

Empowerment in the perspective of ecumenical diakonia¹

Kjell Nordstokke, Oslo

Empowerment seems to be developing as a key concept in the discussion of identity and mission of diaconia. This is also true in the ecumenical movement. Recent discussions demonstrate that empowerment is also used when people in the South comment on their own context. Empowerment also has a strong biblical foundation. Still, one needs to pursue several important questions. One of them being: Who empowers whom?

Keywords: empowerment, local diakonia, ecumenical diakonia, interdisciplinarity.

I

Empowerment has become a key concept in diaconal praxis and theory. This has been well documented by Johannes Nissen in an article recently published in this journal.² In a convincing manner Nissen has elaborated on the ambiguity of this term and demonstrated the importance of the notion of power when using it. The present article aims at bringing in further perspectives, primarily how this concept is now frequently used in ecumenical contexts and documents. In doing so, it refers less to professionals and their way of exercising power, and focuses more on ordinary people and their engagement in collective processes and practices by which people of faith seek to overcome situations of poverty, suffering and injustice. Theologically this permits a pneumatological reflection on diakonia³ as empowering practice, intended as a constructive supplement to the interpretation of biblical texts given by Nissen.

II

In August 2011 I participated in a visit to Cuba organised by the World Council of Churches as part of its program on *Local diakonia*. Among other things the

1 Originally presented at Diakonhjemmet University College in March 2012, a Portuguese version titled *Diaconia e Empoderamento* was delivered on the occasion of the *I Congresso Internacional da Faculdade EST* in São Leopoldo, Brazil, in September 2012.

2 Nissen, J. (2012), Towards a transformation of power: New Testament perspectives on diaconia and empowered, in: *Diaconia*, vol 3, 26–43.

3 I prefer to write *diakonia* with *k* as this is practiced in ecumenical organizations such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). It can be argued that as a Greek word, this is more natural, as also is the case of other words, for instance *koinonia*.

visit aimed at answering the following question: What are the existing *empowerment* schemes for diakonia in the congregations and how can the WCC further contribute to strengthening them by creating arenas for mutual learning and providing tools for capacity building?

Without giving a full report on our findings here, I want to point out three observations that were made and that seem to be of fundamental importance when reflecting on the understanding of empowerment in a diaconal perspective:

The importance of the **context** in its social and cultural diversity in conditioning and shaping processes of empowerment. In the case of Cuba: the 1959 revolution has not only impacted on political, social, economic and also church life in a decisive way, but also given lasting significance to the understanding of empowerment when applied in that country, due to the experiences of mobilising social groups that before 1959 were mainly marginalised.

The concept of one's **identity** in relation to others and the environment. The churches, primarily those with a Protestant tradition, found themselves in a challenging new situation after the revolution, and it forced them to reconsider their mission in Cuban society. Witness and service became key concepts in defining this role.

The **local congregation** as a place for innovative diaconal practice. Creative initiatives were taken by ordinary people, as a kind of 'diakonia from below', as 'self-empowerment' in the sense that it was presented as an energy from within, rooted in the experiences and anxieties of their communal life and the visions of their faith.

If these observations are correct and relevant in contexts other than the Cuban, it follows that empowerment, as a method in diaconal work (and probably also in social and health work) must be **interdisciplinary**: It must be able to analyse the local context socially, culturally and politically. It must understand how individual and collective identity is formed in its many dimensions, including the spiritual. And it must develop models of intervention that are respectful in the sense that it secures space for self-empowerment.

We shall bear in mind these observations in the rest of this article, with the aim of

- Giving some introductory remarks on the interdisciplinary nature of diaconal theory and praxis, and how this affects the understanding of empowerment as a diaconal term;
- Presenting some examples of how empowerment is used in ecumenical documents, with special reference to international diakonia;
- Elaborating on some biblical motifs that directly or indirectly underpin a theological understanding of empowerment;
- Working out some theologically based principles for using empowerment as a diaconal term.
- Formulating some critical and perhaps disturbing questions.

III

Claiming that empowerment should be reflected in an interdisciplinary perspective corresponds to a strong tradition. When diaconal training was introduced in Norway in the second part of the 19th century, nursing and theology were the two main disciplines in the curriculum, clearly from the perspective that the diaconal praxis as conceived by the diaconal actors at that time required such a double qualification. In some institutions, like Diakonhjemmet in Oslo, social work was added as another basic discipline, again mainly due to its relevance for those engaged in diaconal work, whether in church or in society.⁴

It is important to have this in mind when reflecting upon the term empowerment within the praxis and theory of diakonia. It first appeared as a key concept in social work, gaining position in the training of social workers in the 1990s, both as a method and as an indicator of what social work aims at.⁵ Parallel development can be observed in other disciplines. In nursing the concept came into use in relation to public health programmes.⁶ It then became a popular term in political management, in a way that has become so loaded with normative and ideological interest that we may ask whether it has lost some of its power of indicating processes and methods of social intervention.

Not surprisingly, empowerment has also become an important concept in diaconal language and in the training of deacons. From one point of view it is normal that new concepts within social work will challenge the praxis and theory of diakonia. This is a natural consequence of its interdisciplinary approach. At the same time, and this is another fundamental dimension of diaconal knowledge, theory is always challenged by praxis and should always be ready to re-conceptualise its knowledge according to insights from praxis. The fact that empowerment was found to be a relevant and meaningful term for diaconal actors when performing diaconal work was a motivation for its inclusion in the diaconal vernacular.⁷

The fact is however that empowerment is quite often used in a rather superficial manner, as a kind of slogan expressing good intentions. In my opinion there

4 Vetvik, E. & P. Hakala (2011), Higher Education Institutions of Diakonia in Norway and Finland, in: Johannessen, K.I. (ed.): *Religious Education in Contemporary Society*. Tartu: Logos, 127–173.

5 The literature on empowerment is vast. A helpful introduction to the concept from the perspective of social work is given by Adams, R (2008) *Empowerment, Participation and Social Work*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

6 In Norway it was introduced by the governmental white paper NOU 1998:18: *Det er bruk for alle. Styrking av folkehelsearbeidet i kommunene*.

7 It should however be noted that the word empowerment is not explicitly used in the Church of Norway *Plan for diakonia* (2007). Defending human dignity and establishing inclusive practices in church and society are presented as diaconal tasks; it can therefore be claimed that they implicitly presuppose empowerment as goal and method.

is a strong need to elaborate a clearer understanding of what is meant by empowerment when used in diaconal work. In social work empowerment is often presented as a goal and as a method of achieving that goal. Is this same when used as a diaconal term? Or will the diaconal identity as faith-based action also influence the interpretation and the use of the concept? If diaconal reflection claims to be interdisciplinary, it should be expected that both social sciences and theological knowledge would contribute when conceptualising key concepts. By interdisciplinary I mean a discourse that holds together social and theological knowledge, in a manner that initially allows each of them to be articulated on their own epistemological premises, and secondly to be dialectically related to each other, so that both can be questioned and stimulated, in the quest for new and broader insight.⁸

This also links us to the acknowledgement of human reality as a multidimensional reality and the need for holistic action when addressing situations of need, injustice and suffering. Interdisciplinary reflection is therefore as much a question of practical necessity as one of academic curiosity. In an age that often seems to favour departmentalisation and specialisation, there is every reason to emphasise the need for more comprehensive approaches and interdisciplinary knowledge, especially when dealing with cases of human life in defence of its dignity.

Today empowerment has become mainstreamed in diaconal theory and praxis. It is often presented as an alternative to paternalistic practices that in the past too often characterised church-affiliated charity work. This is also the case in international diakonia where the recent focus on rights-based approaches requires methods that allow people to be subjects when projects are implemented with the purpose of improving their lives.⁹

IV

Within the ecumenical movement diakonia was initially understood as inter-church aid and as professional work, mainly drawing its meaning from how diaconal work was conceived and carried out in Northern Europe. Since the 1980s a clear shift can be noted in the use of this word: more emphasis was given to its ecclesial nature and eventually also to its commitment to promote justice, or its prophetic mandate as representatives from churches in the global South would claim.¹⁰

This can be observed in recent ecumenical documents. One was produced by Chris Ferguson and Ofelia Ortega on behalf of the WCC Regional Relation Team

8 This view is further developed in Nordstokke, K. (2011), *Liberating Diakonia*, Trondheim: Tapir, cf. especially chapter 2: Theoretical Framework of the Science of Diakonia, 29–39.

9 This is clearly expressed in the *Global Strategy 2011–2015* of Norwegian Church Aid, <http://www.kirkensnodhjelp.no/en/About-NCA/About-NCA/Principles-and-Strategy/>

10 Cf. the article on Diakonia in Lossky N. et al. (2002): *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva: WCC, 305–310.

in 2002 with the title 'Ecumenical Diakonia'.¹¹ Here diakonia is presented as prophetic, transformative and justice-seeking, contributing to what is described as a 'cycle of empowerment':

This diakonia also involves participation in the continuing struggle for a just and equitable sharing of resources. Such sharing emphasises the mutual responsibility and accountability of churches and ecumenical partners. Sharing must be married to justice, contributing to a "cycle of empowerment" so that "all may have life in all its fullness" (Jn.10:10) and shares in the Biblical vision that "each shall sit under their vine and fig tree and live in peace and unafraid" (Mic. 4:4).¹²

On the one hand this position is clearly inspired by the biblical vision of justice and peace, and by an ethos of sharing and of mutuality; on the other it implies guiding principles for diaconal action:

Our actions must form part of a cycle of empowerment which places the affected people and communities at the centre stage, acting as their own advocates and acting as agents of their own development and service. This applies equally to local initiatives to respond to human needs, to emergency aid in times of disaster or to complex programs of international development.¹³

Similar concerns are found in the report from the Lutheran World Federation consultation in Johannesburg November 2002 titled 'Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World'. The preparatory document for this meeting does not address the theme of empowerment, nor does the final message. However, two of the speakers referred to it in a very significant manner, first Shanta Laxmi Shrestha from Nepal, who advocated the introduction of what she called an 'empowerment approach' in diaconal work:

Poverty programs must follow the empowerment approach to enable poor people to elevate their low self-esteem so that they themselves are able to assert their causes, concerns and priorities at all levels. It is a process that should start from the self of an individual.¹⁴

The other speaker to use the concept was Molefe Tsele, then general secretary of the South African Council of Churches. In his concluding response to the consultation he stated:

11 This document remains unpublished. A Spanish translation (*Diaconía Ecueménica*) was published by the Latin American Council of Churches in 2006.

12 Ecumenical Diakonia, p. 2.

13 Ecumenical Diakonia, p. 18.

14 Lutheran World Federation (2002): *Prophetic Diakonia: "For the Healing of the World"*. Report Johannesburg, South Africa, November 2002, Geneva, p. 39.

We are challenged to discover a new *locus* for diakonia: the jubilee or sabbatic dynamic of relief and social intervention aims to restore the dignity of human beings. Thus, diakonia must be viewed as sacramental service, like Communion which restores wholeness to our brokenness. Thus the notions of empowerment, transformation and reconciliation belong to the overall concept of diakonia.¹⁵

Two observations regarding these statements: Firstly, the concept of empowerment is brought up by representatives from the global South. It is their context, their experience of diaconal work as committed to the cause of the poor, affirming their rights and dignity, that has made the concept of empowerment relevant. Secondly, they claim that empowerment is more than a method in development work, but a term loaded with theological significance that requires reflection with consequences for the understanding of being the church (ecclesiology) and of what the church is mandated to be in today's world (missiology).

From my working experience with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) I shall give a few examples of how this was followed up.¹⁶ Following the consultation on prophetic diakonia in Johannesburg, two important documents have been produced: *Mission in Context* and *Diakonia in Context*, both "received" by the LWF Council (in 2004 and 2009) which means that they have been given a sort of semi-official status within the Lutheran Communion.

In both documents three terms are highlighted as key concepts for understanding mission and diakonia: transformation, reconciliation and empowerment, the very same that Molefe Tsele pointed out in his address at the end of the Johannesburg consultation. *Mission in Context* presents them as "dimensions of mission" and as reflections of God's mission as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier.¹⁷ When commenting on empowerment,¹⁸ it states that this term primarily refers to "God sharing power (*dynamis*) with people for participation in God's mission". The main focus is therefore theological with reference to the work of the Holy Spirit, and with the goal of fulfilling God's missiological mandate of bearing witness to God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ. The social dimension of empowerment is also referred to, but still mainly within an ecclesial context as the church is urged to "resist misusing power as 'power over' others". The church should instead "benefit from the mutual empowerment of its members". In the following paragraph the perspective is widened as the theme now is the church's service and diaconal ministries. Here it briefly states that the church is called upon to "go beyond a 'hand-out' or charity ministry to a mission of empowerment".

While empowerment in the mission document mainly remains a theological (more precisely: a pneumatological) term and from this perspective is only very superficially applied in relation to social and diaconal action, the second docu-

15 Id., p. 54.

16 I served the Lutheran World Federation as Director of the Department of Mission and Development (DMD) 2005–2009.

17 Lutheran World Federation (2004): *Mission in Context*, Geneva, p. 32.

18 For the following: Id., p. 35–36.

ment, *Diakonia in Context*, has another approach. Transformation, reconciliation, and empowerment are also presented here as key concepts, but now understood as “basic directions” of diakonia, to “indicate how the work is done and by which values it is oriented”.¹⁹ Empowerment is seen here both as a preferred method, which is followed up in the chapter on “Diaconal methodology”,²⁰ but also as a quality – we could say a diaconal asset – that should characterise diaconal work and foster basic values that should be implemented and recognised. Secondly, this document refers to interdisciplinary reflection and to the role of social sciences in diaconal theory and practice.²¹ The format of the document, however, does not allow a more thorough elaboration of these issues.

Concluding this part, it seems clear that the term empowerment has gained a central position in ecumenical language and in international diakonia. Very often empowerment appears together with transformation, and also with reconciliation, in a way which has each of these three concepts qualifying the other two. Transformation thus presupposes that people are reconciled and empowered; empowerment contributes to processes of transformation and reconciliation; reconciliation is only real when people are empowered and transformed.

V

In the above sections, some references have already been made to biblical texts in relation to empowerment. Not surprisingly these references do not contain the word empowerment, and it would of course be anachronistic to search for it in its modern and professional meaning.

Bearing this in mind, it is nevertheless interesting to notice that at least one English translation of the Bible, the English Standard Version, uses the verb *empower* on two occasions, both in 1 Corinthians 12, in verses 6 and 11 respectively, the first affirming that “there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone”, the second that “all these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills”.

It is the Greek verb “*energein*” that here is translated “empower”; “energise” could evidently also have been used as long as the main point is clear: the energy to realise the kind of activities to which the Apostle here refers (Greek: *energema*), comes from God and is provided by the intervention of God’s Spirit.

This takes us to a fundamental insight throughout the whole Bible: Human beings are created by God and empowered by God’s Spirit for communication and responsible action. This is affirmed in both creation narratives in Genesis 1–

19 Lutheran World Federation (2009): *Diakonia in Context*, Geneva, p. 43.

20 Idem, p. 59–66.

21 Idem, p. 60 and 75.

2. In the first story the central expression is “created in the image of God” which immediately is linked to the task of being in charge of all other living beings (Gen 1:26). The Hebrew verb “*rdh*” used here should however not be understood as “to dominate” in the sense that it invites reckless exploitation and consumption, but much more the mandate to rule over in the sense of taking care of as God’s representative.²² In the second narrative Adam is made a living being when God breathes the breath of life into his nostrils (Gen 2:7); thereby he is empowered to be in charge of the garden as steward and to name the animals. Both texts make it clear that humans are empowered by God for tasks as God’s co-workers and to be partners in God’s project of creation. The creation of Eve as Adam’s partner does not change this: there is no contradiction between empowerment and partnership in this project. Only when evil and sin corrupted human life, did this become different.

A diaconal reading of the biblical passages on creation presents an alternative to modern individualism portraying humans as autonomous and self-centred beings. It also contradicts the notion of life as something static, left for each individual to fill with meaning. Life is formed by divine will and energy; each being is created into a web of relationships and mandated to be a subject in the project of realising God’s good intentions for creation. This perspective is a fundamental point of orientation for the diaconal understanding of empowerment. It may be perceived as critical in view of present political and social schemes of empowerment.

Another theme from the biblical material that may shed light on a diaconal understanding of empowerment is its relation to the powerful word, especially in the tradition of the prophets who spoke out against oppression, injustice and idolatry. According to their own witness they were empowered by God: “The word of the Lord came to me” (Jer 1:4; Ezek 3:16). Empowered by this word they denounced the powerful and their way of treating the poor and lowly, they rejected the ruling ideology and announced an alternative path to justice and peace. Prophetic diakonia thus contains both diagnosis and prognosis, both the powerful word to unmask situations of injustice and the powerful word to announce what is possible.²³ Diaconal action should bear witness to this word, as a sign of resistance and at the same time as anticipation of what is hoped for. For that reason diaconal action can never be silent; bold words are an integral part of empowering diakonia; they denounce and announce, if necessary also by spoken words, as Francis of Assisi once phrased it.

The Jesus story is told in line with this tradition. This is my third point of reference in relation to the biblical material. It all starts when Jesus is empowered by the Holy Spirit and enters the wilderness in order to resist the domain of evil

22 Westermann C. (1974), *Genesis 1–11*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 210–211.

23 The Latin American theology of liberation has contributed immensely to this reading of the prophets and its relevance for social practice today, for instance Schwantes, M (1987), *Amos. Meditações e Estudos*, Petrópolis/São Leopoldo: Vozes/Editora Sinodal.

(Luke 4:1), and the demonic version of exercising power. Jesus resisted the temptations of a self-centred Messianic ministry; instead he consciously opted for a ministry of solidarity with the hungry and lowly, in obedience to his God-given task. Here we can see a clear parallel to the creation story: God empowering his servant for the sake of realising God's project for creation.

The gospel stories make it clear what this ministry aims at:

- Healing the sick, affirming their dignity: The woman who touched his cloak (Luke 8:43–48); the man born blind (John 9);
- Including the small and marginalised: Blessing children (Luke 18:15–17); receiving the woman with the alabaster jar in the Pharisee's house (Luke 7:36–50);
- Qualifying the despised for participation in the Messianic project: The Samaritan woman (John 4); Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–9).

These stories are all about empowered action with the purpose of empowering people. They testify to the power (*eksousia*) of Jesus that is alternate to the power of the rulers of that era (Mark 10:42).²⁴ It is not a power over, but power for, in order to lift up, include and dignify.²⁵ Healing does not only mean intervening to overcome an illness, but also rejecting stigmatisation and mechanisms of social exclusion, and thus empowering persons for a dignified life. Inclusion means re-establishing relationships and empowering people to be self-confident subjects, and not passively subjected to others in such relationships. In this process of empowerment, the least is given the role of being the first.

From this understanding it is natural that the story of the establishment of the first congregation in Jerusalem is presented as an empowering act of God's Spirit: "But you will receive power (Greek: *dynamis*) when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The story of Pentecost can thus be read in this perspective of frightened and disillusioned disciples being transformed and empowered and thereby enabled to exercise an important ministry in the public arena.

VI

When summing up the motifs from biblical reading, some principles emerge that may orient the understanding of empowerment in a diaconal perspective:

²⁴ Nissen 2012: 35.

²⁵ Nordstokke 2011: 82–83.

- Empowerment is a process of restoring and establishing relationships. Its goal is not self-realisation, as autonomous rational beings, but self-esteem activated and energised in dignified relations with others.
- In a theological perspective, empowerment has a God-given goal (*telos*) of energising people to participate in God's project and realising God's good intention for creation and human society: of mutual love and care, and of promoting human dignity and justice.
- In processes of empowerment special importance is given to the lowly and seemingly insignificant. There is an inversion of importance in the sense that the last are given the role of being the first, as their insight and power count the most.
- Processes of empowerment require space that foster and promote human dignity. Hospitality is such a space. The gathering around the table provides sacred moments of mutual sharing and serving.²⁶
- Empowerment is better understood when linked to the related processes of promoting human dignity and hope, such as transformation and reconciliation. This linking also facilitates a critical monitoring and evaluation of diaconal work, providing questions regarding the outcome and effect of empowerment.

VII

All this being stated, some critical and perhaps disturbing questions remain and have to be formulated for further reflection.

Firstly: has the concept of empowerment become too optimistic? Is it naïve in its understanding of the human capacity to overcome situations of helplessness and marginalisation? Does it fully take into consideration the power of dehumanising structures, both internal and external? The biblical tradition points at the power of evil as something that affects human life in an irrational manner, and admonishes us to resist evil. It also reminds that the powerful – and not the poor as we often think – are the first to be dominated by evil, with the consequence that the poor and powerless suffer most.

Secondly: the impression may have been given that faith per se promotes processes of empowerment. It is evident that this is not always the case. Faith may empower people to self-esteem and liberating action, but it may also contribute to the opposite. How do we discern the role of faith and religion when reflecting on empowerment in a diaconal perspective? This is a topic to be included in the agenda of all professionals working with empowerment, not only church-affiliated professionals. It seems to be a growing consensus that the religious and

²⁶ Cf. the reflection on Diakonia of the table in *Diakonia in Context*, 31–34.

spiritual dimensions should not be ignored in social and health work. If so: what skills are required to deal with this topic properly?

Thirdly: should the term “self-empowerment” be included in our reflection on this matter? Processes of empowerment emerge from within and from below, independent of and before the intervention of professional workers. How are these processes detected and affirmed, especially in professional work? Can we develop methods of accompaniment in the sense that empowerment is not experienced as intervention from outside, but as an expression of solidarity, of working with and working from, more than working for?

This leads to the fourth and last question: Who is finally to empower whom? If we are correct in claiming that processes of empowerment imply building and strengthening relations, this will often require shifts of power, for instance in the relationship between men and women. This means that we all are involved and challenged to reconsider the way we exercise power. And even beyond that: if empowerment is seen as a process of mutual transformation, its effect should be that we all mutually empower each other for new visions of who we are and to which project we are called.

Kjell Nordstokke, Institutt for diakoni og helse Diakonhjemmet Høyskole i Oslo
Postboks 184 Vindern
0319 Oslo
E-mail: nordstokke@diakonhjemmet.no