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SOME HISTORICAL ASPECTS ON THE RENEWAL OF THE DIACONATE

The history of the diaconate is a story of rise and decline and of a growing interest in restoration. A common aspect of much written about the diaconate in recent years can simply be seen as an effort to renew the ministry of the deacon.¹ Theologians and deacons as well have in mind the early form of the diaconate: how the Church dealt with her social responsibility; how the different ministries of bishop, priest and deacon came into existence; how the different functions of each group were at that time, and how they underwent changes. To come to a common understanding about the diaconate in our time, which is the purpose of this joint research project, could therefore with advantage be seen in a historic context. A main target could be that the different churches should learn about each other's history and try to discover the consequences of a common or different historical development. A common understanding of today's situation, in a historical context, would also be of help in identifying the right areas of research needed.

¹ Strohm, Theodor: Erneuerung des Diakonats als ökumenische Aufgabe-Einführung, in Erneuerung des Diakonats als ökumenische Aufgabe-Einführung. Diakoniewissenschaftliche Studien, vol. 7, Diakoniewissenschaftliches Institut an der Universität Heidelberg 1996, p.11f.

This paper will very briefly point out some features of one or two historical periods that have been important for the diaconate. The purpose is to show that the Anglo-Nordic Diaconal Research Project is in a sort of continuation with processes in earlier historical periods, where efforts were made to discuss and to renew the diaconate. These were periods in which the diaconate was explicitly discussed and periods in which implicitly the diaconate was affected by general changes in Church and society. Three central periods will be mentioned: first, the Reformation period, because of the basic change in the understanding of the Church in that period, and the consequences of that for the ordained ministry in general and the diaconate in particular; secondly, the 19th century, with its rethinking of the Church's responsibility for the poor and its efforts to re-establish the early Church diaconate, and thirdly and very briefly the initiatives in the 20th century. In general, volume 1 of this project² is also to be recommended for its coverage of these areas.

The Reformation Period

Until the Reformation in the 16th century, the Churches of the Porvoo Communion had a common history as parts of the one Church. After that, they were separated, and, as far as the diaconate was concerned, the Church of England retained the deacon as a part of the threefold ministry and as a transitional

² Borgegård, G. and Hall, C. (eds.), *The Ministry of the Deacon, vol. 1: Anglican-Lutheran Perspectives*, Uppsala 1999, hereafter referred to as MOD1.

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ministry. There were intentions to return to the ancient roots, but no specific consideration was given to the nature or purpose of the diaconate, or to its need to be reformed in the light of contemporary circumstances or more ancient models.³ The English Church retained the mediaeval concept of order, with its emphasise on the primacy of the priesthood. The transitional diaconate lasted usually one year before ordination to the priesthood.

The Lutheran Churches for many reasons left this tradition. Protestants in general rejected the hierarchical order of ministries, with its strong differentiation between the *clerus* and the ministry of all believers. Secondly, they removed the central role of the bishop, which included all the basic ministerial functions, including the diaconate. The parish priest was given a new role as bishop in the congregation, without any specific qualification, compared with the ministry of all believers. The diaconate was transformed to be the responsibility of all believers. In their actual life situation in '*status oeconomicus*', '*status politicus*' and '*status ecclesiasticus*', each Christian was considered ordained to the ministry of the deacon. They were all called to be neighbours and to take responsibility for each other. The doctrine of the two regiments was basic to that view, maintaining that God reigns in the world through two regiments, the secular regiment and the spiritual regiment. The secular regiment is also responsible to God. This opposition to a monolithic understanding of the Church in the mediaeval period, led to the situation

³ See Christine Hall: The Deacon in the Church of England, in MOD 1, pp.184ff.

where the state and the individual were more highly esteemed than they had ever been in Catholic times.

For the diaconate, which mostly dealt with the poor, the consequences, in the Lutheran tradition, were that the mayor and members of the city council, every father and Christian in general, was considered called to be a deacon. The doctrine of the two regiments, the theology of the freedom of man through faith by the grace of God, and the idea that all people are called by God, where they are, in church or society, made a new platform for Christian identity and life, with serious consequences for the understanding of responsibility towards one's neighbour. This was even stated in many of the church constitutions in the 16th century.⁴

There were meanwhile distinct differences between the Lutheran and Calvinist Churches, because Calvin and the Reformed Churches looked at the congregation as subject of the diaconate, more than the ministry of all believers as subject.⁵ The role of the deacon became more distinct in these churches from the beginning, and these models influenced Lutherans in the 19th century, as we shall see later on. However, in spite of Luther's emphasis on the relationship between faith and love and the ministry of all believers, he also saw the importance of a diaconate based in the congregation. It was meanwhile a

⁴ Strohm, p.25

⁵ For more documentation on the Reformed Churches see McKee, Elsie Anne, *Diakonie in der klassischen reformierten Tradition und heute*, in *Erneuerung des Diakonats als ökumenische Aufgabe-Einführung. Diakoniewissenschaftliche Studien*, bd. 7, pp.35ff.

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question of capacity. In a confusing situation it was difficult to find the right people. A sermon, preached on St. Stephens's Day, 1523, on the text Acts 6:1ff contains a distinct reference to the diaconate of the early Church. It was to be taken as an ideal of the Church, and it is quite clear that social responsibility belongs to the spiritual regiment of the Church.

While the deacon's position is clearly defined in canon law at the Reformation period, in the Church of England⁶, it is not mentioned at all in the important Lutheran document *Confessio Augustana* in 1530. Chapter V, on ministry, defines the ordained ministry as a preaching ministry of word and sacrament. That has later on exclusively been understood as the priest's ministry. The challenge in our time is to discuss the tradition of the mono-presbyterate, and to argue against what may from time to time be characterised as a presbyteral fundamentalism. For both historical and theological reasons, the Norwegian scholar, Oscar Skarsaune, finds it difficult to defend the mono-presbyterate position. Rather than argue for a single ministry, he argues for an understanding of the ministry of the Church based on the variety of ministries which came to expression in the New Testament, and which was transferred from the apostles to their followers.⁷

⁶ Hall, in MOD1, p186.

⁷ Skarsaune, Oskar: 'Det tredelte embete og det ene', (The threefold ministry and the one), i *Tidsskrift for teologi og kirke*, 1/99.

The 19th Century

According to Theodor Strohm, it is not easy to describe the history of the renewal of the diaconate in German Protestantism. Strohm is referring to the land that fostered so many important people, who had the idea of restoring the Church's social responsibility in the 19th century. After all that, the main question of restoring the ministry of the deacon as part of the threefold ministry is still unsolved.⁸ However, that question was put on the agenda at a very early stage. By 1835 the canon law of the church in Rhineland-Westphalia had introduced the ministry of the deacon under the ministry of the priest. Their model was the Reformed Church of the Netherlands and of Scotland. That same year, Theodor Fliedner (1800–1864) founded the first deaconess house in Kaiserswerth in Rhineland-Westphalia, which came to be the model for several other houses and later on for a whole movement. This is not the place to deal with the entire history of deaconesses, but it is worth mentioning that Wilhelm Löhe (1808–1872), a priest in Neuen-dettelsau, who also started an education programme for deaconesses, built more on the model of the deaconess based in the congregation, than on the Fliedner model, in which the deaconess was strongly linked to the sisterhood and the institution.

The most prominent nineteenth century person dealing with the diaconate would seem to have been Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808–1881), the founder of the first institution that trained men for social service in Rauhes Haus in Hamburg. He started

⁸ Strohm, p.26f.

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⁹ Beyreuther, *Er
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his career as a Sunday school teacher and saw very early on the bad condition that many children lived in. The social situation combined with a growing interest in socialist ideas and the revolution in 1848 was the background against which he spoke to the Church Synod in Wittenberg in 1849. In a one-hour improvised talk on the topic '*The Inner Mission and the German Evangelical Church*', he set up a programme for the Church, on how to deal with the social situation. The conclusion was the establishment of '*Central-Ausschusses für die Innere Mission*', with Wichern as the leader.

Within Wichern's plan for church renewal and strategies for social engagement, lies the question of the diaconate. In a meeting in February 1855, together with the king, as head of the church, Wichern talked about the relationship between the church, the state and the civil society in relation to the question of the care of the poor. The king was satisfied, and they also discussed the king's dream of restoring the ancient threefold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon.⁹ The king then announced a synod, at which the question could be taken up again, and Wichern met with Fliedner and other representatives at the important conference in 1856 in Möbitz outside Berlin. The conference was called together by King Friedrich Wilhelm IV, on the subject, *Die Diakonie und der Diakonat* (*Diakonia* and the diaconate). The question of the ordination of deacons and deaconesses was on the agenda.

⁹ Beyreuther, Erich: *Gesichte der Diakonie und Inneren Mission in der Neuzeit. Dritte erweiterte Auflage*. Berlin 1983, p.119.

Wichern wrote a paper for this synod, *Gutachten, die Diakonie und Diakonat betreffend*, which came to be an introduction to his principle thoughts on the question. He saw the diaconate as the structural consequence of the social responsibility of the Church. It had to be more than a ministry of all believers. *Diakonia* is a product of God's revelation because God himself is a deacon, and with the coming of Christ reveals the full *diakonia*.¹⁰ For Wichern, *diakonia* was the inner structure of the congregation, and the ministry of the deacon was first and foremost the ministry to the poor. The deacon was neither the servant of the priest nor of the congregation. He was a servant of God and a co-partner of the pastor.

Wichern and Fliedner both agreed that the evangelical church should have a ministry of deacon. For Fliedner the deacon's ministry was a ministry grown out of the congregation and directed to the congregation. It had to be properly backed up by different free societies. Wichern proposed that the diaconate should be based on the apostolic diaconate, if it were to have any effect on the renewal of the diaconal responsibility of the church. He thought of the diaconate as an independent ministry of the church, which in itself was a position within the order of ministries. That would really proclaim a full solidarity with the poor.

Wichern also differentiated between the free and the public (*freien und bürgerlich*) *diakonia*. That means that, in addition

¹⁰ Haas, Hanns-Stephan: *Der Diakonat als unerledigte Vision*, in Gohde, Jürgen/ Haas, Hanns-Stephan: *Wichern erinnern – Diakonie provozieren*, Hanover 1998, pp.106ff.

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¹⁴ Haas, p

to the permanent diaconate, he defined a free charity work in church organisations, for example the Inner Mission.¹¹ Fliedner had a narrower perspective on the permanent diaconate. He compared it with the presbyterate. However, in addition to the permanent diaconate on the parish level, Wichern thought of an archidiaconate, which would be the co-ordinator of the work in each church province.

The result of the Mobijou conference was that Wichern's ideas were neither accepted in the Calvinist dominated circles of the conference, nor in the mono-presbyterate dominated circles. In fact the whole question has been left unsolved until today.¹² Erich Beyreuther, a writer on the history of *diakonia*, points out that Wichern's ideas were accepted by the king, who, as *summus episcopus* and head of the church, could establish an archidiaconate through a royal decree. However, as always when it came to making a decision, the king refused to act.¹³ The German theologian Hans-Stephan Haas reminds us that in all cases the more or less utopian ideas of the diaconate should be more reflected in today's thinking.¹⁴ On the question of the diaconate is it not enough to discuss ecclesiology; the basic question of *diakonia per se* must also be discussed.

The more practical consequences of the conference were that more emphasis was placed on the role of the brotherhoods and sisterhoods. Wichern talked about brother houses, but he

¹¹ Strohm, p. 27.

¹² Strohm, p. 28.

¹³ Beyreuther, p. 120.

¹⁴ Haas, p. 118

refused to use the word deacon's ministry. At the end of the nineteenth century the people educated in male institutions were more usually defined as and called workers of the Inner Mission.¹⁵

The 20th Century

The concept of *diakonia* has been on the international agenda almost since the formation of World Council of Churches (WCC), as Sven-Erik Brodd states, but the diaconate has not been dealt with in the same way in this century. The real breakthrough for the discussion of the diaconate within the WCC framework seems to have been the so-called Lima document of the Faith and Order Commission, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), published in 1982. Here the diaconate is given a place within the threefold ministry.¹⁶ What we see in the Lima document is a departure from the idea of the mono-presbyterate to a more flexible understanding of the ordained ministry, and with a concentration on the threefold ministry. The document caused much discussion, but it is a fact that even the churches that were critical of it are slowly moving towards the BEM position.¹⁷

The historic challenge to restore the diaconate has taken different directions in the different churches since the Reformation,

¹⁵ Häusler Michael: 'Dienst an Kirche und Volk'. *Die Deutsche Diakonenschaft zwischen beruflicher Emanzipation und kirchlicher Formierung (1913-1947)*, p.23ff.

¹⁶ Brodd, Sven-Erik: An Escalating Phenomenon: The Diaconate from an Ecumenical Perspective, in MOD1, p.11ff.

¹⁷ Brodd, MOD1, p18.

though there seem to be some over-riding issues: either the process starts from the position of a threefold ministry and moves towards understanding a distinct permanent diaconate, or it starts from a traditional mono-presbyteral understanding of the diaconate and moves to a more flexible and differentiated understanding. In all cases what seems to be at issue is the theological understanding of the Church, how to deal with ecclesiology historically and how to understand the mission of the Church in our time.

In addition to that, there is a question of how ministry is to be understood. The churches that have accepted the threefold ministry have to clarify the deacon's ministry as a distinct permanent ministry. The churches still defending the mono-presbyterate have to clarify the deacon's role in relation to the ministry of the priest and the ministry of all believers. The concepts of relationality and representation are in that case important to discuss. The question of *diakonia* itself seems also to be fundamental in relation to the *proprium* of the deacon. The ordination, education, and spirituality of the deacon, the deacon's liturgical role and also the role of the deacon as defender of the poor are all fundamental issues, and for these the reader is referred to the following articles of this book.

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