

Shaken by the Wind  
World Federation of DIAKONIA Assembly  
June 29, 2017

I want to begin by giving thanks for the ministry God has done, is doing, and will do through diaconal groups around the world. Through you and your colleagues, persons in need have been served and given hope, systems of injustice have been called to account, people have received education and health care, and, in these ways, the love of God has been embodied.

I have not been directly involved in diaconal work, except at the local level. My national and international ecumenical engagement has been primarily with Faith and Order and as general secretary of the National Council of Churches. But I have long believed—and said loudly!—that DIAKONIA, both the ministry and the organization, is the most under-appreciated part of the ecumenical movement. As Teresa Joan White has put it, “In international, national, regional, and local church structures, diakonia is too often marginalized, and decisions are made by those who give priority to the pastoral care of the gathered church.” Insofar as this is true, it needs to stop!

That’s why I am honored by the invitation to speak here this morning, honored that you would include me as a colleague. I do not have the right to be called “deacon,” but for the rest of this address, instead of talking about “you,” I will talk about “us.” How are we being shaken by the wind?

Two friends, leaders in DIAKONIA, have been instrumental for my own understanding of the ecumenical church; and here at the opening of my remarks, I want to acknowledge them and their influence on me.

The first is Deaconess Chita Framo from the Philippines. She may not even remember this, but in 1993 Chita and I were both invited to be consultants at the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela. And, lo and behold, we were selected as the drafters of one section of the final report.

As we got to know one another, it became clear that I was more at home drafting theological documents, while Chita was more at home meeting people and listening carefully to their insights. And so, we came up with a plan: She would listen, we would talk, I would write, and together we would try to draft something worth reading. And I think we did!

More than that, however, I went away from our conversations deeply convinced that the ecumenical movement, if it is to be profound, must say koinonia (the theme of the Faith and Order conference) and diakonia in the same breath. A criterion of authentic koinonia (communion, fellowship) is whether it results in committed service. And a criterion of authentic diakonia is whether it builds up the body of Christ—which, of course, means that our service must be mutual, never a matter of dependent relationships. I went away from Santiago convinced that, while church unity is not simply a means to the end of more efficient service, service is also not simply a means to the end of deeper unity. Each has an integrity of its own, even as they belong together in any adequate understanding of the church and ecumenism. Or, as we wrote in our part of the report, “Diakonia to the whole world and koinonia [living as the whole church] cannot be separated.”

I believe Deaconess Chita Framo, former president of this body, is here today; and, if she wouldn't mind standing, I would like for us to recognize her.

The other friend who has greatly contributed to my understanding of these issues is Deacon Jan Cherry. During my years as a visiting professor at Seattle University, I participated regularly in morning prayer in the school's beautiful chapel, prayer that was led by Jan. She modeled for me, and others, the combination of prayer for the world, all of it, and service to the world, all of it. I don't think it has ever crossed Jan's mind that these could be separated.

As a result of my time with Jan, I find that I am reading the New Testament with more nuance. Like most Christians, I suspect, I have tended to think of service in purely moral terms—a matter of good works. I now see, however, that it is much deeper than that. It is the whole orientation of one's life. Those infected with the spirit of diakonia live in prayerful gratitude for our servant Lord, whose own life calls us to service in his name. And if our service is in imitation of Jesus, then it must be incarnational—a participation, including through prayer, in the life, including the suffering, of those we serve.

I know that Deacon Jan Cherry, a member of the planning committee for this assembly, is here today; and, if she wouldn't mind standing, I would like for us to recognize her.

By the way, you will hear much more about the ministry of deacons when my friend, Bishop Chris Epting, speaks to this assembly on Saturday.

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The theme for this assembly—“Shaken by the Wind”—has two obvious meanings. First, if the church is the church, it is because we who follow Christ have been shaken by the

wind of the Holy Spirit. The theme, in other words, is a reminder that God's grace is the basis of our human efforts. People like me who are involved in ecumenical dialogues often sound as if the church's unity depends on human agreement. But surely this is backwards. We engage in dialogue because we know that we already belong to one another thanks to what God has done in Jesus Christ. Remember the language of Ephesians 4: "... maintain [not create, but maintain] the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. [For] there is [not should be, but is] one body ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God ...." Our efforts to reach agreement are a consequence of the unity we have been given in Christ, not a pre-requisite for it.

In the same way, diakonia is not simply or primarily a human achievement. If scripture is our guide, then we know that the divine invitation to serve those in need is a privilege to which we respond with gratitude, and certainly not a reason for boasting. As the Pentecost story in Acts 2 makes clear, it is the Spirit who pulls us together and sends us out to the ends of the earth. Being brought together—being sent out. It is the essential movement of Christian life, a sign that we are being shaken by the wind of the Spirit. The church's constant prayer, our prayer at this assembly, must be that the Holy Spirit will shake us into renewed understanding and faithfulness—gathering us in and sending us out.

There is, however, a second obvious implication of our theme: We who are gathered by the wind of the Spirit are also shaken by the winds of contemporary social-political events. And, friends, we need to spend time today reflecting together on this turbulence. I won't presume to speak about your contexts. But I will try to describe how the winds are blowing here in the United States, and leave it for you to decide whether similar winds are blowing in your setting—or whether these winds in the US are also affecting you.

The elephant in the room, the thing we can't ignore no matter how much we may want to, is Donald Trump. Please hear me. There are many people of good will who voted for him, people who are understandably anxious about the loss of jobs or a culture that is changing rapidly around them. What I am about to say is not meant to question the integrity of their choice. In my judgment, however, Trump's presidency is a manifestation of currents in this society that are dramatically contrary to the gospel, even as his presidency is also an agent of negative change.

I am going to name five of these societal winds that are shaking us here in the United States, although I suspect they are already familiar to you:

- *Economic policies, including proposals for the funding of health care, that favor the wealthy at the expense of the poor.* The budget proposed by the President for the next fiscal year would, among many other things, eliminate funding for community development grants aimed at providing affordable housing and care for the homeless, and would severely reduce federal dollars for after school and pre-school programs relied on by poor families. The health care proposal that he supported, but which failed in Congress, would have cut almost \$900 billion from Medicaid, which provides payment for medical services for low-income citizens. It goes without saying that these cruel policies, if enacted, would deeply affect the need for Christian diaconal ministries.
- *A rejection of scientific research regarding climate change and a consequent attack on regulations and legislation designed to help protect the environment.* The proposed budget would slash 30 percent of funding for the Environmental Protection Agency, gutting programs to promote clean air and water and reduce lead poisoning (which, of course, disproportionately affects the poor). It would eliminate support for the UN's Green Climate Fund, as well as clean energy research programs. And regulations designed to keep companies from polluting are being reversed. Such policies, which dismiss studies on climate change in order to maximize corporate profits, run counter to Christian values and will surely affect the need for diaconal ministries.
- *An emphasis on the military, including military action at the expense of diplomacy.* The US already spends more on the military than the next eight highest-spending countries combined; and the proposed budget calls for a \$54 billion increase! That increase alone is \$15 billion more than Germany's entire military budget. Meanwhile, money allocated for the State Department, the locus of US diplomatic efforts, would be reduced by a third. These astonishing financial priorities reflect a commitment to the "myth of redemptive violence," the idea that violent force is the answer to international challenges. It goes without saying that this runs counter to the gospel and affects the need for diaconal ministries, if not here then in other countries.
- *An isolationist mentality that promises to reduce US presence and funding when and where they are most needed around the world.* The proposed budget would cut funding for the United Nations by 50 percent, with detrimental impact on everything from vaccinating children to caring for refugees to monitoring the spread of nuclear weapons. Foreign economic assistance, already sinfully paltry (.19 percent of GDP), would suffer further reduction. In Trump's own words, "I'm going to spend less money on people overseas and more money on people back home"—this at a time when 20 million of our global neighbors face the prospect of starvation in the Horn of Africa,

Nigeria, and Yemen. Such astonishing provincialism will obviously affect the need for diaconal ministries in many places.

- *An apparent nostalgia for an America that was predominantly white and Christian, which has led to unwarranted and mean-spirited fear of immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and other minorities.* For many people in this country, the mix of races, ethnicities, cultures, and religions is the nation's greatest strength. For others, however, this is precisely what's wrong with America. In a recent survey of US adults, more than half agreed with the statement, "I don't identify with what America has become." It is evidence of a backlash against what many experience as rapid, disorienting social change, a backlash that is often manifest in the language of fear. Do I need to say that this has implications for diaconal ministries?

I want to spend a bit more time on the problem of fear, because I am convinced that fear is at the root of, or at least contributes to, other problems I have named. "The enemy," Gandhi once said, "is fear; we think it is hate; but it is fear"—because fear is so often the basis of hatred. Unlike grief or empathy, fear is, generally speaking, narcissistic; it focuses on the self and, thus, often thwarts compassionate identification with others—which, as you well know, is the foundation of diakonia.

Some fear, of course, is perfectly appropriate. I suspect you deal all the time with people who face very understandable anxiety. But what we see now in this country is a level of public fear completely, dangerously out of sync with any actual threat.

Refugees are a good case in point. Long before Trump's infamous executive order temporarily banning the entry of refugees to the US, a majority of governors, citing security concerns, announced their opposition to receiving Syrian refugees in their states. But such concern is based on fear, not fact. Quoting now from a widely-respected recent study: "Over the last four decades, 20 out of 3.25 million refugees welcomed to the United States [.00062 percent] have been convicted of attempting or committing terrorism on US soil [none of them Syrian], and only three Americans have been killed in attacks committed by refugees—all three by Cuban refugees in the 1970s." It is hard not to conclude that the travel ban meets no real security need. It is designed to reduce the fear felt by persons who have been told, falsely, that they should be afraid.

We could multiply such examples until time for lunch: A person is four times more likely to be hit by lightning than to be killed by a terrorist in the United States; but fully half of the American public say they are fearful that they or a member of their family will become a victim of terrorists. The crime rate has fallen by 50 percent over the past

quarter century, but most Americans believe, fearfully, that it is going up. A quarter of all prisoners worldwide are behind bars in this country, and nearly half of our states now spend more on jails and prisons than on colleges and universities (a sure sign that fear has triumphed over hope in political decision making). The United States has nearly 50 percent more guns per capita—guns that their owners say are for “self defense”—than the next most heavily armed country, which is Yemen. You get the point.

In a new book on this subject, I argue that the problem is not that we have fears, some of which may at times be warranted. The problem is that this nation lives in a state of fear, with highly detrimental consequences for Mexicans, Muslims, the LGBT community, the poor, the homeless, young black men, immigrants and refugees—anyone viewed with fearful suspicion by those with political power.

Donald Trump did not create this “culture of fear,” but he has stoked and exploited it with false and incendiary rhetoric that increases fear among those who are the targets of his administration’s policies. Addressing this epidemic of anxiety will be a challenge for diaconal ministers in the years ahead.

So, this is some measure of the wind I think is now shaking us. Its effects have been particularly troubling, as I see it, because the recent past seemed at least somewhat hopeful.

- Globally, as many of you know better than I, there has been extraordinary progress in the struggle to eliminate extreme poverty. If today is an average day, then 100 thousand fewer people live in extreme poverty today than yesterday, according to UN statistics. There is also good news with regard to HIV/AIDS and malaria (infection and mortality rates have fallen substantially), and the percentage of girls in school has risen in nearly every country.
- In recent decades, we witnessed the collapse of apartheid in South Africa and the pressing of indigenous rights in such places as Australia and Canada. In this country, we thought there was progress toward overcoming the racism that has so scarred our history, progress symbolized by the presidency of Barack Obama.
- Greater attention has recently been paid in recent years to the importance of protecting God’s creation from human-caused decimation. The Paris Agreement seemed to indicate that momentum was building for significant action aimed at reducing the effects of climate change.

And now much of this is in danger of being undone, at least in this context.

In preparing this presentation, I looked back at previous ecumenical statements on diakonia, including the Larnaca Declaration of 1986. This declaration is well-known in our circles for its ground-breaking emphasis on “prophetic diakonia,” on the socially “transforming power of Christian service.” It is disheartening, however, to read the challenges listed in the Larnaca Declaration and realize that they could have been written in the age of Trump. Christian diakonia, in the words of the declaration, must respond to increased terrorism, growing militarization, growing numbers of refugees and an increase in xenophobia, economic structures that perpetuate inequality, increased polarization and fragmentation in political life, and (to show just how stagnant world affairs can be) the Palestinian struggle for self-determination.

So, yes, there are signs that we are being shaken by the wind of the Spirit, for which we should give thanks. God is at work, calling us to participate in divine diakonia. But we are also being shaken by turbulent social-political winds, both new and persistent, both in the US and around the world.

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What does all of this suggest for the practice of diakonia in this era? In one sense, diakonia is diakonia in any era. Serving those in need is essential, no matter what political winds are blowing. And our focus on the margins, rather than the center, of society will likely be at least somewhat at odds with most governments.

As I see it, however, there are particular emphases that are especially appropriate, especially needed, right now. I will name five as a way of inviting discussion. These are not new ideas, but I believe they deserve even more emphasis in the way we undertake our ministry in this era.

1) *Emphasis on global solidarity, including our ties as DIAKONIA within the world-wide ecumenical movement.* Trump’s slogan, as you probably know, is “America First.” Seen in Christian perspective, this is nothing short of idolatrous, an exaltation of artificial boundaries that divide God’s one human family. The noun that defines us is Christian. I am an American Christian, not a Christian American—which means that Chita, not just Jan, is my sister in Christ, a bond more consequential than national citizenship. And because we are followers of One who died for all, there are no boundaries, either national or religious, to our service.

I have no doubt that you practice this kind of global solidarity already, but I am arguing that it needs to be highlighted even more in this era of nationalist fervor. The cross of Jesus undercuts the pretensions of any group that declares its self-interest to be pre-

eminent, and especially the pretensions of any rich nation that seeks to preserve its prerogatives and resources at the expense of the poor. Global interdependence is a key theme of Christian living, and I hope we emphasize it in the coming years.

2) *Emphasis on welcoming the stranger.* The President's immigration policy proposes to close this nation's doors at a time of a global refugee crisis because, as he repeatedly says, American safety comes first. Seen in Christian perspective, this is nothing short of idolatry—a denial of the hospitality due to any person who comes to us in need.

I have a friend, a biblical scholar, who argues that the most persistent commandments in scripture are have no strange gods and welcome strangers. The Hebrew people saw the latter as a mark of covenantal faithfulness: Remember that you were strangers in the land of Egypt, and treat others as God treated you. Christians confess that through sin we have made ourselves strangers to God; but, in Christ, God has extended a gracious welcome even to us—and calls on us to do the same.

You know, of course, that such hospitality is not a matter of politeness or distant charity. We have not necessarily done it by giving money, since the issue in welcoming someone is relationship. A genuine welcome also doesn't mean inviting the stranger to become like us. White churches in this country often put "All Welcome" signs on the door, without changing anything inside, and then wonder why people of color don't join. No, true welcome is not absorption. It simply enables the other to feel at home.

Welcoming the stranger, while not formally a sacrament, is certainly sacramental: an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual bonds that connect all who bear the image of the Creator. I hope the whole ecumenical movement will emphasize it in this era of threatened exclusion.

3) *Emphasis on what we might call a "diakonia of resistance."* I realize that this is familiar territory for many of you who have lived in situations of overt oppression. Here in the United States, however, where oppression gets swept under the rug, ecumenically-engaged churches have tended to stress the importance of incremental change, of speaking truth to power as the way "to get things done." Before becoming head of the National Council of Churches, I was the chairperson of the Council's Justice and Advocacy Commission, which maintains a regular presence in Washington, DC in order to lobby (we don't call it that!) for particular legislation. But such a strategy may not be what is needed in this era.

The churches that make up Church World Service signaled a new approach, following the executive orders aimed at stopping refugees, with a powerful statement of "strong

opposition.” A number of congregations, including my own in San Diego, are preparing to resist, making plans to harbor persons threatened with deportation.

There is a time, obviously, for patient, long-term advocacy. But surely there is also an appropriate time to resist policies and systems that are fundamentally at odds with the gospel. As I see it, that time has come for this country, and perhaps for others, as well.

4) *Emphasis that following the servant Christ is inherently risky, and that we welcome such risk.* Security, as I suggested earlier, has become a one-size-fits-all justification for policies that all of us, I suspect, find troubling. Indeed, there are days when I think “security” is the most dangerous word in the English language. Increase the military budget at the expense of dollars for health care and education—in the name of security. Relax gun laws and promote gun sales—in the name of security. Deny entry to refugees fleeing violence—in the name of security. Step up deportation of immigrants and build a wall against Mexico—in the name of security. Justify the use of torture—in the name of security!

Christians know that, because human community is interdependent, true security can never be achieved through unilateral defense, but through attentiveness to the injustice and anxiety that afflict other children of God. South Korea will be insecure so long as North Korea feels threatened. Israel, in the words of one of its former defense ministers, “will have security only when Palestinians have hope.” European security, as recent events make clear, is intertwined with that of North Africa and the Middle East. US security depends, among other things, on reducing the economic disparities that understandably fuel global resentment.

The Christian vision, however, is even more profound, because, as the United Methodist bishops put it, “following Jesus leads to radical insecurity.” If scripture is our guide, then we are called to live vulnerably as participants in God’s risky mission of serving and welcoming those in need. To borrow a formulation from the Russian Christian philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev, security for oneself is a material issue—not necessarily sinful, but also not a highest value. Security for one’s neighbor, however, is a spiritual issue. Protecting persons who are most at risk, even when doing so is risky, is the calling of those who follow Jesus. This needs special emphasis in our era.

5) *Emphasis on hope.* The opposite of fear is not invulnerability; people in guarded, walled communities (or nations) are often afraid. The opposite of fear is hope in God’s future, both for ourselves and for life on this planet. In fear, people live in anticipation of possible danger. In hope, they live in anticipation of promised fulfillment; and this frees us to risk a life of service, welcoming those unlike ourselves. To say it another way,

scripture provides us with a vision of life as God would have it. And we show our trust in God by acting to help make it so.

It takes intentional effort, however, to live hopefully rather than fearfully. Hope is a conscious, cognitive activity; fear is a more automatic, spontaneous emotion—which means it is not easy to live hopefully when the cultural narrative is one of fear. That is why we need the reinforcement of one another, why hope needs to be emphasized over and over, why we need to insist that promoting hope is a crucial part of the church's diakonia.

There may be some of you who feel that I have not been hopeful enough in this address! Of course, as you know, Christians are not often optimistic. We know too much about sin for that! But Christians are always hopeful because we trust that, in God's mercy, the future does bend toward justice. And, friends, I am hopeful because of you. You, as a globally-connected community of diaconal ministers, committed to welcoming strangers, are in the front line of the church's risky, hope-filled resistance to the winds that now shake our world. This morning, let us acknowledge those negative winds, but let us also proclaim together that they are not the most powerful wind in our lives!

And so I pray to our gracious God: May the wind of your Holy Spirit blow through this assembly! May we be shaken and directed and empowered by this wind! And may all we do and say in these days together be to your glory! Amen.

Michael Kinnamon