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THE DIACONATE: MINISTRY OF PROPHECY AND TRANSFORMATION

'We are ordinary servants; we have only done our duty.'

(LUKE 17:10)

The purpose of this article is to posit a line of interpretation of the diaconate that starts from the perspective of ecclesiology and relates to very basic questions of the Church's identity and mandate. What does it mean to be the Church of Jesus Christ in today's world? Does this identity imply a specific way of being, in order to respond to the mandate given by the Lord? How is the Church incarnated in the human reality of which she forms part? What impact does this have on the diaconate?

This line of interpretation is suggested in the context of the fact that there are basic differences in understanding the diaconate, which soon appear when deacons from different churches begin to discuss it. For example, whilst Lutherans see deacons as belonging to the tradition of *diakonia*, traditionally understood as charity work organised by the Church and interpreted as rooted in the Greek concept of *diakonia*, Anglicans do not have quite this tradition. In their context, deacons have their role

according to the tradition of ordained ministry. It is therefore not immediately evident why exactly charity work should be a particular task for deacons. Within the Anglican setting, social responsibility has a well-rooted tradition, and often, under this heading, deacons are involved in charity work and other forms of social action. However, such responsibility has not been looked upon as the *proprium* of the diaconate, nor has it led to the development of an anglicised form of the word *diakonia*¹ to describe this activity. It should therefore be noted that in spite of the fact that churches both in the Anglican and the Lutheran traditions ordain deacons, the position and the self-understanding of an Anglican deacon may be quite different from that of a Lutheran deacon.²

Research has proved that references to Scripture and church history only give limited help in bridging these differences, since it is difficult to form a clear picture of the deacon's role and function in the time of the New Testament. The problem is not whether the diaconate has been part of the Church's ministry from the very beginning, but that major changes have occurred between what deacons were then and what they are today. It is therefore difficult to give a normative interpretation of the office of the deacon only from terminological or historical arguments.

¹ In a number of European languages (e.g. German and the Nordic languages), a form of the word *diakonia* appropriate to that language has been developed. The word 'deacony' has been coined in translation from those languages but is not in general use in English lexicography. See Hall, C., The Diaconate: Language and Expectation, in *Diaconate in Focus*, Chichester 2000.

² Cf. the broad description of the ministry of deacons within four of the Churches of the Porvoo Communion, in Borgegård, G. & Hall, C. (Eds.), *The Ministry of the Deacon*, Uppsala 1999.

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In the following attempt to take a different line of interpretation and to give the diaconate legitimacy through ecclesiological reflection, particular importance will be accorded to experiences in the South, and above all to the methodological approach of the Latin American Theology of Liberation. Here theory and praxis are deeply interwoven, which makes it necessary, when the church is being studied, to refer to sociology and to the normal behaviour of social organisms.

Furthermore, this method implies a critical perspective in relation to power and power structures, and a commitment to those placed at the periphery. Special reference will be made to the discussion within the Roman Catholic Church where there has been lively debate on this issue.

Finally, the concepts of 'prophecy' and 'transformation' have been chosen as possible expressions of the kind of role the diaconate may assume within an ecclesiological understanding. Both concepts are in current use within the ecumenical movement.³ 'Prophecy' means in this context critical opposition to structures and powers that cause injustice and exclusion, and also advocacy in favour of those who are victimised by these forces. The prophets of the Old Testament and their way of re-

³ In a report dated 23 March 2000 to the WCC Programme Committee, the Advisory Group on Regional Relations and Ecumenical Sharing comments on the overall context of globalisation and welcomes further reflection on ecumenical *diakonia*: 'In this context ecumenical *diakonia* cannot be divorced from prophetic *diakonia*. This in turn is intertwined with ecumenical advocacy, which places the affected people at the centre stage, acting as their own advocates. Ecumenical *diakonia* must thus embrace a variety of forms, including crisis intervention and direct aid for the victims, but it was also strongly affirmed that Christian commitment to diaconal action must be coupled with transformative prophetic *diakonia*, which is change-orientated and boldly addresses root causes.'

lating action to theological vision are the models for this role. 'Transformation' is now being preferred to concepts like 'social change' and 'development' because of its broader scope and ability to include theological dimensions.⁴

Centre and periphery

'Every institution attempts to monopolise imagination in the interest of order, propriety, purity, efficiency, competence, and control, while wanting at the same time to be democratic, porous, and open.'⁵ This statement by Walter Brueggemann is both of sociological and ecclesiological relevance. Social scientists have documented how institutions tend to develop mechanisms of maintenance and self-regulation. Even institutions that have been established for the benefit of others will normally and increasingly pay attention to matters that condition their own existence, reputation and ability to grow in importance.

Together with this, the culture of the organisation will normally develop a 'monopoly of imagination' that gives centralised power the right to decide what is meaningful and possible in determined situations. Some of us have met public welfare institutions that express an absolute centralised and monopolised structure, where, at the best, we are given the role of passive consumers of the services promised by these institutions.

⁴ 'Transformation is at the very root of our Christian faith. It is at the heart of the saving, redeeming and sanctifying acts of God.' Melancthon, Monica J., in *Koinonia and Mission*, a lecture given at the Lutheran World Federation Consultation on Churches in Mission, Nairobi, October 1998.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, Interpretation and Obedience, in *Faithful Reading to Faithful Living*, Minneapolis 1991, p. 189.

It is well known that political institutions may also take the form of monopolies, both in exercising power and in permitting imagination. History gives endless examples of political projects where any form of criticism is excluded. The authority of the ruler is then defined by referring to divine grace, to the will of the people, or to the right of the party and its ideology. Even post-modern society, which elsewhere shows profound scepticism about the very possibility of constructing social history, does not escape such centralising structures, but now the market and its logic are given the monopoly of imagination in political and social matters.

The question of power is worth studying in this shift from modern to post-modern society. A shift is observable from structural power, represented by political and social institutions, to what could be defined as ideological power, although very different from the time of the great political ideologies of modernism. The kind of ideological power that reigns in post-modernity may be described as power of definition, or power to set the agenda. It is the power to decide what is in and what is out, what is relevant and what is not. It is also the power to decide who should be heard and who should be silenced, to determine what is possible and what is not even worth attempting. Such power has heavy ideological weight since it presupposes standardised ideas concerning the human being (focusing on individualism) and society (focusing on new-liberal consumerism).

Thus post-modern ideology also exercises a 'monopoly of imagination' in a way that excludes different approaches to social life. Exclusion may take many forms, from political oppression, via economic and social marginalisation, to indifferent ignorance. This is not the point to enter further into that issue, but we are close here to a burning question for post-modern society, if we still want to be democratic and inclusive.

The question is whether these observations also have any relevance for the study of the Church and her way of being a social structure. It is evident that the biblical material reports on tensions between centre and periphery. The classical example in the Old Testament is the conflict between city and countryside, between kingdom and tribal systems. In the New Testament we see a similar tension between Jerusalem and Galilee, between the keepers of tradition and their centralised structures of power, on the one side, and popular belief on the other. What later happened to the Christian Church is known to all of us. Its centralised and monopolised power was given dominance and placed beyond question when Constantine gave the ancient roles of *sacerdotium* and *pontifex* to the hierarchy of the Church.

One important aspect of this development is the fact that the diaconate lost its position in the Church. It became a stepping-off point for those who were selected for an ecclesiastical career. It should also be noted that this happened at the time when those who were concerned with the radical dimension of the Christian message withdrew from the centre and found new

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ways of living the faith at the periphery. The monastic life presented itself both as protest against the current tendencies in the central Church, but also as a positive way of serving the Lord and of assisting the sick and poor.

If it were possible to identify this concern with a specific way of being Church that is rooted in the life of Jesus Christ and the mission given to his followers, it may be that a specific concept should be reserved for it. Within the Lutheran tradition, the word *diakonia* expresses this concern in a meaningful way, above all as an ecclesiological term to focus the importance of the periphery within God's mission in Christ, and how this is reflected in the mandate given to the Church.

If the observations above are correct, something happened both to the diaconate and to *diakonia* as the Church developed her centralistic structure. This indicates that there may be a relation between the historical diaconate and what we have designated here as *diakonia*. It also opens up an understanding of the diaconate as a ministry of prophecy and transformation, and as a possibility for renewal in the Church and her way of being incarnated in our time.

Periphery and centre

The question then is whether this tendency to structure institutions in a way that furthers centralisation and monopoly should be seen only in sociological terms, or whether this also is a matter of theology.

The conflicts between periphery and centre described in the Bible indicate that there exists a continuous tension that is vital for the identity of the people of God and its constant need of renewal. In the Old Testament this tension is represented, on the one hand, by the tradition of the Exodus and its liberating action and, on the other hand, by Sinai and the covenant's regulation of law and order. It is important to see that both sides are regarded as necessary for the welfare of the people of God. It belongs to the eschatological nature of Israel, and later of the Church, to find a sound relation between breaking up and maintaining tradition, between prophetic protest and religious establishment, between evangelical liberty and dogmatic tradition.

Ecclesiology should be concerned with both sides. There is no Exodus without Sinai, and no Sinai without Exodus. Therefore the Church must respect the tension between prophetic charism and power. The power centre should not criminalize the first and monopolise the last. Nor should the periphery declare infallible the first and combat the last.⁶ As there is always a tendency to give central power more weight, it should be remembered that Scripture normally gives priority to the periphery: Exodus comes before Sinai, the prophetic protest is given more attention than the established answer.

Periphery should not only be seen as a context of social and political oppression, but as *locus theologicus* in the sense that here is located basic human experience, and even more, the

⁶ Merton, Robert K., *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Glencoe, Ill. 1957, p. 157.

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periphery is a centre of God's active love. The book of Job illustrates this in a very convincing way and expresses the clamour to God of the tormented, which cries for justice and salvation. In Job's dialogue with the orthodox theologians, on the one hand, they present all correct teaching on justice, sin and mercy. The victimised, on the other hand, cannot see that such answers are sustainable in his experience of being consigned to the outermost periphery of human existence. At the end Job's right to protest is proved, not as a new way of formulating theological dogma, but as freedom to cry out against established reason, in the same way as the enslaved people in Egypt did, and where action and answer depend solely on God and his salvation.

The mission of Jesus may also be read as incarnation at the human periphery. 'Can anything good come from Nazareth?' asked Nathanael, in the name of all those who invest faith and hope in central power. Criticism arose later, when Jesus chose the periphery as the arena of his proclamation and liberating action. When the disciples longed for powerful position, he warned them against the power of those leaders that have 'complete authority': 'Anyone who wants to be great among you, must be your servant'. This passage (Mark 10:35-45) has both a strong christological and ecclesiological focus. Thus is underlined the exclusivity of Jesus' Messianic mission as *diakonia* ('to give his life to redeem many') and at the same time the continuity between his *diakonia* and the *diakonia* of his disciples ('the way it is among you').

As we know, it has not been easy for the Church to measure up to this vocation. Roman Catholic scholars like Yves Congar have criticised what he calls the 'hierachological' structure of the Church. In his opinion christomonism is responsible for the Church's traditional pyramidal structure.⁷ Within this concept, Christ and Church are regarded as almost identical, 'the one who sees the Church, sees Christ, because the Church is Christ himself' as is stated in the papal encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943). When the Church is identified with the visible church structure, ecclesial power becomes absolute and criticism may be classified as disobedience against divine order.

Against this 'christomonism' Catholic theologians like Congar⁸ and Boff⁹ have referred to the pneumatological element of ecclesiology in order to create a balance between charism and power in the Church. The Church is at the same time mediator of a unique tradition, present in the apostolic witness, and an eschatological 'now' (*kairos*) created by the Spirit.

This corresponds to the expression of the Lutheran tradition that the Spirit works '*ubi et quando visum est Deo*' (*Confessio Augustana* V). The fact that the Reformers strongly questioned centralised ecclesiastical power did not, however, necessarily result in alternative church structures with more space for the

⁷ This is also one of the main concerns of Leonardo Boff in his *Church: Charism and Power. Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, New York 1990. See also Nordstokke, K., *Council and Context in Leonardo Boff's Ecclesiology. The Rebirth of the Church among the Poor*, Lewiston, NY 1996, pp. 195ff.

⁸ Congar, Y., *Ecclesia a Spiritu edocta*, Gembloux 1970, p. 41ff.

⁹ Boff, L., *Church: Charism and Power*, ch.13, An alternative structure: Charism as the organizing principle, pp. 154-164.

lowly. So far the churches of the Reformation are in the same need of reformulating their relation to the periphery and of establishing a ministry of prophecy and transformation.

Power to serve

The attempt to balance charism and power in the Church by referring to the pneumatological and christological moments in ecclesiology, as Boff does, is not quite convincing, as it identifies Christ with ecclesial power in a way that is questionable. The point at issue is not so much the question of balance, but how to understand power, especially when the New Testament deals with power in christological and ecclesiological terms.

The evangelists recount that Jesus demonstrated power (*exousia*) 'not as the scribes' (Matt 7:29). The Synoptics use this term in situations where Jesus reveals the qualities of the Kingdom. This is done in word and deed, and the crowd was amazed observing this authority: 'his fame spread everywhere' (Mark 1:27f).

Not only was the imposing effect of his power amazing: even more astounding was the way in which it was used. The sick were healed, excluded groups were given access to his table, and women and children were admitted to his fellowship. It is possible to interpret all this as manifestations of his rule of inversion, in which 'whoever would be great among you must be your servant'. As referred to above, this rule relates closely to the presentation of Jesus the Servant: 'For the Son of man

also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). According to the findings of John Collins¹⁰, service should not primarily be interpreted as self-humiliation and servility, but as conscious mission with divine authority and with the mandate to be a go-between in contexts of conflict and suffering. In other words, where the periphery has deprived people of all dignity and hope, where their belonging to the community is being denied, the authority of Jesus is manifested as a power to invert values and relations. It is prophetic in the sense that the periphery is defended and promised divine care and mercy. It is messianic in the sense that it represents the coming of a new age and the qualities of the Kingdom that is being proclaimed.

This is how his authority differs, not only from that of the scribes, but also from 'the rulers of this age'. Their authority envisages submission, distance and silence. The authority of Jesus is recognised by the opposite: it lifts up, it includes and it empowers. This is done through his service, his messianic coming, his human figure, his word and deed, his solidarity with the most marginalized experience, his suffering and death. Several indications in the New Testament present his mission as messianic service (e.g. Luke 22:27; John 6:4 and 13:1ff).

The authority of Jesus became a threat to the religious and political institutions of his time (Matt 21:23). Their position presupposed the power to exclude, and they possessed means

¹⁰ Collins, John N., *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, New York / Oxford 1990.

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of sanction that also enabled them to get rid of Jesus as representative of an inclusive, liberating and empowering authority given by God. Easter is the dramatic climax in the conflict between two opposing visions of divine authority, the one expressing faith through the words of the high priest: 'it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people' (John 11:50), and accepting torture and death in order to maintain the *status quo*, whilst the other is willing to go the way of passion, so that new life may grow forth. 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24). Thus the power of the *status quo* is revealed as the logic of death, while the power of transformation is the logic of life.

In the authority of Jesus is seen a paradoxical simultaneity of power and powerlessness. Paul affirms in his letter to the Colossians that Jesus has 'disarmed the principalities and powers (2:15), but he also makes it clear that this happened at the cross, exactly the place of defeat and powerlessness. It seems reasonable to interpret simultaneity as central to the very nature of Jesus' mission, as an expression of his *diakonia*. It should be noticed that service is not seen as passive delivery to the will of others. Service is conscious option and powerful action, even in moments of humility. It could be that the Greek verb *tapeinein* has been too easily interpreted in individual and moral terms – to humble oneself. It can also be translated 'to be among the small', as an act of conscious solidarity and willingness to abandon positions of privilege. This is the context

of Phil. 2:8, where the messianic service of Jesus is praised. At the same time it is presented as a model for the Church and her way of being (vv 1-5).

Diakonia as power to serve

It is evident in the New Testament that the Church is called to serve following the example of Jesus and with the same kind of authority that he had been given. 'And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity' (Matt 10:1). This mandate was given a new authority after the resurrection (Matt 28:18).

It is impossible to see the calling of the disciples without their empowerment to serve in the same way that Jesus had done. This is the reason for the use of the concept *diakonia* when the New Testament refers to leadership and vital concerns within the community. Thus is expressed continuity with the *diakonia* of Jesus, and at the same time it acts as a reminder of the kind of values that must belong to the very nature of the Church as body of Christ. An interesting example of this is found in Paul's arguments in favour of the collection (*diakonia*) in 2 Corinthians 8-9. The collection in favour of the poor in Jerusalem is simply called 'the *diakonia*' (8:4, 9:1). Its motivation is found in God's gracious action, above all in the example of Jesus (8:9), and the final goal of this '*diakonia*' is the glory of God and the communion where everybody is included (9:13).

Acts 6:1–7 illustrates how the church leadership responds according to its diaconal identity when being challenged by the periphery. Greek-speaking widows experienced a kind of marginalisation at the daily distribution of food (or funds), in contradiction of the community of the table and its inclusive character. After finding out what really was happening, the apostles proposed a reorganisation of the community. New leaders were appointed. Their Greek names indicate that they represented the group that had been marginalized. Thus the apostles manifested a kind of leadership that gave authority to the periphery, and we see that this change mobilised the church: it ‘grew larger and larger’ (v. 7).

It is not conformity to the standards of this world, but transformation according to the new age brought by Christ and the example given by the incarnate Lord, that is the kind of service to which the Church is called (Romans 12:1–2). *Diakonia* could thus be understood as the way of being that also acts concretely, giving space to the marginalized. The diaconate would then be the ministry with a specific task to see that this really happens. Thus it would have to be a ministry of advocacy and prophecy, of speaking in favour of the poor and the silenced, just as the prophets did in biblical times. And it would be a ministry of transformation, in the sense that the deacon would be a church leader especially engaged in empowering and animating those at the periphery to active participation in the life of faith, hope and love.

The key question is whether this image of the diaconate can be identified with what deacons are understood to be and what they actually do in our churches. On the one hand, there are clear indications that go in this direction. When deacons are ordained in the Church of Sweden they are asked by the bishop: "Will you hold fast to the faith of the church, help those who are in need of your service and take sides with the oppressed?"¹¹ Thus concrete action and advocacy belong to the image of the deacon, and as the bishop's question is formulated, this is related to the faith of the church. It should therefore be no surprise that many deacons in the Nordic Churches are active in the periphery of society, even if their voices are not so often heard either in the church or in the public sphere.

It is, on the other hand, complicated in our context to develop an image of a church minister who acts prophetically in a convincing way. Because of centuries of history characterised by a close alliance between throne and altar, the ordained ministry is profoundly marked by its loyalty to worldly authorities. Are there ways of powerful church ministry that could differ from what has been modelled in European church history? Is the only alternative a humble and self-effacing 'Church for others' as this was formulated in the ecumenical language of the 1960s? Or is it possible to imagine a self-confident Church with a mission incarnated at the margin of human existence? These are partly unanswered challenges to *diakonia* as praxis and reflection in our time.

¹¹ Borgegård, G., & Hall, C., p 127.

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Above all else, this challenges the institutional Church's traditional alliance with the dominant classes. Although the aristocratic features have sometimes been toned down during recent decades, the Church still reflects the life-style and the interests of the middle and higher classes of society. In some cases, but not too often, the periphery has challenged the churches to act, but traditional charity work has seldom questioned the monopoly of the centre. Its dominant position normally gives those who are at the periphery only the role of being objects and passive receivers, with the understanding that they should conform to the centre, its worldview and values.

Consequently, conformity and conservatism dominate in the churches. Change is limited to the personal level, and often as an acceptance of the traditional worldview and value systems. It seems difficult to find models that could liberate the Church as a corporate organism into being an agent of transformation. Could *diakonia* and the ministry of the diaconate be an instrument for changing this situation?

To put this in very general terms, in the last 1500 years the Church has placed nearly all its emphasis on its institutional centre, and we have started to become more and more aware of the negative consequences of this imbalance, as we have been crossing the threshold of a new millennium. The challenge for the church now is to de-centralise, to give the periphery a new importance, remembering the biblical witness in favour of the poor, the oppressed and the excluded, and being especially mindful of how Jesus related to these groups.

In practical terms, that would imply a new sensitivity in the Church to situations of exclusion. In the global context, two-thirds of the world's population is considered expendable according to the logic of neo-liberal society. In the local context, post-modern individualism and political fatigue justify new mechanisms of exclusion. Perhaps impulses from the periphery, from poor churches in the South, can help our churches to respond to these challenges.

A Brazilian theologian, Rodolfo Gaede Neto, has recently defended a thesis related to the understanding of *diakonia* in the context of Latin America.¹² He starts with diaconal praxis as experienced in his Brazilian church and describes it as practical, prophetic and community-orientated.¹³ His analysis of biblical texts affirms that the *diakonia* of Jesus had the same features, with the rule of inversion as the most challenging mark.

If Rodolfo Gaede Neto is correct in his observation, the diaconal praxis of the Church is an expression of her prophetic mandate. The practical nature of this praxis makes it go beyond words and opinions. Within Lutheran tradition, there has been a tendency to relate *diakonia* to ethics or ethical consciousness, either at a personal level as in the pietistic tradition, or on a more political level, as in modern theology. However, this position risks being one-sided. Against this view must be held the

¹² Gaede Neto, R., *A diakonia de Jesus. Uma contribuição para a fundamentação teológica da diakonia como disciplina emergente na América Latina*, São Leopoldo 1999.

¹³ Gaede Neto describes three dimensions of *diakonia*, a '*dimensão prática*', a '*dimensão profética*', and a '*dimensão comunitária*'.

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practical nature of *diakonia*, which means conscious action with the aim of transforming reality, motivated by Christian hope and modelled by the example of Jesus the Servant. As such this praxis is clearly based upon the faith, hope and love of the Christian community, and with the aim of edifying the Church.

The prophetic nature is proved above all in the commitment to the periphery. Its aim is not to be a Church for the poor, but much more a Church with the poor, or even a Church of the poor. For that purpose prophetic *diakonia* seeks to promote a praxis that opens space to the periphery, dignifies the expendable and empowers the excluded.

In the Brazilian context it is obvious who the poor are, both because of their number and the visible misery in which they are condemned to live. Poverty is more hidden in our affluent society. Some would even like to think that poverty has finally been eradicated with the establishment of the modern welfare state. Reality shows, however, that poverty and misery have many faces, many of them masked and therefore not easy to see. Not only is new poverty growing in most European countries, but we are also experiencing situations of silencing and exclusion by which considerable groups of people are being placed at the periphery of society. The long-time jobless, the school dropouts, persons with chronic health problems, the disabled and other groups risk being considered expendable according to the ideology of post-modern society.

The effort to defend the dignity and rights of the excluded must therefore have roots in the socio-economic-political reality of our time. Only then can ministry be prophetic and challenging. Care must therefore be taken that this task is not being reduced to the spiritual sphere. The commitment to the poor does not mean that the rich are excluded from the sphere of diaconal action. Here also, the rule that periphery and centre are inter-related counts, but without ignoring the difference between them. However, as was the case with the *diakonia* of Jesus, those in most need of healing met the Healer first (Matt 9:12).

Such practice may be resisted, both in Church and society. Its authority may be questioned. Consequently, it is of fundamental importance how this diaconal authority is founded and what kind of legitimacy it is given. If it is only founded in social theory, it will easily be judged as secondary to theological authority. This makes it vital to root diaconal praxis and its authority in the identity and fundamental mandate of the Church. The diaconate can be seen as a visible way of rooting this authority in the ministry of the Church. According to this way of arguing, the diaconate is vital for the Church and its mandate of advocacy, of healing and of transformation, then this ministry places such responsibility in the centre of the Church structure and thus links it to the authority of the Church.

In this way, two equal movements within the Church can be seen. The first relates to the de-centralisation of church power, locating it at the periphery. The second relates to the representation of the periphery at the church centre. In both these

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movements, the diaconate as a ministry of prophecy and transformation has an important role. In theory, this may appear logical. However, the reality is quite different: as quoted above, 'every institution attempts to monopolise imagination in the interest of order'. Such self-regulation is also experienced in the Church, and in the end only the life-giving Spirit gives a steadfast hope that transformation is possible.

The ministry of service

If this paper so far has not dealt with the diaconate as ministry in practical terms, it has consciously aimed at this topic and tried to give it a convincing basis for concrete action. The first thing to be noticed now is that there is a surprising continuity between this understanding of the diaconate and its actual role in the first centuries. According to the written sources from that time, the deacon was the 'ear' of the bishop, responsible for bringing to the centre of the Church whatever was happening among the members, especially those who were sick or in other forms of need. This sensitivity to the need of people and the access to the bishop were closely linked to the administrative responsibility of the deacon. All this gave him an authority that was soon questioned, especially by the priests. Although cases of abuse of diaconal power are reported from that period, which may have been one of the reasons for the degradation of the ministry of the deacon, it seems equally likely that the blame also lies with the development of institutionalisation, centralisation and the introduction of a hierarchic structure.

The same elements that we register in the model of the early Church are also relevant for today's diaconate. The ability to sense the experience of the periphery presupposes a readiness to be present among the excluded, to taste their powerlessness, to listen to their stories as versions of describing reality and also to share their visions of what the future could be like. This ability can be natural and it can be fortified by diaconal spirituality, but it should also be trained professionally in the sense that the deacon is able to analyse what is seen, and to formulate together with others proposals for action, even if choices in some situations are difficult and may be conflicting.

Secondly, ordination is important, not only as a sign of access to the bishop, but also as an expression of being part of the leadership of the Church, with the kind of authority thereby implied. This gives the deacon the possibility of linking the periphery with the centre, of inverting the scale of urgency and of dignity within the Church. Ordination also gives the deacon a liturgical role and the authority to bring the clamour into the room of prayer and celebration. Thus the role as go-between is relevant in many contexts, not only in the socio-political and cultural arena, but also in the ecclesial and liturgical context.

Thirdly, the administrative function gives the deacon opportunities to practice the role of advocacy and transformation. A variety of activities may be organised. The deacon should not be the only actor in this field. That would mean another deplorable monopoly. The role of the deacon is much more to animate, motivate, empower, mobilise and organise.

Within the understanding of the diversified ministry of the Church, these elements could give the office of deacon its *proprium*. Even if the diaconal mandate should never be reserved exclusively for this ministry, as it belongs to the ministry of all the baptised, it is the especial concern and commitment of the deacon. The professional requirement for ordination should take this into account, as should also the way the deacon is deployed by the Church.

This understanding of the diaconate does not necessarily correspond to the Lutheran tradition of *diakonia*, though it could be seen as an interpretation of some of the development we have seen in the Nordic churches in the last few decades. On the other hand, it reflects recent experience in churches in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Here the concept of *diakonia* has been rediscovered as a meaningful term of expressing what Christians do, in a way that relates action to their identity as the body of Christ. From this perspective the ecumenical discussion on the ministry of the diaconate gains new relevance. It also gives new stimuli to the bilateral dialogue between Anglicans and Lutherans.

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