in prayer. They help teach the congregation and exercise a ministry of love within the community. They fulfill certain administrative tasks and may be elected to responsibilities for governance.

Questions from the Ordinal:

- Will you, in the name of the Triune God, accept the ministry of deacon and exercise this ministry to the glory of God, the building up of the church so that God's will may be realized throughout the world?
- Will you stand firm in the faith of the church and defend it, help those who need your service and stand at the side of the oppressed?
- Will you, in your ministry, follow and protect the order of your church and follow Christ's example in your calling?
- Will you live among people as a witness to God's love and the mystery of reconciliation? [...]

## **Tanzania: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT)**

### ***Elitana Kitahenga***

[...] Under the umbrella of the Federation, the seven Tanzanian Lutheran churches merged in 1963 to become a single church known as the ELCT. The

ELCT is the second largest church in Tanzania after the Roman Catholic Church and evangelism and mission its principal activities.

Traditional African societies have always regarded the disabled and needy as an integral part of their social structure, and family and community members were obliged to be on good terms with all those who had an impairment. Consequently, disabled people always received help. There was neither segregation nor open discrimination. People feared God who was furious and could punish everyone for their iniquities. A major motive for exercising charity was that the improper handling of people with disabilities was likely to result in similar misfortune.

In the process of modernization, people started to ignore these good traditional values. African political and social transformations have largely contributed to this trend: family ties are loosening, egoism is growing. It is the weak members of society who are suffering the most. Today, some people are unaware of the existence of the various disabilities within the community. Voluntary involvement in rendering social services has decreased.

In an attempt to counteract this trend, the church is providing various services through its different programs. Individuals, groups, the church, the government and non-governmental organizations are carrying out a number of charitable activities. Through diakonia the church anticipates to convey the Good News. Thus, diaconal work complements the pastoral ministry.

Within the ELCT, the diaconal ministry—as a specific, set-apart ministry of individuals (called, trained and ordained) to form one part of the special (clerical) ministry of the church—is not uniformly recognized. Only about twenty-five percent of the ELCT units have ordered this ministry by calling, training and ordaining people as deacons (or sisters—only three units), empowering them with special ecclesiastical authority and assigning them special (diaconal) duties.

Within these units, the definition and general comprehension of diakonia differ greatly. Generally, the diaconal ministry is not placed on an equal footing with the pastoral ministry. A deacon is regarded as inferior and subject to the pastor; lower qualifications suffice to become deacon; a pastor can become a deacon but not vice versa; liturgical vestments of deacons are not nationally uniform and well recognized as is the case with pastors. Influential in shaping the emerging diaconal ministry is the church's general recognition that through diaconical activities the essence of Jesus Christ's discipleship is meaningfully expressed. This understanding has also been informed by missionaries from European mother churches.



This understanding is supported by the traditional way of life where community leaders, to whom spiritual leaders belonged, were also fully responsible for the welfare of the disadvantaged members of their society. Each community leader had to make sure that vulnerable people in his territory were safeguarded and not deprived of their basic rights.

After obtaining the required qualifications (diaconal and theological studies, special training in different social service fields and examination of faith) candidates are ordained for life as deacons (or sisters) by a bishop. This is done openly in a special church service. A deacon is invested with all ecclesiastical rights and duties except for conducting wedding ceremonies. He can preach, conduct different church services, perform pastoral counseling and administer the sacraments.

Christianity is a foreign culture with regard to the African social context. It needs ongoing contextualisation in order to bear fruit. Basic components of the church's mission need to be well observed and practiced: liturgy and diakonia are an inseparable pair. The ministries of preaching the Word of God and of doing charitable work complement each other. They are like a human being's two legs which work together to enable the body to move. Both the pastoral and the diaconal ministry deserve equal status in the carrying out of the mission of the church, as was lived by Jesus himself. [...]

## **Zimbabwe: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ)**

### ***Naison Shava***

[...] In its programs, the ELCZ seeks to address marginalization and its consequences. In its structure it has put diaconal and stewardship institutions in place. In 2000, the church introduced the office of deacon to underline the importance of diaconal work. Of late, health services have incorporated the HIV/AIDS program. The holistic approach to health and healing includes preaching, teaching and healing as a three legged pot.

The diaconal ministry is an integral part of the ELCZ's overall ministry and occupies an important space in the body of the church. Through its diaconal ministry, the ELCZ seeks to move from charity to self-help. [...]

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Cf.* John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

# Lutheran Ethics at the Intersections of God's One World

*Edited by Rev. Dr Karen L. Bloomquist, director of the Department for Theology and Studies, on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation, LWF Studies, ISBN 3-905676-47-8, CHF 18, USD 15, EUR 12, plus postage and packing.*

In today's world, there are significantly different ethical perspectives even within one confessional tradition. These perspectives vary with cultural context, history, politics, gender, ethnic and interreligious dynamics. The book sheds light on how these different perspectives intersect and influence the ways ethical challenges are viewed and evaluated.

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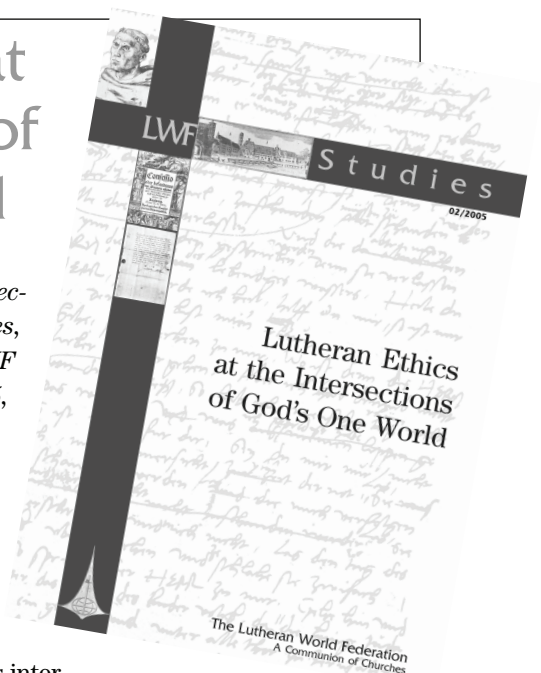
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Authors include Per Anderson, Karen L. Bloomquist, András Csepregi, Wanda Deifelt, Elisabeth Gerle, Puleng Lenka Bula, Phillip Moeahabo Moila, Hans G. Ulrich and Wai Man Yuen.

For further information, please contact the Department for Theology and Studies, The Lutheran World Federation, 150 route de Ferney, P.O. Box 2100, CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland, or by e-mail: [liesch@lutheranworld.org](mailto:liesch@lutheranworld.org)





The main presentations, regional reports and final statement of a global consultation on the diaconal ministry are brought together in this publication. Churches are challenged to reexamine how they understand and order the diaconal ministry as an expression of diakonia as a core component of the church's mission in society.

The Lutheran World Federation  
150, rte de Ferney  
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Switzerland

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