

Reflections on the Theology of Diakonia

Kjell Nordstokke

Introduction

The installation of an archbishop is an ecumenical event,¹ and a strong symbol of the unity of the church, despite confessional and other differences dividing church traditions. The unity of the church is not first and foremost a question of church order and ecclesial structures. Rather, it is intimately related to a vision of the unity of human beings² and the church's ministry of reconciliation in the world (2 Cor 5:18). The Greek New Testament highlights the "ministry of reconciliation" (τὴν διακονίαν τῆς καταλλαγῆς). With regard to the unity of the church, this suggests that diakonia plays a central role in the reconciled communion of believers, and the church's mission for the healing of the world.

According to tradition, defending the unity of the church and the dignity and participation of the poor and marginalized is part of the bishop's oversight. In the Early Church, the deacon assisted the bishop in this task, and it was said that the deacon was his "eye and ear," bringing the concerns of those living on its periphery to the attention of the church leadership.

In the following "diakonia" refers both to the New Testament where the *diakon*-words appear close to 100 times, and to the contemporary use of this concept in ecumenical theology. I am fully aware of the difference between the two, as is the case with other biblical terms being used today. I claim, however, that the two are related and consider it a theological task to elaborate critically on this relation.³

Towards a theology of diakonia

Different approaches may be followed when developing a theology of diakonia. Since diaconal action always implies concretely responding to situations of suffering, need and injustice, such challenges should be analyzed and reflected critically. Throughout church history, this has happened time and again when Christians have been mobilized to take new and courageous action. Prophetic figures such as Francis of Assisi and Bartolomé de las Casas have inspired generations of Christians: the first because of his radical solidarity with the outcasts of his time, the second because of his bold defense of the indigenous people in the Americas. Fliedner and Wichern founded their institutions in response to what they had learned about the inhumane conditions female prisoners and homeless children

were subjected. The Lutheran World Federation was founded in Lund, in 1947, in the aftermath of World War II and in the face of the tremendous challenges posed by the millions of displaced people in Europe. The Federation's primary task was to respond to that challenge by taking responsibility for alleviating human suffering in war-torn Europe. This action was a clear witness to the fact that churches, previously divided by deep political and ideological differences, could work together in order to contribute to reconciliation and healing.

Many other examples can be cited of how specific needs and situations changed the church and its diakonia. Clearly, the church must always be sensitive to human reality, to what people experience and especially to what threatens human life and dignity. Jesus told his disciples to be sensitive and to react to human need. In the story of the feeding of the multitude we see how the disciples sensed that the people were getting hungry, but only reacted once Jesus told them to, "[...]; you give them something to eat" (Mt 14:16).

This is indicative of what we could call "spontaneous" diakonia. The story of the Good Samaritan shows us that the case of "a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead" (Lk 10:30). This story presents a challenge to all who happened to walk along that same road. As Luther says, there is no need for a Christian to invent good work; it comes to us in the form of everyday challenges.

Such challenges sometimes necessitate that diaconal action is organized, even institutionalized, in the form of hospitals, orphanages, homes for the homeless, aid programs for refugees, development programs, or projects for people living with AIDS, etc.

The theology of diakonia cannot ignore the challenges arising from suffering, need and injustice. That would mean to ignore the sensitivity Jesus emphasized in his diaconal ministry. Therefore, the church must critically ask whether its diaconal practice is sufficiently sensitive to the clamor of the suffering, bold enough to respond to difficult and even controversial challenges, and willing to be renewed through its actions.

Although this "contextual" approach or track is important in view of elaborating a theology of diakonia, it is not sustainable if it stands alone because it could give the impression that diakonia is exclusively formed by challenges arising from the social environment. Of course, this is not the case. What brings diakonia into being, motivates and sustains it, comes from the same sources that give life to the church, namely Word and sacraments. Those same sources point to Jesus' diakonia. As I shall elaborate on later, Jesus' diakonia was deeply rooted in the

mission bestowed upon him by the heavenly Father, while being shaped by his sensitivity to human need and suffering.

Therefore the theology of diakonia needs at least two other tracks. Of fundamental importance is one that I shall simply call the “ecclesiological” track. This reflects diakonia as an integral dimension of being church. It will take us to the biblical material, especially the New Testament, and its use and understanding of the concept of diakonia.

The third track, which I shall refer to as the “praxeological” track has its point of departure in the concrete praxis of diakonia. The theology of diakonia must critically reflect the diaconal praxis in which the church is already involved and set priorities for the use of its limited resources. It is only then that the theology of diakonia becomes practicable in the sense of meaningful action, of strengthening vision and commitment, of empowerment and mobilization.

I am convinced that all three tracks must be followed when developing a theology of diakonia. They form a triangle in the sense that they are all necessary parts of an integral, dynamic model. If the ecclesiological dimension is left out, diaconal action runs the risk of becoming situational. This, in turn, could lead to understanding diakonia as being optional, depending on the social challenges confronting the church. If the contextual track is omitted, diakonia might become an introvert ecclesial activity, at a distance from human reality. Without the third, the praxeological dimension, diakonia might remain mere rhetoric or unrealistic idealism, because it would not be rooted in the everyday life of the church and the congregations.

Connecting the three tracks is not an easy task. It implies bringing together knowledge from theology and the social sciences and opening up a dialogue between theory and praxis.

In light of today’s challenges diakonia will have to address such questions as: How does diakonia deal with new and growing mechanisms of social exclusion? How does diakonia deal with the growing gap between the rich and the poor? How can diakonia witness to the biblical concepts of justice and equality? How can diakonia defend human dignity in actions of solidarity, advocacy and practical accompaniment? These questions lead to further questions: How is diakonia empowered to perform such tasks? By what authority can diaconal action denounce injustice and announce transformation?

I shall not be able to address all these questions or elaborate on all three tracks identified above. Instead, I shall concentrate on the following two items:

First, I shall give an account of how the ecumenical movement has recently

formulated its understanding of diakonia as a key term for describing the church's commitment to action in the world in response to today's urgent challenges.

Secondly, I shall turn to the core identity of diakonia and subsequently present some basic references to Scripture and how especially the New Testaments uses the concept of diakonia.

Ecumenical renewal of the understanding of diakonia

A recent publication by the World Council of Churches (WCC) states that diakonia is a term "often used by Christians and church-related organizations to describe the work that they do in response to the biblical mandate to do justice and to respond to those who are poor."⁴ This formulation indicates that the concept of diakonia has gained a new and privileged position in current ecumenical language.

An international consultation organized by the WCC in Larnaca, Cyprus, in 1986, took the lead in dissociating the language of diakonia from its rather traditional North-European background, and the understanding of diakonia as charity and humble service, often expressed in terms of pietistic spirituality.⁵ Instead, it linked diakonia to the global challenges of poverty and injustice, to the radical analysis of their root causes, and to bold advocacy in defense of marginalized groups. In Larnaca, diakonia was defined as the "active expression of Christian witness in response to the needs and challenges of the community in which Christians and the churches live."⁶

The concept of "prophetic diakonia" was formulated in Germany in the 1980s. This concept was picked up by the WCC in its comments on the overall context of globalization and welcomed 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-oriented and boldly addresses root causes."⁷

Prophetic diakonia was also the theme of a global LWF-sponsored consultation held in Johannesburg in 2002. In their letter the participants affirmed that 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." The message continues that, "While diakonia begins as unconditional service to the neighbour in need, it leads inevitably to social change that restores, reforms and transforms.

[...] We must challenge all theological interpretations that do not take seriously the suffering of the world, a world afflicted with poverty, violence and HIV/AIDS. As Lutheran churches, we are to be shaped by a theology of the cross, which compels us to identify with and for the suffering rather than the successful. A theology of the cross calls things what they really are, moving beyond politeness and pretense, breaking the silence and taking the risk of speaking truth to power, even when this threatens the established order and results in hardship and persecution. This is at the heart of the prophetic diaconal calling.”⁸

What are the reasons for reintroducing diakonia as a key ecumenical concept? Summing up it may be said that the following factors seem to be important:

- The context of globalization
- The regaining of an holistic perspective on the mission of the church
- The rediscovery of diakonia as empowering service
- The prophetic dimension of diakonia, and
- The need of relating social work/action to the identity of church.

The last point may be one of the most important ones, especially for the churches in the South, who have often felt a sort of dichotomy established between their identity as churches and their action in the world when they have been involved in development work. As long as this work is only described in secular language—as development work or social action—it is difficult to maintain a convincing link to their mission as churches. The language of diakonia has turned out to be very helpful in overcoming this dichotomy.

The concept of diakonia offers a rationale different from such concepts as development and social action that have largely been formed by modernist/Western ideology that is secular in nature and has little understanding of the church’s role. Nonetheless, diakonia seeks to develop an interdisciplinary discourse, taking into consideration both secular and theological language. Its rationale thus reflects both “what it is to be a church,” and “what it means to be in the world.” While this does not mean that such rationale is easy to establish, it provides us with a constructive theoretical and practical framework for elaborating an understanding of the church’s action in today’s complex world of poverty, suffering and injustice.

Another perspective may be added. The language of development had already been criticized especially by people in the South. They perceived it as being mainly formed by modernist optimism and by the Enlightenment’s confidence in human morality and readiness to overcome injustice. As an integral part of the church, diakonia is better informed concerning the power of evil, both in human action and worldly structures, and knows that evil must be resisted and sin overcome. While

the commitment to justice therefore becomes even more necessary, it rests on the confidence in God's saving power and in the gift of reconciliation in Christ, both in its vertical and horizontal dimensions.

Without any doubt, ecumenical diakonia challenges our Northern churches and the way in which we carry out diakonia. It urges us to address the question whether the cause of justice is sufficiently integrated in diaconal practice. Is our diakonia emphasizing advocacy? Can it be seen as prophetic action proclaiming God's justice in favor of the poor and the excluded?

Some may ask how people would react if the church through its diakonia were to become bolder when addressing issues of poverty and justice. Jonas Bromander's informative research shows that many members of the Church of Sweden expect such action from their church and that their continued membership to a large extent depends on this. Bromander, a sociologist, also documents that the Church of Sweden's diaconal action is largely under-communicated, both within the church and in society, and that justice is not sufficiently done to what the church stands for and aims at in its diaconal praxis.⁹

How diakonia is carried out cannot depend on public opinion and popular expectation, even if such voices should be listened to. In the effort to make the churches to be aware of and act upon pressing social and political issues, ecumenical diakonia may run the risk of falling prey to current activist jargon. That may give an unilateral focus on ethical perspectives in a way that understands diakonia as a human response to faith. This may give the impression that in the first place it is an ethical commitment and a matter of discipleship, even if there are frequent references to the spiritual dimension of diakonia and its roots in the Eucharist.¹⁰ In my opinion, the accent should be placed more explicitly on the ontological nature of diakonia, on its being an expression of the life of the new communion in Christ and the kind of relations this implies. In the following section I shall elaborate further on this referring to how the concept of diakonia is used in the language of the New Testament.

Diakonia as expression of communion in Christ

Several New Testament texts lead us toward a theology of diakonia. Above all, the way in which New Testament describes Jesus' messianic mission (e.g., Mk 10:45) helps us to understand that his care for people is not something that accidentally challenges his compassion, but is a core dimension of his coming to the world. This is clearly expressed in Jesus' answer to John who wanted to know whether he was the one "who is to come." "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind

receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” (Mt 11:3-5). From the very beginning, proclaiming Jesus referred to his holistic mission, as for instance Peter expresses when visiting the house of Cornelius. “You know the message he (God) sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all; (...) how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:36-38).

Jesus’ diakonia has several dimensions. In the first place, it is an act of liberation, of lifting up the suffering, including the downtrodden and marginalized, of healing and reconciliation. In this, human dignity is affirmed and defended. Thus diakonia witnesses prophetically to the values of God’s Kingdom.

All this reveals another dimension to Jesus’ diakonia: Jesus’ power to include persons, even sinners, in the messianic fellowship that he established, and to empower them to participate in his mission. This is referred to at the very moment of installing the Holy Communion: “But I am among you as one who serves - ἐγὼ δὲ ἐν μέσῳ ὑμῶν εἰμι ὡς ὁ διακονῶν” (Lk 22:27). Thus Jesus’ diakonia not only constitutes fellowship, but it also qualifies those who belong to it. It is grace that reconciles, transforms and empowers. This is also the core message in the story of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet (Jn 13). Although the word diakonia is not found in this chapter, it portrays the service of Jesus as powerful action in the sense that the disciples have a “share” (μέρος) with him (Jn 13:8). Thus the washing of feet is not in the first place a demonstration of humility; it announces the inbreaking of eschatological time and demonstrates Jesus’ diaconal authority by which the inclusiveness of the new community of disciples is proclaimed (*cf.* Jn 1:13).

On this basis it becomes imperative for the Christian community to give continuity to Jesus’ diakonia, to its values and qualities. How could they forget his words? “For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (Jn 13:15); “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21).

Thus diakonia became a known central concept in the life of the Christian congregations that came into existence all over the Roman Empire. It became the term designating leadership positions in the church (e.g., Rom 11:13; 2 Cor 4:1; Col 4:17). In the Latin translation of the Vulgata, diakonia became “ministerium.” This implied a shift of emphasis towards proclamation and administration of sacraments at the expense of diakonia, and thus limiting the richness of what ministry is about in the life of the church.

Although terminology is important, what is decisive is the practicing a diaconal

lifestyle. The story about the installation of the seven new leaders in the congregation in Jerusalem in Acts 6 shows how the marginalization of the Greek widows challenged the church's inclusive nature. It was not only the dignity of those ignored in the daily "diakonia" that was at risk, but the diaconal quality of the fellowship. To ignore this would be to ignore the power of sin and its potential to destroy what God has reconciled in Christ. The installation of the seven, all of whom had Greek names and therefore probably represented the widows' cultural and social environment, was not merely a practical matter in order to have things done better. It was an act of securing the fundamental self-understanding of the church, for the well-being of the whole fellowship and for public witness. The story concludes: "The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem ..." (Acts 6:7).

Diakonia is thus related to the congregation's ethos and structures. In other words, it is both an expression of what the church is by its very nature, and what is manifested in its daily life, plans and projects. It is therefore natural to designate certain concrete action as diakonia. One example we already mentioned is the daily distribution referred to in Acts 6. Another is the collection organized by Paul and his colleagues in favor of the poor congregation in Jerusalem.

This campaign is referred to in several places in the New Testament, and is simply called "the diakonia". The most extensive commentary is found in 2 Cor 8 and 9. The way in which the Apostle Paul admonishes the congregation in Corinth to participate in the campaign is interesting and instructive even today with regard to developing a theology of diakonia.

The first thing to notice is that Paul does not explicitly refer to the poverty affecting the congregation in Jerusalem. It may be that their situation already was well known and that further words were unnecessary. But, more probably, this is due to the basic understanding of diakonia, as grounded in theological and ecclesiological principles, and not on changing situations of human need.

For Paul, diakonia is an expression of the *κοινωνία*, the new communion of God's people in Jesus Christ. Interestingly enough, Paul even uses the expression "the communion of diakonia" (*τὴν κοινωνίαν τῆς διακονίας* - 2 Cor 8:4). The Christian congregations in Corinth, Macedonia, Jerusalem and elsewhere are united for diakonia and, at same time, united by diakonia, first and foremost by the diakonia of Jesus: "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9).

A key word here is grace – *χάρις* – which in his commentary on 2 Corinthians

the German scholar Erich Gräßer translates both as "Gnadenwerk" and "Liebeswerk" (work of grace and work of love).¹¹ This makes clear that grace is more than an attitude; it manifests itself as active intervention, as revealed in the incarnate Jesus and his salvific work. The communion is created and sustained by God's χάρις – work of love. To be in Christ implies being in his χάρις – in his work of love.

So Paul admonishes the Corinthians to learn from the example of the Macedonian churches. Thanks to the χάρις of God, poverty and affliction have been transformed into joy and abundance, and this has made them eager to participate in diakonia. The church in Corinth is known to be much more gifted, and should therefore be even readier to let its faith and knowledge be fulfilled in χάρις – in work of love.

Paul makes it clear that participating in diakonia is a free expression of their χάρις, their action of love, in the spirit of being in communion. This is followed up throughout chapters 8 and 9. First Paul relates this to comments on equality, as an important dimension of belonging to a communion, in the sense that equality is not only a gift, but also a task advocating a fair balance between, "your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance" (2 Cor 8:14). The practice of diakonia and its ethos of inclusiveness and the mutual sharing of resources thus clearly imply ethical demands, but its basis is the experience of God's grace and the gift of belonging to the communion created by God's grace. The following verse reminds the reader of former times, when the people of Israel received God's manna, the bread from heaven, according to their need. The way it was received affirmed their equality as a communion: "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little" (2 Cor 8:15).

While this may give us the impression that diakonia is something spiritual, remote from everyday life, the last section of 2 Cor 8 shows how practical diakonia has to be. Here Paul raises questions of organization and accountability in dealing with collected money, thus pointing at the importance of responsibility and of transparency when doing diakonia. But even here we find references to communion. Honesty is a matter of relations, both to God and to fellow human beings, as dishonesty would mean breaking the communion. It is also significant that Titus, who is given a key role in organizing diakonia, is presented as κοινωνός (8:23), which affirms partnership and commitment to the well-being of the communion.

Chapter 9 in 2 Corinthians adds another dimension to the theology of diakonia: Its intimate connection to the church's liturgy. Diakonia grows out of worship and aims at thanksgiving to God for his indescribable gift (2 Cor 9:15). Diakonia is a

response to concrete situations of suffering, need and injustice, the fulfillment of the commandment of love, and in all that an expression of what the church believes in and confesses: The grace of God – for the healing of the world.

The secret of diakonia is that its vertical and horizontal dimensions are inseparable. If they are separated, diakonia can easily become secularized. This means that it may still be good and necessary action, but limited to secular interests and goals. Another result of such a separation would be that diakonia becomes spiritualized and too limited by its theological and ecclesial framework.

Rejecting such a dichotomy does not mean uncritically combing the two dimensions. Human dignity is not respected if diaconal action is used as an opportunity to propagate moral or religious teaching. Since the grace of God is a free gift, diaconal action must be generous and unconditional. Only then it reflects God's "indescribable gift" that finally the Apostle lets everything depend on (2 Cor 9:15). By this gift the church is called to diaconal action in the world, as a "surpassing" of their thanksgiving to God. The church in Corinth is reminded that by this action and specifically their "generosity of your sharing with them" (the congregation in Jerusalem) and with all others "the communion will be strengthened and God will be glorified", not according to secondary intentions related to what they do, but "because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you." (2 Cor 9:13-14).¹²

Summing up, the Apostle Paul has established here a significant theological platform for the formulation of a theology of diakonia, especially for what I initially referred to as the "ecclesiological" track. On the one hand there is the christological dimension, with its special focus on the holistic nature of Jesus' mission and incarnation as reconciling and liberating practice in the midst of human suffering and injustice and, on the other, the dimension of being in communion which is intimately related to the first one. Here we clearly see links to the "contextual" and the "praxeological" tracks. It provides decisive for criteria dealing with the burning challenges of our time, and for evaluating our understanding and praxis of diakonia in a way that is open for renewal and transformation. These challenges relate to all our ministries. As part of a worldwide communion, sisters and brothers find their own way of responding to the same call, empowered by the same Spirit of God, through Word and sacraments, for the healing of the world.

NOTES

- 1 Based on the paper presented at the occasion of the installation of Anders Wejryd as Archbishop of Uppsala, Saturday, 2 September 2006. This article has been partially published in Kjell Nordstokke, *Liberating Diakonia*. Tapir Academic Press 2011.
- 2 "The search for the visible unity of the church is essentially a search for the visible unity of human beings by means of a divinely reconciled diversity. In this sense, the church is a fundamental paradigm of the work of the Triune God in the world and for the sake of the world. Ecumenism, therefore, belongs to the core of the Christian faith." Sven Oppegaard, "Unity of Human Beings and the Dichotomy of Ecumenical Models," in Susanne Munzert und Peter Munzert (eds), *Quo vadis Kirche? Gestalt und Gestaltung von Kirche in den gegenwärtigen Transformationsprozessen*. Joachim Track zum 65. Geburtstag (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2005), p 319.
- 3 A theoretical framework for reflecting on the diakonia is presented in Nordstokke: *Liberating Diakonia*, Trondheim: Tapir, 2011, p. 29-39.
- 4 *Poverty: A Scandal Challenging the Churches*. Current Contexts and Approaches in Diakonia and Development: A Study Guide (Geneva: The World Council of Churches, 2004), p. 6.
- 5 An import contribution to breaking with this tradition was made by the Australian scholar John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
- 6 Klaus Poser (ed.), *Called to be Neighbours: Diakonia 2000*. Official Report WCC World Consultation, Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service Larnaca 1986 (Geneva: The World Council of Churches, 1987).
- 7 Working paper of the Advisory Group on Regional Relations and Ecumenical Sharing to the WCC Programme Committee, dated March 2000.
- 8 *Prophetic Diakonia: "For the Healing of the World."* Report Johannesburg, South Africa November 2002 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2003).
- 9 *Jonas Bromander, Medlem i Svenska kyrkan. En studie kring samtid och framtid* (Stockholm: Verbum, 2004).
- 10 "True diakonia following Christ's example and rooted in the Eucharist involves immersion in the suffering and brokenness of the world. It will hear and respond to the signs of the times from the same faith in the God of life but it will need to include new learning and new voices and respond a different context. Our context forces us to overcome false dichotomies from the past. We cannot understand or practice diakonia apart from justice and peace. Service cannot be separated from prophetic witness or the ministry of reconciliation. Mission must include transformative diakonia." Ofelia Ortega and Chris Ferguson, quoted in *Diakonia: Creating Harmony, Seeking Justice and Practicing Compassion* (Geneva: The World Council of Churches, 2005), p. 1.
- 11 Erich Gräber, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*. Kapitel 8,1-13,13 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005), p. 27.
- 12 Gräber also affirms that the collection is "leiturgische Handlung" and not just "profane Dienstleistung," and continues: "Mit ihrem Dank an Gott anerkennen die Jerusalemer, dass sich eine wirkliche Hilfe und uneigennützige Brüderlichkeit in dem Kollektenwerk offenbart. Mehr noch! Es drückt sich darin aus (1) Dank für die Einheit der Kirche aus Juden und Heiden und (2) Bestätigung der Legitimität des paulinischen Missionswerkes", *ibid.*, p. 64.