

A Conference in Diakonia – Diakonhjemmet 30 March 2005

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DIAKONIA – A GLOBAL AND ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE

1. Diakonia as integral part of ecumenism

Diaconal praxis has been one of the main pillars of the ecumenical movement since the very beginning. This is evident in the fact that the church in her nature is ecumenical, a body whose members (local churches) are spread all over the inhabited world, and at the same is diaconal, in the sense that the members are organically committed to care for each other. In that sense, the reports in the New Testament regarding the collection (Greek: *diakonia* – 2 Cor 8-9) in favour of the poor in Jerusalem is paradigmatic to what we today call international or ecumenical diakonia.

The immense suffering throughout Europe in the aftermath of World War II challenged churches to act together and to develop organisational tools in order to deliver emergency aid effectively. In this context organisations such as Norchurchaid (Kirkens Nødhjelp) were established. The primary task was to assist people in need, but equally important was the inbuilt message of reconciliation and of posing a prophetic alternative to attitudes of revenge and hate in post-war Europe.

Something similar happened in the 1960s when the former colonies in Africa and Asia gained independence. Again, churches acted together in launching a variety of projects and programmes with the aim of furthering development and welfare in the new countries. Again, the primary task was to implant knowledge and structures, this activity was of course accompanied by an inbuilt message of global equality and justice, and of presenting a prophetic alternative to indifferentism and provincialism.

Although the optimism of the 1960s soon had to be revised, as was the ideological framework of development aid from the 1970s, this was met with heavy criticism especially from the South, the ecumenical movement however, maintained its commitment regarding the diaconal challenges worldwide. Today this challenge is related to globalization and its effect in the different parts of the world. Even today concrete action is accompanied by proclamation and advocacy.

We shall come back to this. For the moment, the point to be noticed is that diakonia is an integral part of the ecumenical movement.¹ As such diakonia is a manifestation of the strength and the potential of ecumenism. The praxis of diakonia has in fact contributed largely to ecumenical theological reflection. It has given visible expression to the understanding of the worldwide church being an organic communion and the spiritual importance of sharing pain and joy. Experiences of participation in people's struggle for dignity and freedom have opened for new perspectives of biblical witness, and have renewed the theological vocabulary.

¹ Regarding the history of the Lutheran World Federation Jens Holger Schjørring states: "No survey of the history of the Lutheran World Federation can fail to take note of the essential role of service, *diakonia*, at the beginning and throughout the course of that history", in: Jens Holger Schjørring, Prasanna Kumari, Norman A. Hjelm (eds.): From Federation to Communion. The History of the Lutheran World Federation. Minneapolis 1997, p. 85

At the same time, it should be admitted that the diaconal praxis has also revealed the shortcoming of ecumenism and of the churches' limited ability to be instruments of peace and justice in the world. Too often the commitment to service has been restricted to lip service! In that sense ecumenical diakonia affirms the ambiguous nature the church, of both being holy, as instrument of God's gratuitous action, and sinful, sharing the corrupted pattern of action in the fallen world.

2. Changing winds

Although diakonia has had this constant role in ecumenism, there have been changes regarding the use of the concept of diakonia, dependent on ideological and theological trends. Generally it can be said that while the 1950s maintained a more traditional understanding of diakonia, elaborated in Germany and the Nordic countries, the 1960s introduced a more modern international terminology of development and social change. Diakonia could then be interpreted as old-fashioned and provincial.

The new political consciousness of the 1970s strengthened that conviction. Diakonia was not only old-fashioned, but uncritical and servile. No real help could be given unless the root causes were revealed and combated. In the conflict between charity work that pretended not to be politically involved, and social action for the promotion of peace and justice, traditional diaconal activity most often was identified with the first. This could some times lead to quite heated debates in ecumenical meetings.

Jens Holger Schjørring writes in the history of the Lutheran World Federation: "*The debate really had to do largely with the place of diaconic work in the context of the church's social and political responsibilities, between the witness of "feet washing" and that of "public, prophetic protest"*".² It took some time however until it was not seen to be the case of either/or, but that of dialectic interaction, in theological terms "between compassion and justice".

The terminology of diakonia should, however, regain its use in ecumenical settings. In 1986 the World Council of Churches organized an international consultation on diakonia in Larnaca, Cypros. Here diakonia was defined as "active expression of Christian witness in response to the needs and challenges of the community in which Christians and the churches live".³

It is important to note that the understanding of diakonia is now being reformulated. As an example of this, a document from the World Council of Churches is illustrative. In a report addressed to the WCC Programme Committee, dated March 2000⁴, the *Advisory Group on Regional Relations and Ecumenical Sharing* states:

"The Advisory Group began its work by reflecting on the context of ecumenical diakonia today. The overall context was identified as one of globalization. While recognizing that there are diverse experiences of globalization including positive effects for some, the predominant feeling was that globalization is a process which excludes, marginalizes and fragments communities. In this context ecumenical diakonia cannot be divorced from prophetic

² Idem, p. 133.

³ Klaus Poser (Ed.): *Called to be Neighbours: Diakonia 2000: Official Report WCC World Consultation, Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service Larnaca 1986*. WCC Geneva 1987.

⁴ World Council of Churches: *Advisory Group on Regional Relations and Ecumenical Sharing*, Bossey, 18-23 March 2000. Report to the WCC Programme Committee.

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.

The document continues to characterize the predominant globalization as ruled “*from the top*” with dramatic negative consequences for the world’s poor. The report continues to state: “*Ecumenical diakonia has to respond to this with a “globalization from below” – actions for peace by people of hope and faith. Ecumenical diakonia must affirm people as the subjects rather than objects of development ... In so doing, ecumenical diakonia must be anchored in a theology of life which proclaims the value and worth of human life.*”

The wind has definitively changed. Diakonia is no longer a provincial old-fashioned word, but a word which can be shared by Christians both in the South and in the North. It is seen to reflect grass root praxis. At the same time it is given the potential of holding together critical awareness and theological reflection.

How has this change been possible? In the following I shall point out some factors that have contributed to the reintroduction of diaconal as a key concept in the ecumenical theological language. The factors are:

- The context of globalization;
- The search of a holistic perspective;
- The rediscovery of diakonia as empowered service; and
- The prophetic dimension of diakonia.

As we look closer at these points, attention should not only been given to how these elements have marked the shaping of ecumenical diakonia, but also how they may influence our own diaconal praxis and reflection.

3. The context of globalisation

Globalization is today the most common term used for describing our time. Its predominant ideology is neo-liberalism with more confidence in the market than in political programs, with more concern for the individual than collective entities. Globalization thus reflects the transition from modernity to post-modernity.

From one perspective post-modernity confesses a spirit of immobility – the world is what it proves to be, here and now, without illusions grounded on idealistic projects of solidarity and justice. From another perspective it is characterized by a spirit of fluidity, which means that nothing is absolutely firm and reliable. Not only the answers, but also the questions of yesterday have become irrelevant.

In many circles the transition from modernity to post-modernity has meant a shift from optimism to pessimism. In the 1960s internationalisation was looked upon as a promise of development and justice, especially in what was then named *The third world*. Today the concept of globalisation contains no expectation, just networks of merciless power and of mechanisms of exclusion.

This has consequences for the church. What a few decades ago was named social work, influenced by modern professionalism under the auspices of modernity, is now being

questioned as too dependent on Western ideology and their models of society. Christians in the South especially resist a terminology that reflects the political ambitions of Western modernity; with the North as subject and model of development.

Because the concept diakonia is embedded in the Church's identity and faith it clearly differs from development work, social work or whatever concept that has been used in order to name the Church's action in favour of those who suffer. Thus, diakonia seems to offer a different sort of rationality than the one given by modernist ideology. While the last by its nature is secular and has no understanding of the role of the church, diakonia tries to develop an interdisciplinary discourse, taking into consideration both secular and theological language. Its rationality thus reflects both "what to be a church is", and "what it means to be in the world". It would, however, be wrong to affirm that such rationality is harmonious. On the contrary, it contains contradictions and is fragmented. On the one hand, should that not be expected in post modern reality? On the other hand, does that not reflect the Christian perspective of perfection being hidden present in the imperfect?

4. In search of a holistic perspective

Another concern that has been forwarded by Christians in the South is that of finding a terminology that is capable of holding the different aspects of the church's action in the world together. Over decades, Christians in Africa have criticized the separation of project money allocated for evangelisation from project money restricted to development work. Already in the 1970s the Ethiopian church sent a letter to the LWF commenting on rules imposed by Northern agencies, according to which vehicles financed by development money should be labelled "Not to be used for evangelisation". The church could not accept such a dichotomy and questioned agencies who were more sensitive to the orders of Western governments and their development strategies of "religious neutrality", than to the culture and worldview of their African partners.

Some of the same uneasiness was expressed by Latin Americans responsible for project activity. They have sensed a growing dependency on agencies in the North, not only regarding funding, but also regarding ideology and terminology. The result has been a growing distance to local congregations and church life. The introduction of a diaconal terminology has not only reversed that process, but also opens for new concepts that have brought new dynamic to the reflection of what it means to be church in mission.

It has therefore become important to enhance a terminology that expresses a holistic perspective on the church's mission in the world. In the latest mission document of the LWF from 2004, mission is understood as proclamation, service (diakonia) and advocacy. Although the three are presented distinctively, more importance is given to what relates to them, than what separates them.

This same concern is also formulated in the WCC document that was quoted above. It reads: "*Ecumenical diakonia must be anchored in a theology of life which proclaims the value and worth of human life*". In other words, a strong connection is established between diaconal praxis and theological reflection, between what is being proclaimed and what is being done.

5. Rediscovering diakonia as empowered service

The history of diakonia, especially from the 1830s when the modern diaconal movement started in Germany, shows that servility in many cases became part of diaconal lifestyle and performance. This is mainly due to strong influence by pietism that interpreted diakonia as humble service. The deaconesses and deacons were educated in the spirit of obedience and

silent service. Institutional diakonia has as a whole also been loyal to the established order, both in church and in society, in spite of its important role in the development of modern health and social services.

How has diakonia come to be identified with humble and self-effacing service? Many think that this is how the Bible understands diakonia. Recent research, however, has proven that this interpretation lacks foundation. There are good exegetical reasons for defining diakonia as important service given to an agent or a go-between. Looking rapidly at how the Greek words of diakonia/diakonein are related to Jesus in the gospels, they most frequently refer to the Messianic mission to which he was empowered by his heavenly Father.

The New Testament portrays the diakonia of Jesus as a manifestation of Messianic authority (Greek: *exousia*), but as an authority that radically differed from what experienced from the powerful of the world (Mark 10.42ff). Diaconal authority as revealed by Jesus is not an authority over people, but an authority for people, manifested on occasions such as when he healed the sick and included them in the life of society. His authority astonished people (Luke 9.8), and they praised God for what they had seen him do. This same authority was expressed in a way in which he ate with people, also in the act of washing the disciples' feet. It manifested itself as a salvific, including authority, thus giving a profound meaning to diakonia.

From this interpretation, there are reasons to break with the tradition of understanding diakonia as self-effacing, humble service. Diakonia is commissioned service, given by the Lord and empowered by his Spirit, with the aim of lifting up the downtrodden, of dignifying the expendable, and of empowering the excluded. As such, diakonia expresses the healing service of the church – for the healing of the world.

But does not the Bible say that Jesus humbled himself (Phil 2.8) and was obedient unto death? Now the Greek word for humbling oneself does not mean an introvert individualist pious action as it often was idealised in pietistic tradition. Much more the word should be seen socially, as an act of moving in direction of the lowly. For Jesus this was a voluntary action, an expression of his incarnation, with the purpose of getting close to the lost and to open new way of salvation.

This should be kept in mind when is referred to the kenotic dimension of mission and diakonia. In the 1960's the World Council of Churches launched a program called "Church for others". One of the main intentions was to develop an ecclesiology focusing a servant church. The church should serve the poor and marginalized in the world, leaving the models of colonial times behind, following the kenotic example of Jesus.

A few decades later it was discovered that it was wrong to talk about the poor and marginalized as "the others", as objects of the Church's action. Theologians, especially in Latin America, renewed the ecclesiological reflection based on the experiences from the basic Christian communities. People in Latin America, they said, are poor *and* believers. The challenge therefore is to acknowledge the "power of the poor", affirming their role as agents of hope in God's project for his world.⁵

How should we understand the church as a serving community from this perspective? If the Church is seen as the Church of the poor, a Church from below, would that mean that the Church is given the task of serving others? Should we therefore avoid such concepts as diakonia and as serving community?

⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez: *The Power of the Poor in History*. Maryknoll NY 1983.

It is important to note that diaconal mission does not mean servility or self-effacing service. Quite the contrary, it manifests divine authority. That is evident in the diakonia of Jesus. He questioned the religious and political authorities of his time; it was clearly a prophetic ministry. Therefore Jesus was persecuted, tortured and killed in a most brutal way. In this critical moment he was rejected and despised by the people, his disciples fled. On the cross he even experienced to be abandoned by his heavenly Father. In this way the *diakonia* of Jesus brought him to the bottom line of human suffering and damnation. But God was with him throughout his mission, he raised him from death – “he is the one whom God has appointed judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets spoke about him, saying that all who believe in him will have their sins forgiven through the power of his name” (Peter in Acts 10.38-43).

Many poor Christians recognize their own experiences of humiliation and struggle in the story of Jesus. And they see his victory over the forces of evil as their victory. Through faith they see their role as empowered partners in God’s diakonia in the world, for reconciliation, empowerment and transformation.

6. The prophetic dimension of diakonia

From this background the term *prophetic diakonia* has been introduced. As one example of how this is used in ecumenical circles, I shall briefly refer to the LWF Report from the Consultation on Prophetic Diakonia in Johannesburg in 2001.⁶ The Letter from this event states:

“We acknowledge with gratitude the many kinds of diaconal work that the Church has carried out through the centuries, and which necessarily continue in our own day. This work is now challenged to move toward more prophetic forms of diakonia. Inspired by Jesus and the prophets who confronted those in power and called for changes in unjust structures and practices, we pray that God may empower us to help transform all that leads to human greed, violence, injustice and exclusion.”

Prophecy is a biblical term and should be understood and used from that background. Some times political diakonia and prophetic diakonia have been referred to as being the same thing, but to differentiate between the two would be more precise.

Political diakonia expresses the political dimension of diaconal work. Since diakonia takes place in the public sphere, it must be conscious of its socio-political role and be ready to speak out when necessary.

Prophetic diakonia, on the other hand, has another accent. It relates to the intrinsic nature of diakonia, affirming that the prophetic task is part of the mandate and authority that God has given the church and its diakonia.

In the biblical tradition, prophecy appears as response to divine revelation and a God-given mandate given to the prophet. “The word of the Lord came to me, saying...” This word always manifests God’s lordship and power, as reads Amos 4.13: “For behold, He who forms mountains, and creates the wind, who declares to man what his thought is, and makes the morning darkness, who treads the high places of the earth – the Lord God of hosts is his name”.

⁶ LWF: Prophetic Diakonia: “For the Healing of the World” Report - Johannesburg, South Africa - November 2002.

But it also expresses God's concern for creation, especially for his people, reminding them that he is judge and redeemer, now and in times to come. Isaiah 52.7-10: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns!" ... The lord has made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God".

Christians in the South especially sense the relevance of such wording in a time that has declared that history has come to its end, or that the market, eventually some worldly powers, should set the ultimate condition for human existence. In such a situation, the prophetic word reminds that God is the Lord of history, it is a word that still judges and promises redemption.

How is the relation between prophecy and diakonia established?

Both have the task of finding ways, of building bridges, in direction of renewal (repentance) and transformation. The task of diakonia is that of being a pathfinder. Diakonia is never just words, but actions, looking for ways by which transformation may take place. In Latin American migrant diakonia is being used for conceptualizing this notion of being in the present reality of people with an open-minded perspective of hope.

Acting like this, diakonia cannot keep silent. It conveys a message of new times to come (as read in Isaiah 52.7). It is important to notice that the prophets were strong defenders of justice. They reacted especially when the God-given law was broken. This so-called apodictic law was established at Mount Sinai as a part of the covenant between God and his people. It is different from the casuistic law made by the elders who met at the gates of the city. The apodictic law is unquestionable. It belongs to the covenant and its promise of shalom and well-being. That is why breaking that law had such dramatic consequences.

From this perspective it becomes clear that to be prophetic means to defend justice. Diaconal action therefore by its very nature includes the task of unmasking injustice and of promoting justice – or better: being a pathfinder serving that cause.

For the prophets of the Old Testament, this task was undertaken within the framework of theocratic society. How to give continuity to this same task when theocracy is no longer viable as political option? Could it be by being committed to human rights as a manifestation of apodictic law in our times? And to work for a just, participatory and sustainable society as our way of expressing what the covenant and theocracy meant at that time?

In any case, there is a strong link between prophecy and diaconal commitment to justice. This should have normative consequences for all kinds of diaconal work, but especially for ecumenical diakonia.

Prophetic diakonia is thus characterised by its divine mission. But at the same time it is according to its nature and due to its commitment to justice, oriented towards the margin of society, towards the poorest and their condition of life. This has both a sociological and a theological/ecclesiological implication making prophetic diakonia committed to the perspective of those belonging to the periphery. Here a kind of diaconal sensibility must be developed, so that the version of the last is heard first.

Another important observation to make is the fact that the prophets often addressed their message to the leadership of the religious order, They also addressed the rich and mighty, such as the king, but then within the rationality of theocracy. They were responsible for

abusing the system and the power given to them. They were manipulative in order to appear pious and lawful. They even installed false prophets that announced what pleased them.

What kind of challenge is this to prophetic diakonia? It could be that the prime focus of prophetic action should not be political institutions and similar secular entities. Although there obviously are cases even today when politicians pretend to have religious sanction for what they do, and refer to a kind of metaphysical “it must be done” when they allow that the poor are being sacrificed.

But it must be at least an equally important task for prophetic diakonia to address the church establishment, in order to question how we are being “confirmed to this world” (Rom 12.2) in dealing with burning issues of our time. Is it fair to say that the church some times has imitated structures of domination and exclusion? Is a lifestyle of religious consumerism and ethical indifference adopted instead of being profoundly provoked by the signs of growing poverty and injustice in the world?

Could it even be that our own performance as diaconal institutions needs a prophetic questioning? How do we measure what we are and what we do? Is it done according to standards of efficiency and professional work, as defined in current manuals of development work, or is it done according to the mandate given by the Lord: “As the Father has sent me, I also send you!”?

Without critical prophetic questions, the church and her diakonia is easily trapped by triumphalism, by ecclesiocentrism and other variants of the theology of glory. The church needs to be constantly renewed and reminded of her God-given mandate and to be on the way – even when this is a way of the cross.

7. Transformation as gift and task

Returning now to the Letter from the Johannesburg consultation, it continues by affirming the holistic perspective of the church’s mission:

“Because of the holistic mission of God, diakonia is deeply interrelated with kerygma (proclamation of the Word) and koinonia (sharing at the Table). Diakonia is witnessing through deeds. It is rooted in the sharing of the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion. The mutual sharing inherent in the communion of the church can transform the unjust power relations that often are present in diaconal work, such as between “wealthy givers” and “poor recipients.” In diakonia, those served and those serving are both transformed. At the same time, we insist that the purpose of diakonia is not to proselytize.

Diakonia is more than the strong serving the weak, which can lead to paternalistic assumptions and practices, and imply that some churches are unable to engage in diakonia because of their lack of resources or expertise. We challenge this assumption. Diakonia is part of the calling of all churches and all Christians in the world.”

Here two expressions should be noticed since they point out what makes the holistic perspective possible. The first is the communion of the church being a sharing communion, and the second is transformation as gift and task.

Both expressions are important in ecumenical terminology. Communion has become a key concept within ecclesiology. *Com*-union means *with* each other, as organic body where each member has its own dignity and importance, and where caring and sharing are vital expressions of life and mobility.

Another emerging concept is transformation. Transformation has a deeper signification than social change for instance. Social change or action is most often dependent upon a modernist view on society: the future may be constructed. Thus, action itself has subordinated the intention to change. Action will then be measured according to its results. This provides dangerous power to those who define the course and the goal of change. On the other hand, it also gives an ungrounded confidence in the relationship between cause and effect in the social world.

Transformation has a broader scope. As Indian theologian Monica Melanchthon states, “*Transformation is a process whereby changes are wrought in structures, be they political, social, economic or cultural. The process of transformation should therefore affect the individual personally, interpersonally and socio-structurally. Equally significant is also the fact that transformation is a characteristic feature of Christian tradition, fundamental to the Christian view of things, and at the heart of our conviction that something fundamental new and different can be brought about by God’s will and work*”.⁷

We sense here that transformation, quite differently from social change, implies openness for spiritual reality. No human being is the master of transformation. On the other hand, nobody is excluded from the need and the promise of transformation. It is the power of the grain of wheat that is apparently doomed to death when laid into the earth. This action opens the transformation into multiplied life. In the perspective of faith, this reflects the sacramental mystery of transformation, and the significance of what is apparently insignificant.

From this background the serving community sees its diakonia not as a powerful social action, but as service empowered by God’s Spirit. The spiritual dimension let us see diaconal action as meaningful in itself as it does not depend upon development theories. It is powerful due to its dynamic nature and is as such able to open new dimensions of being. As already stated post-modernism has no visions of the future. Its concentration is here and now. How does the Church view here and now? Is the Christian message basically related to the future, either within history as some kind of social reality to be constructed, or as heavenly reality beyond time?

Diaconal action implies a valorization of here and now, as importance is given to what people live and suffer. This does not mean that the Church adheres to the ideology of here and now. The task is to be present and at the same time act under the perspective of transformation.

In a broken world that means a diakonia of reconciliation and healing. When LWF met for its Tenth General Assembly in Winnipeg 2003, the main theme was: *For the healing of the world*. During the Assembly different Village Groups discussed the theme related to actual challenges. One of them concentrated on the healing ministry of the church.

In the report from that group is stated: “*The starting point for our reflection on the Church’s ministry of healing is that God is the one who heals. We confess God as God of Life, and we see healing as promoting the wholeness of life. The world we live in is broken as a result of sin; people are victims of injustice and the abuse of power. Healing is part of God’s creation, it embraces the experience of forgiving, the restoration of broken relations. It has also an eschatological dimension as new and just ways of living are being called forth, as sign of the Kingdom and God’s unmerited grace.*”

⁷ Melanchthon, Monica J.: *Koinonia and Mission*, in: LWF Consultation on Churches in Mission, Nairobi October 1998. Report, p. 109-117.

As a Christian communion we are called to be partners in God's healing work. Physical, mental and spiritual healing of persons is not a new activity, but has been important in the life and ministry of the church from its beginning, and continues to be in the church's ministry today. Jesus healed and called his followers to do likewise: "to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal" (Luke 9:1-2). The ministry of healing, which belongs to the whole church, continues Jesus' ministry of healing, building and edifying a new community. It includes the ministry of service - diakonia - through medical, educational and social services for those in need. All are called to promote healing, nurturing, and preservation of life.

In our globalized world we cannot limit the task of healing to the individual or intimate sphere. A wider perspective must be used, including issues of social, political and ecological nature. The prophetic dimension must not be ignored in the healing ministry of the church. Where healing takes place, justice is restored.

It is of fundamental importance to relate the healing ministry to the ministry of proclamation of the Gospel and of administration of the sacraments. Healing is grounded in the Word of the cross, which basically is a word of powerlessness. This clarifies that humans are not subjects of healing, but God alone. This is expressed in the Lutheran doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone, as celebrated in baptism and eucharist. Both are sacraments of healing. From this basis the church is given its ministry of healing as a transformative action, empowered by the Holy Spirit."

8. Conclusion

From what has been presented it is evident that diakonia has regained a central position in ecumenical life. Within the WCC, *Diakonia & Solidarity* is one of the five programme teams, with the following self-presentation:

*"The term "diakonia" refers to service as a permanent activity of the church throughout history. Diakonia is essential and foundational to life in faith. The very existence of a fellowship of churches is impossible to imagine without compassionate service and solidarity for all, based on God's love. Over the years, the concept of diakonia has expanded from being viewed solely as a service of compassion to include working for change in relationships and social structures."*⁸

When the WCC gathers for its IX General Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in February 2006 under the theme "*God in your grace, transform the world*" diakonia without a doubt will have a central role.

As referred to above, the Lutheran World Federation affirms diakonia as an integral part of the church's nature and life.⁹ This will also be an important theme in the coming years, which can be illustrated by one of the recommendations adopted at the Tenth Assembly in Winnipeg, Canada, July 2003, under the heading *Prioritizing the issue of Diakonia within the LWF*, it reads:

The Assembly requests that the Lutheran Communion (LWF) initiate a coordinated study program on "the role of diakonia as an integral part of the Lutheran communion". This study should include reflection on the diaconal work of lay people inside and outside organized church structures.

⁸ <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/regional/index-e.html>

⁹ For information and documentation see: <http://www.lutheranworld.org/>

Contextually, the Lutheran churches should be churches of presence for and with marginalized individuals and groups. In view of the persistence of material poverty in major parts of the world, and in the light of the spiritual poverty related to excessive individualism in other parts of the world, the diaconal tasks of the churches are today many and multifaceted.

Theologically, we need to reconsider the Lutheran commitment to the priesthood of all believers. What is the relation between mission and diakonia? What does the message of God's unconditional justification of sinners mean to those who are ashamed as poor, powerless or contagious, or branded as those who do not measure up to modern standards of efficiency and success?

Ecclesiologically, we should give voice and recognition to those lay members of the church, who contribute to the life of the church through hospitality and visitation, hearing and helping, or contribute to the beauty of the world through music and art. A failing theological reflection on the works of the love and beauty may reflect an ecclesial situation where sometimes only the ordination of church officers is regarded as important to church formation.