

Diaconal Reflections

How we experience our diaconal calling in our diversity

PREFACE

Because there has been some confusion about the meanings of some of the words used in the working paper, these understandings are put forward to assist your reading and discussion.

Diakonia — Christian service to which all the baptized are called and which is part of the mission of Christ's church in the world.

DIAKONIA — The World Federation of Diaconal Associations and Communities.

Diaconate — Those called, identified, prepared, set apart and/or commissioned [or ordained] for „public“ ministry of diakonia, sometimes doing diakonia in the name of the church, sometimes encouraging greater involvement of all the baptized in diakonia, and sometimes serving as a sign and reminder that Christ has called the whole church to diakonia.

1. THE NATURE OF DIACONAL MINISTRY

I am in the midst of you as one who serves. Luke 22:27

The model for diaconal ministry is Jesus Christ, 'one who serves'. Servanthood is the key to understanding the call to diaconal ministry. 'Servanthood', however, is a difficult concept especially when people are relegated to servant roles not of their own choosing or when some in other ministry positions do not wish to be servants. The servanthood that is central to diaconal ministry is a costly way of life chosen by those who know their own brokenness and their own need for God's healing. It can be embraced only by those who have received God's love and been empowered by the Holy Spirit. Diaconal, servanthood ministry then means being a healing, accepting, encouraging presence to others, enabling them to experience God's unending, unconditional, love and forgiveness. It includes seeking justice and sharing a visions. It presumes an image of God whose love and care extends to all people. It is a call to be in a relationship with God and God's world, to accept, support, and comfort, and to equip and encourage others to use their own gifts to fulfill their potential in service and life.

Diaconal ministry is both prophetic and a witness to God's love. Faithful servants represent and act on behalf of the one who sends them. In the Church the people of God gather as a community to worship and are sent out to serve. God calls us to worship and be nurtured. God sends us out to nurture others. It is a constant movement of gathering and dispersing. The sending out or diaconal nature of the Church completes its life and purpose. The ministry of the diaconate involves and seeks to link these two aspects of the Church, the people of God gathered as a community and the Church acting in the world as Christ's servants. The Church is not whole until it accepts and exercises its diaconal nature.

The prophetic role of diaconal ministry is to see God's intention for the creation, to critique what is going on in the church and world, to protest against evil and injustice, and to call the Church and world – all people – to respond in ways that will transform the world. Some diaconal members are called to leadership and public service in order to ensure the unity and continuity of *diakonia* as the nature of the Church. Some are called to work in education, pastoral care, social service, health care, evangelism and missions, wherever their particular gifts and service can be used. In their work they represent but do not replace the ministry of all the baptised.

Diakonia is not only a function or a job. It is a way of life, of being and loving, which is expressed in many different jobs and functions. It is a calling accepted by choice and followed in obedience to Christ. It is an attitude to life, living with a loving heart and enacting that love in the world. Servanthood in this sense is positive and a privilege. It is not to be confused with servitude or slavery! Diakonia is a space where the human and divine meet. It can be symbolised by hands: receiving, offering and blessing in a permanent movement. It is a ministry that enables others to also do ministry. Ministries beget ministries! Ministry is fruit-bearing when it draws others into ministry.

In identifying with Christ, we are identifying with the suffering of the world, with the oppressed, the poor, the disenfranchised, the abused. The diaconate calls the whole church, clergy and laity, to see the suffering of the world and to be involved. We are to bear one another's burdens not to make others dependent, but to express solidarity and support, to be agents of healing and hope. There is a call to persevere in ministry, and to be faithful.

Those in diaconal ministry also need to be refreshed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. They need to have time and space for prayer and quiet listening to God. When we have found our home, our centre in God, when we know the joy of relationship with Christ, then we are able to serve.

2. LIVING AS A COMMUNITY

Community is basic to Christian life and takes many different forms in the life of the church. Although community is not unique to the diaconate, building community is always a distinct characteristic of the diaconate. Diaconal community is centered in the whole community of Christ. The diaconate has a great deal to share with the church about community. Some members of the diaconate live in motherhouses, others live in families or small households, and still others live alone. But all see community as part of their diaconal identity. Ideally in community people share what they have, receive what they need, and find support and encouragement for service in the world. Community is both gift and task, blessing and burden, a place of joy and a place of struggle and suffering. Community may make possible a corporate witness that is more powerful than the voices of individuals.

In talking about the meaning of community, members of the diaconates gave a diverse picture. The paragraphs that follow express some of that variety.

Community is both a way of life and a place to be. It is a watering hole, and oasis. It is a forum, a mother-body. It is a place of safety to share joy, prayer, laughter, tears and rituals. It is compared to the disciples learning together from the teaching and life of Jesus who is the centre of community. It is a way of belonging where differences are accepted, where broken relationships can be restored, where skills are developed and where companionship can be found. It is a place of reconciliation and forgiveness where individuals are respected. It is a place to be yourself. Community life can also produce tensions that need to be addressed.

This sense of community exists even when members are separated by great distances. Most communities plan conferences, meetings and retreats and keep in touch through networks, newsletters and regional gatherings.

Diaconal members work collegially in teams and make decisions by consensus whenever possible. They share common goals, a call to ministry and an identity. They often act as advocates and pastoral support for one another.

The declining membership of some groups combined with an ageing population, has led to the decision not to accept new members. Others are no longer finding ministry positions in the Church so that the majority of the membership work in secular positions and volunteer in the Church. Still through their identity in belonging to the diaconate, there is a bond that brings them together in community. In still other groups there is growth in numbers and creative forms of ministry responding to new needs in church and world. Others see rich potential in employment outside the Church as a way to make stronger links between liturgy and work. Community provides a place for reflection on changes, discernment for God's leading, and support and encouragement to make sometimes risky decisions.

The motherhouse is an example of community as home, with accountability and interdependence part of the life style. It has economic advantages for living and creates its own ministries. These include hospitals, senior residences, nursing homes, day care, kindergartens, teacher training and conference centres. They provide care for their senior sisters and opportunities for ministry for younger sisters. They balance the needs of the individual and of the community. Associations or orders that live independently either in families or alone find more conflicts in maintaining an interest in their diaconal community but the same bondedness in their identity exists. The bond that binds all communities is their spiritual life, their commitment to a life-long call to service, which is sustained and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

3. VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF DIACONAL MINISTRY AND THE WORLD FEDERATION OF DIAKONIA

Because of the diversity of cultures, political situations, and church governance, it is difficult to articulate a single vision for diaconal ministry. What follows reflects some of that variety.

The church of the next century will be a servanthood Church. The needs of society are critical, people and communities are on the verge of destruction. In recovering the diaconal dimension of the Church, the diaconate will help the Church build a society that cares for people and empowers them. This will come from the movement of the Holy Spirit and from Biblical and theological study. When governments move away from caring for people, the diaconate will be in the forefront of the Church's mission.

Human touch and the presence of a loving heart are needed in a technological world. The diaconate will be a sign of the Church's full recovery of the ministry to others. More and more the church must go into society and not just invite people into the church.

There is a need for the diaconate to be recognised within the church and an integral part of the structure and agencies of the Church. All the church bodies have been involved in studies on ministry. They have to move from the study of ministry to the study of diakonia! They have to come to new understandings of servanthood. The diaconate has the knowledge and experience and now must use its voice to alert the Church to new areas of concern and opportunity for the ministry of service. The diaconate brings to the Church its creativity both in worship and in service. It will be a prophetic voice to call the Church to exercise its servant nature. It will be a prophetic voice in addressing our interconnectedness with all countries and with the environment. It will work ecumenically. It will be a model for servanthood, for deepening spirituality and for community life.

The World Federation of DIAKONIA is a link to bring understanding and acceptance. It is a place to learn to listen without prejudice. It is a place to develop a spirituality of receiving and giving without colonialistic ideas. It encompasses and brings together the diversity of languages and cultures represented by its members around the world. It reveals one common identity as servants of Christ, our common goal of being God's presence in the world. Through this unity we support each other in a broader vision of the world's needs, we become partners and friends building new bridges. DIAKONIA brings into focus the world history of diaconal ministry which is our shared history. It will facilitate networking, sharing and support. It will be a source of encouragement and learning for new diaconates. It will join its voice in the struggle against economic domination and the power of bureaucracy. It will use power to empower others.

The focus of diakonia is the world as the object of God's activity and love.

Please feel free to photocopy for the use of your members.

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