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The Identity of the Deacon in Zimbabwe and Sweden

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Essays and Reports from Practice

Introduction

In this edition, we focus on international perspectives and actions in the field of diaconia and Christian social practice.

First, we explore the issue of developing the office of professional deacon in the Zimbabwean context in a report stemming from a seminar organized in the framework of a long-term partnership between colleagues from Sweden and Zimbabwe. From the very beginning, the Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe has included diaconia in its structure and program, consisting of three key elements: congregational life, healthcare and education. However, only recently has the office of deacon, as a part of congregational life, become recognized and organized. A number of questions emerge in this context which are also present in other contexts, for example, the relationship between so-called institutional diaconia and congregational diaconia, the (power) relationship between deacons and priests, and the difficult question of the specific roles and the development of voluntary diaconia by professional deacons—to name only a few! The focus on congregational diaconia is a consistent theme in both countries, even though the political and economic contexts are very different. We look forward to the next steps in this development, and it would be interesting to share our learning with other, similar learning partnerships and to promote mutual learning between colleagues from different contexts.

In the countries of the European Union, the problem of people having insufficient resources to cover their food and energy costs as well as other everyday needs has led to a growing number of people literally going hungry. In response, the European Union developed a funding mechanism for food aid projects. The sec-

ond article introduces this program and the good practice related to it, which has been implemented by members of Euro-diaconia. The article includes some examples and also lists the criteria for good practice in the field, which can be used by any diaconal organization involved in food aid. The disturbing question of why the need for food aid is growing does not the focus of this article, but the fact is that churches in practically all European contexts are struggling with this issue. The underlying question is the increase of poverty and inequality in Europe (and the world), which is linked with specific economic developments and political decisions. Churches are drawn to offering immediate aid, but also to protesting and working for political change. The second issue is that food aid is officially conceived of as help for individual and families, and the article also points out that this can become a basis for building relationships and trust. However, the lack of food and energy can often affect the majority or at least a large percentage of people living in an economically weak area. The question is: how can the access that the church and diaconia have to working with people through food aid also be used for community organizing and developing community initiatives?

One issue that links these two articles is the fact that in both contexts local communities are faced by unpredictable change, which directly affects food security. The churches and diaconia are challenged in different ways to respond to the growing need for the basics of life.

The third article in this edition concerns the issue of borders and borderlands. The discussion about diversity in Europe has been shaped by the experience of Western countries with recent migration and mobility. What is not so widely appreciated is that many countries of Cen-

tral and Eastern Europe are in fact already 'multicultural societies,' and that migration also affects this region. The presence of minorities and the growing number of conflicts across borders are also important issues in the region. The International Academy for Diaconia and Social Action has been tackling this issue, which is an important one to many of its partners. The article reflects on two recent events that highlighted how the theme of "borders" may be visible or invisible and how it is shaped by biography. In light of this experience, starting in 2011 the Academy developed "conviviality" as a core concept for community diaconia. This provides a basis for developing the art and practice of living together, and highlighting this concept has opened up a wider discussion, as reflected in a recent edition of this Journal.

Finally, we include a report on the fifth international conference on research in diaconia. This was in fact also the first to be organized by the newly formed International Society for the Research and Study of Diaconia and Christian Social Practice, which is closely related to this Journal. Together, the Journal and the Society are seeking to promote research in the field and to contribute to a critical evaluation and a constructive development. The next stage of the development of the Society will be to build research groups or networks and launch new projects. The conference in Stockholm provided the space for thematic discussions, and readers of the Journal are also invited to join the Society and participate in developing its activities. The next conference of the Society will be held in Helsinki, Finland in 2016; an advance notice is included at the end of this section.

We look forward to hearing from you with your contributions to this section, be it in the form of a report on innovative practices, an essay floating a new approach, a report concerning a significant

event or an advance announcement of an action or event. Meanwhile, we hope that these reports are stimulating and interesting for you!

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The identity of the Deacon in Zimbabwe and Sweden

Introduction

Diaconal work has been at the heart and in the practice of the work of the Church since the beginnings of the Lutheran church in Zimbabwe. Indeed, one could say diaconia was part of the design behind the basic mission structure, with its three commitments and its holistic approach: healthcare, education and proclaiming the Word of God, represented by the three buildings: clinic, school and church. Diaconia has always been embedded in the life and work of the Church, but perhaps was not known as such.

Since 2005 the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Zimbabwe (ELCZ) has included the permanent diaconate in its church constitution. This was implemented after a process of phasing out the office of the evangelist and abandoning a transitional diaconate. After two years of training from 2010 to 2012, the first group of ten permanent deacons was ordained at Chegatu on the 12 August 2012.

During the final stage of the deacons' training it was decided that a follow-up seminar should be held within 2 years after their ordination. The aim was to evaluate both their training and the position of the deacon in the local parishes and congregations. It was also decided that a group of deacons from Sweden should attend the seminar to share their own ex-

Zimbabwe

The country is among the richest countries in Africa when it comes to natural resources, but to a great extent these assets have been tied to president Robert Mugabe who has ruled the country since 1980. Especially since 2000 the country has been suffering from a severe political and economic crisis. A violent land seizure policy has devastated Zimbabwe's once thriving agricultural sector. The educational system and national health system are also suffering from the ongoing crisis. In 2009, when the local currency was abandoned in favor of foreign currencies, the economy started to recover. The state security forces in Zimbabwe have committed acts of human rights violation against civilians, targeting primarily political opponents. The population is estimated to around 13 million with more than one million Zimbabweans living in diaspora. The rate of unemployment is, according to some sources more than 80%.

periences with their newly ordained colleagues in Zimbabwe. This text is based on the follow-up seminar, held in Manama 8–12 September 2014. Here we discuss the lessons learned.

A Complete Ordained Ministry?

The theme for the conference, "The identity of the deacon in the pastoral context," reflects both the theological and practical challenges that arose when the new office was introduced. Presiding Bishop SM Dube initiated the seminar by talking about the background and importance of the diaconal ministry in the Church. ELCZ has had diaconia since 1903, expressed in voluntary service from people who knew their Christian calling, but only since 2012 have there been ordained deacons.

The word *Deacon* comes from the Greek word *diakonos* – servant/attendant. It was long seen as a "servanthood ministry," for the service of the poor and the distribution of alms. Poor people and widows had no one to speak for them, to advocate (Acts 6). The poor also need to be empowered (Mark 14:7), and they need people to speak for them and help them to stand up. Bishop Dube said that something was missing in the Church when

it wasn't carrying this out. Therefore, the ministry of ELCZ has now become complete with the diaconate. And he said, "We need this ministry to be integrated into the church."

In 1998, Bishop Dube visited ten parishes in the Uppsala diocese. "I saw pastors and deacons working very well together, complementarily. Now we have ordained deacons in ELCZ. Some have faced difficulties: Who are they? Deacons are given power to heal or help others, to direct them. They do know what they are supposed to do, even if they don't do it now. Some perform like a pastor. In Acts 6, the diaconate was the first ministry after the apostles. From being mentioned first in the threefold ministry, deacons are now in the third position. Why?" The bishop meant to imply that there is a culture of power in the church.

The church constitution of ELCZ contains diaconia to some extent, but it is not consistently understood. Bishop Dube said there is a need to go through the church order to ensure that deacons are included at all levels.

Reports from the Deacons

All the present deacons shared their stories from their work in their different

Training of deacons in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe

During 2008-2009 six men and six women students were recruited for the deacons' training program. Applicants had to pass the same procedures as those applying for pastors training. Their ages ranged from 23 to 52 years. The students were trained at Manama bible school during two years 2010-12, with four periods of internship. The training followed a syllabus which was originally drafted in 2006, covering a variety of subjects including spirituality of Diakonia, Church doctrine, issues relating to HIV/AIDS and conflict management. During the whole training bishop emeritus Dube was part of the training staff. Ten deacons were ordained 2012.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ)

The ELCZ was founded in 1903 through the activities of the Church of Sweden Mission. The Church was originally administered from Zululand, South Africa. The Church became independent in 1962. The ELCZ is divided into three dioceses with about 150000 members and runs four hospitals, one clinic, six high schools and five primary schools. A majority of Zimbabweans belong to mainstream Christian denominations such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist Churches. A variety of indigenous churches and groups have emerged from these mainstream denominations. Pentecostal churches and apostolic groups are regarded as the fastest growing religious movements.

parishes and congregations. The questions asked were: What do they work with? What is their support and what are the challenges?

The Zimbabwean deacons talked about their work of taking care of orphans, caring for widows, visiting the poor and the sick and about how to be persistent in their work. Deacon Nelia Dube, Mnene Parish, gave one typical example that she has to manage: Four children who had been supported from Canada are no longer cared for, and the woman they stayed with passed away.

The deacons also reported on gardening projects and the distribution of clothes. They run projects with chickens or cattle to obtain funds for orphans and their school fees. Collaboration with volunteers is needed when visiting elderly and sick people.

But there are questions in the congregations. What are the deacons supposed to do? In one parish, the pastors did not

understand what diakonia was, and indeed what deacons were for, but they were already working with schools and hospitals in a diaconal way. It would have been good if the dean and/or bishop had introduced diaconal work to the parish beforehand. Members of the congregations are also unsure about how to distinguish between the pastor and the deacon. Some deacons also have also to perform as pastors when the pastors are missing. One participant reported: "I can preach, but I am not a pastor. My field is to serve – sick, orphans, widows and widowers." One important area in their work is also advocacy and giving legal advice. Deacon Bridget Ndou in Bulawayo cooperates with Musasa – an organization for abused women in need of shelter.

Although the contexts, the resources and the circumstances are very different for the Zimbabwean and the Swedish deacons, there are similarities. They are respected in the congregations, despite the

fact that some of the pastors/priests still have questions about their office. Sometimes the priests have a lower education than the deacons, and tensions arise about their different roles in the parishes.

When humanitarian aid organizations leave after a short-term project, the deacons tend to stay on. Many of the Zimbabwian deacons told about working for months without a salary. There are also problems with transportation. Some of them walk long distances between the congregations, sometimes more than 3 hours on foot. Deacon Mayibongwe Singo obtained support in the form of a motorbike (but without a license). Despite huge challenges, the ELCZ deacons continue to work, 2 years after their ordination, and are proud of what they are doing. The task for the whole church in the future is how to make diaconia visible in the church structure and in the local parishes. One of the challenges is that in the whole Eastern Diocese is that there is only one deacon, Tamuka Moyo.

A Call for Integration

For the ELCZ diaconia is also present in such programs as Lutheran Development Service (LDS), which coordinates projects with support from Lutheran World Federation. Another program is Thusanang, a community-based program responding to the need for HIV and AIDS education and mitigation in the communities. The program is based on voluntarism. In 2012 Thusanang had 220 active HBC volunteers. Thusanang began as a project in 1993, funded by Church of Sweden through the ELCZ. The motto for Thusanang is “*put your faith into action*” (1 Thes., 1–3).

The program has 3 thematic areas:

- HBC – Home-based care
- OVC – Care for orphans and vulnerable children
- IEC – Information, education and communication about HIV and AIDS issues.

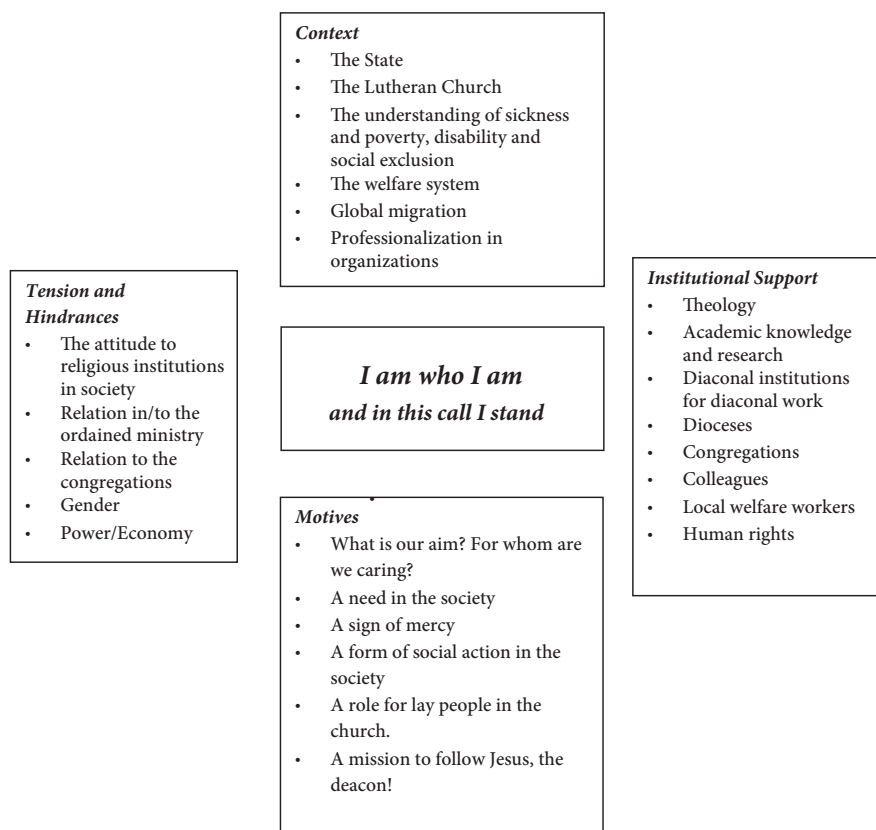
On its website, Thusanang is called “the diaconal arm of the ELCZ in the Western Diocese” (see www.elcz.co.zw/thusanang.html). The deputy program officer of Thusanang, Mrs. S. Makhurane, and the health services coordinator of ELCZ, Mr. P. Ndlovu, addressed the seminar by giving some background information and explaining the motives for the work of the Thusanang home-based care unit. As diaconal definitions, they underlined the call to identify and serve the needy, the caring ministry of the Church and working with local partners for a sustainable change. They also showed that many parts of the Thusanang program fit the diaconal activities and serve as points of integration. For example, counseling services, advocacy, community mobilization and providing shelter, food and clothes, etc. Later, they invited the deacons to take an active part, in the Thusanang program, as some do already. This should also apply to the home-based care programs, Betseranai in the Eastern Diocese and Tariro in the Central Diocese.

The comments following their presentation underlined the necessity of finding ways of integrating the work of the deacons with the work of different institutions in the ELCZ, especially since all are part of the same church and work toward the same goal.

What Determines the Identity of the Deacon?

A later session of the seminar highlighted four areas that affect the diaconal role: *motives, context, tensions and hindrances, and institutional support*. The diagram below places the vocation of the deacon in the middle, surrounded by factors that show the complexity of introduc-

Factors that influence and determine the identity of the deacon in the pastoral context



ing a diaconal ministry into the church and the society. One example: In Sweden, until recently the Lutheran church was organized as part of the state. This created tensions about the responsibility for the poor, and created ambiguity in its role and the task of organizing diaconia.

Factors that influence and determine the identity of the deacon in the pastoral context

The group discussions that followed showed many similarities in the challenges facing both Swedish and Zimbab-

wean deacons as well as pastors. What is the role of the ministry in a changing society? For whom should they care? "I serve the entire community, not only Lutherans," said Stephen Noko, from the Western diocese. Whatever one may think of religion and Church work, the act of helping the vulnerable is something that is appreciated by the community in which it operates. In Sweden there are many refugees, and their vulnerability is similar to that experienced by people in Zimbabwe. The importance of highlighting the diaconal work remains a task for both churches.

A significant difference between the structural conditions in Sweden and Zimbabwe affecting the role and work of the deacons is the weak institutional support in Zimbabwe. For more than 100 years the deacons in Sweden have been vocationally prepared at diaconal institutions, which have also had an impact on the formal church institutions. In Sweden today the deacons' education is based on a combination of academic education (a bachelor degree) and 1-year confessional education. The professionalization of deacons is part of a wide-ranging trend in Western societies, which has both pros and cons.

Katarina Olofsgård, the diocesan deacon in Uppsala, talked about the support and supervision given by the dioceses. The process that took the Church of Sweden 150 years – from planting the idea of a diaconate to the confirmation of the ministry of the deacon – was carried out by the ELCZ in 15 years. The ELCZ now tries to integrate the “traditional” diaconal institutions (hospitals and schools) with its congregational program, with the help of the ministry of the deacon. The Church of Sweden has, somewhat to the contrary, the challenge of handling the decision taken in 1999, when the state and the church separated and the diaconal ministry was confirmed as part of the church constitution. At the same time, by focusing on the new role of the Lutheran denomination, the Swedish diaconal institutions were left aside and not included in the new constitution.

When looking at the working situation of the deacons, one can see that the congregation is not always the best organizational form for action. A congregation can gather people together, which is a good way to create community. But as an *organization for change* the ordinary structure for congregations is not always the most appropriate, neither in Sweden nor in Zimbabwe. Frustration also comes from having to serve six or eight congregations

in a parish, with respect to both congregational councils and local committees.

Looking Forward, Building on the Past

Bishop Shava presented the background to the development of the office of deacon in the ELCZ, which began in 1998, when the twinning agreement between the Diocese of Uppsala and the ELCZ was signed. From that time, diaconia and diaconal reflection became one area of mutual concern, and during the same year a team was sent to Sweden to study full-time diaconal ministry. Since then quite a number of seminars and workshops have been held: In September 2000 in Uppsala, then in August 2001 in Gweru, on the theme “From charity to self-help,” in August 2005 on “The diaconate within the ordained ministry” and finally in October 2006 on “Training of deacons – a proposal for curriculum and syllabus.” In a “dialogue” with the Diocese of Uppsala, the national office of the Church of Sweden and the ELCZ, representatives of the two churches have, over the years, been given an opportunity to share both the challenges and theological reflections on the ministry in the Church and specifically on the position of the deacon.

Now, in 2014, Bishop Shava assured the seminar, the issue of sustainability does not question the permanency of the office of deacon. Sustainability refers to the need to facilitate the smooth function of the deacon's office and of the program itself. Program sustainability means that measures are put in place to ensure that the permanent diaconal program is self-supporting, and that the resources used are also permanently found locally. For the program to be self-sustainable, some factors have to be considered:

1. The deacons, who are facilitators of the program, need to develop diversified

skills. These skills serve to assist them in being innovative and creative, and to engage in some income-generating activities.

2. They need to be skilled in mobilizing local resources so they can multiply, in order to ensure diaconal sustainability.

3. They need to be skilled in human resource mobilization, so that congregations and communities feel obliged to provide for the needs of their fellow human beings.

4. They also need to be equipped so that they can engage in prophetic diaconia and effectively become the mouthpiece of the disadvantaged in the society as well as being able to challenge the structures that perpetuate the suffering of marginalized human beings.

5. There is need to impart skills meant for self-support, so that the needy acquire skills to mobilize resources for their own needs instead of continuously depending on others.

6. Training should be organized for people in need in the skills of good stewardship of the God-given resources at their disposal. They need to be assisted in changing their mindset from that of dependence to that of independence, and to raise their self-esteem and fully utilize their potential.

Bishop Shava was eager to underline that he was not saying that the deacons were inadequately trained – but that they need further training. The challenge to sustainability also mirrors the desperate financial situation in Zimbabwe. He reminded participants in the seminar that the since Church of Sweden is not willing to pay for the salaries of the deacons, the only way forward is to mobilize local resources. He therefore underlined the importance of further training relevant to the work of deacons, such as how to write proposals, project management etc. He also emphasized the point Bishop Dube made in his presentation, namely, that the

inconsistencies concerning the position of the deacon in the church constitution have to be corrected. The ministry has to be put properly into the church structure. The issue of a national coordinator for diaconia also has to be explored.

In comments following the presentation it was said that it is a challenge for the whole church to “mainstream” diaconia without overshadowing the office of the deacon and to make the program of ordained deacons sustainable. One of the church leaders present in the seminar, Dean Solomon Vudzijena, gave voice to an internal critique, saying; “We have not encouraged the parishes, and those who run the parishes have not been enthusiastic.” He also added, “People have started to see the church through diaconia.”

With respect to the political situation in Zimbabwe, the question was also asked, “Who will defend the deacon when he or she enters into prophetic diaconia by raising a voice against corruption and political mismanagement?” The question highlighted the issue of further training, such as training in the specific skills needed in different kinds of environments. The deacons will also need a deeper knowledge of economics, politics and ecological issues as well as of how to network with other organizations. In this regard, attention was also focused on how diaconia should be represented and visible on a national level.

At the end of the seminar, Bishop Shava addressed the partners from Sweden: Feel free to present this program at home! Writing about the seminar is a way of supporting the continuing aim of diaconia developing diaconia in Lutheran churches. And the story is to be continued: In September 2015 deacons from Zimbabwe will be invited to a seminar in Sweden.

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Pathways to Social Inclusion. Innovative Responses to Food Poverty and Hunger in the European Union

The European Union Food Aid Program – An Instrument for Diaconia

In 2014, the European Union set up a new food aid program which provides the 28 EU Member States with funding to support food distribution, material assistance and social inclusion activities. This program, the “Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived” (FEAD), aims to support Member States’ social emergency relief schemes to provide a broad range of nonfinancial material assistance.

The FEAD comes at a time of increasing social needs in Europe, and it was also introduced because the former program came to an end abruptly, following a court ruling challenging its legal basis. The specificity of the new FEAD is that it can be used for emergency material support as well as for organizations to provide further programs and workshops that lead to social inclusion. Many diaconal organization in Europe carry out these types of activities; specifically, Eurodiaconia

members often use food aid and basic material assistance to support vulnerable groups and connect them with other activities run by the organization such as social activities (e.g. choir, cooking, arts and crafts, etc.), language classes, legal counseling sessions and vocational workshops. The key to the FEAD is that the social inclusion measures it funds do not have to aim toward inclusion through employment and access to the labor market but to social inclusion in itself.

As the FEAD begins to be implemented throughout the European Union, Eurodiaconia would like to highlight some best-practice examples of our members who are currently carrying out programs that bridge the gap between extreme poverty and social inclusion. This article draws on a report published in January 2015 which is now available on the Eurodiaconia website <http://www.eurodiaconia.org>. This learning may be relevant to all working with the most deprived, whether or not they can access the FEAD. More information on the FEAD program is available at <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1089>.

Ten Key Projects Addressing Extreme Poverty

Eurodiaconia reviewed programs carried out by its 44 members throughout Europe in order to select 10 key projects to highlight. The different projects that were ultimately chosen were specifically picked to present a diversity of projects regionally across Europe and methodologically, showcasing different types of services specifically designed for different groups of people experiencing extreme poverty. Looking at the 10 projects featured in this report, some interesting patterns for successful projects appear:

- Tailor-made individual approaches based on one-on-one meetings with

participants, volunteers and professionals.

- Trust, built up over time, creates important relationships between participants and staff members, and empowers participants emotionally and professionally.
- Providing a response to basic needs, then legal or administrative support and then social inclusion activities (i.e., educational or to rebuild a social network).
- Using both innovative services and traditional support depending on the specific needs of a those being supported.

So, first of all, each of the projects selected provide **immediate material assistance** to people experiencing extreme poverty (i.e., providing housing, food, clothing, hygiene materials).

Then, second, staff and volunteers from member organizations use the material aid as a way to connect with participants, slowly building up trust with many of these people, forging key friendships and relationships. This trust enables participants to eventually join many different projects that can lead a person back toward social inclusion.

The key is that each of the projects provides a safe place to enable further assistance and activities aiming to **empower** people in crisis situation. This empowerment then leads to a change in personal circumstances and to social participation, beginning a path **toward social (re)inclusion**.

The ten projects selected for the Euro-diaconia report are:

- Diaconia Lithuania: Mother-Child Activity Centre
- Sweden's National Association of City Missions: Transitional Housing and Employment program
- Kofoed's School (Denmark): Educational Centre and shelter in Copenhagen
- Salvation Army (Czech Republic): Street Work in Havířov
- Diaconia Valdese (Italy): Housing for Ex-Offenders
- Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization (Serbia): Day Centre Project
- Iglesia Evangelica Espanola (IEE): EEMI (Espacio Encuentro de Mujeres Inmigrantes/ Migrant Women Meeting Space)
- The Hungarian Reformed Church: Lifebelt Project
- Icelandic Church Aid (Member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland): Debit Card Project
- Entraide de L'Eglise Réformée de l'Annonciation (Member of Fédération L'Entraide Protestante): Solidarity Grocery Store Project

Learning from the Projects

Through this review, we have found that the projects selected usually follow a “**3-step pattern**.” First of all, the projects tend to provide a **basic material service** that supports individual needs of a person. This material service is used to create a **point of contact with a person, family or community**, and the continued distribution of this material provision allows for volunteers and staff members to develop **important relationships among those receiving the material assistance**.

Then, the diaconal organization can often provide administrative or legal support to help the users to take back the control of their life.

Finally, after a period of time, those experiencing extreme poverty are open to the idea of **participating in different activities run by the organization**, often with the same staff members they already have relationships with. **These activities empower users emotionally and mentally**, with education courses, vocational trainings, language classes, indi-

vidual counseling sessions and so much more.

One example featured in the Eurodiaconia report is the Icelandic Church Aid Debit Card Project. For years, Icelandic Church Aid operated a food aid program for families at risk of poverty or living below the poverty line. Families were able to come in once a week and collect a basket full of food, preselected by the volunteers at Icelandic Church Aid. In 2011, the organization decided to stop providing this type of food aid and switched to distributing debit cards to their clients instead, because they believed that food aid in itself was not meeting the needs of the people and in fact did not enable further inclusion. Thanks to the new system, the Icelandic Church Aid now feels that they can interact better with users because, in order for a person or family to receive a debit card, they have to go through an application process which requires them to individually converse with a social worker from the organization. In these conversations, social workers get a chance to get to know people, discuss their finances and better understand their background. Through this process, social workers can also effectively address the needs of the people they are interacting with by providing them with subsequent financial counseling, family counseling, and by helping them to register for various social inclusion seminars that the organization runs in conjunction with this food aid project.

Not only does this debit card program empower a participant by letting them shop at whatever supermarket they choose and choose the products they want, it also gives Icelandic Church Aid an incredible opportunity to get to know the participants thoroughly in order to work with them further through social inclusion activities.

These projects also have in common two characteristics:

1) They connect people (staff/volunteers/participants) to each other in a safe, healthy way that fosters relationships and helps build a social network for participants.

2) These relationships empower people, increase their self-confidence and willingness to become involved in “self-improving/empowering” activities.

For instance, the Spanish Iglesia Evangelica Espanola (IEE) “Espacio Encuentro de Mujeres Inmigrantes,” creates a space for migrant women and their families in Madrid, Spain who are at risk of being socially excluded. The women who visit the center have their food and clothing necessities met through food aid distributions each week and a second-hand clothes “shop” where the women can pick out clothes. The food aid and clothing shop help IEE volunteers and staff to come into contact with these women. Through these “basic provision” services, volunteers and staff members from IEE then develop relationships with the women and invite them to other activities the organization runs like Spanish classes, job-training workshops, legal counseling sessions and drama/choir activities.

Not only do the educational, legal and vocational workshops offer valuable insights to the women, these workshops allow the women to have a safe place to come to where they feel comfortable and can make friends. In this way, the women not only enhance their job-related abilities, but they grow as individuals, finding friends and creating a new social network in Spain, all of which helps them to succeed as they integrate further into society.

These two common threads ultimately help the church members (and others who may be involved in working in projects to address hunger and food poverty) to take a basic provision like food aid and turn it into a life-changing experience for staff members and participants alike. In these projects, food aid is **the bridge** that is used

to initiate social inclusion activities that ultimately help a person leave a life of extreme poverty.

Conclusion

In the coming years, as more organizations and Member States have the opportunity to apply financial support from the FEAD, it is important to remember that for people experiencing extreme poverty, emergency help in the form of material assistance is often imperative. However, from Eurodiaconia's perspective, neither food aid nor the FEAD program are the actual keys to fixing poverty but more like a starting point – an opportunity to connect with people in extreme poverty and support them in their path toward a socially included life, just as the Eurodiaconia members highlighted in these projects are doing. This will happen through, among other things, support to provide access to basic quality services such as health and education as well as through empowerment and participation. Moreover, the provision of basic material support could be seen for diaconia as a basis for further action, to work toward change through advocacy.

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Crossing Borders – Recent interdiac Experiences

Introduction – interdiac and Diversity

The shifting boundaries on the map of Europe very quickly reveal a picture of the complex and changing diversity in the country of origin of the people. The International Academy for Diaconia and Social Action, Central and Eastern Europe, o.p.s (interdiac) is an international educational organization rooted in the learning needs of Central and Eastern Europe. The Academy has a specific Christian basis and ethos. It aims to strengthen the diaconal and social action of churches working with marginalized people and communities across the region especially including countries outside the European Union. The strength of interdiac is a diverse network of 14 partners in 12 countries in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. On the basis of this geographical background, interdiac has witnessed tremendous diversity from the moment it was founded. Gradually, dealing with diversity in terms of individual biographies with their related values, economic and social backgrounds has expanded our knowledge of the region from diverse viewpoints.

Even if, generally speaking, we notice that, although the countries of Central and Eastern Europe went through very similar historical experiences, belonging to the Soviet bloc and living under a common ideology, the diversity is striking. This lived experience has cast a long shadow on the mindset and feelings of people. They have been confronted with political changes over the past decades, which have promised a new hope for the future. Together with these changes, the formation of civil society and transformation processes of social, educational and health sectors are still being worked on. In

particular, the creation of democracy and democratic structures is still in the learning and formation phase.

Even 25 years after changes to the political system, people are still confronted with war and civil conflict, which has undoubtedly caused questioning of the democratization processes in the whole region. This has resulted in a growing lack of security and trust in the relatively new values such as human dignity, the open expression of opinions and respectful behavior. On the contrary, the extremist nationalistic movements and Communist parties recently secured more votes and have obtained an influence over public life.

Diaconal institutions and churches are also a part of these systems, and they too are very much shaped by historical experience and memory, as they bear certain societal and cultural patterns. They also have to deal with the question of identity in very complex surroundings and with the fact that religion, identity and nationality exert influences in ways that raise questions in many contexts.

The understanding of the churches' mission has been challenged in the light of the changing landscape of "classic" membership, traditional self-understanding of being a national church and a rethinking of the vocational call to become a more diaconal church by welcoming the "others." This is closely related to the growing number of migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people. On the other hand, it has also changed the dynamics in the relations between different denominations, especially when in some cases minority churches understand themselves as bridge-builders between the majority churches and other minorities. In order to better understand the relational dynamics, it is important to note that, in some cases, the supportive role of the state toward certain denominations has played very significant role.

From the perspective of organizational development, the theological understanding of "diaconia," charismatic leadership of diaconal institutions and state support for NGOs especially after the political changes, have strongly affected the extent and quality of the organized diaconal initiatives. Moreover, varied influence of the international donor organizations and church and diaconia partnerships played very crucial roles in supporting more empowered and sustainable initiatives.

Furthermore the growing diversity of new religions and spiritualities poses very new challenges, which seem to attack many people especially in the societies who consider themselves secular, such as Estonia and Czech Republic.

This combination of historical memory and current challenges in a rapidly changing world poses existential and identity questions to the diaconal initiatives, as they are being undertaken in an ever wider society. There is much interplay between these structural issues and personal identity and service model of the people who do diaconal work in the region.

Borders and Biography

In modern Europe, borders seem to be more important than ever! Old borders disappear, new ones emerge, and old ones reappear. If you picture the map of region of Central and Eastern Europe, at the first glance it is very obvious that the geographical scope is restricted by lines that apparently clearly show the borders between the countries. But what do those lines actually *hide*? Aren't those lines very much connected with the borders inside us as well as with the borders between and among us, as the communities, churches and the diaconia initiatives, and aren't they very visibly (and practically) present between „professionals“ and „clients“?

Exploring this issue can become an invitation to learn about ourselves and to

learn about others, because such learning by diversity is a very enriching process.

Recent interdiac experience as a learning and living community emphasized that everybody has their own contribution to make and their own role to play. This is directly linked to unity, diversity and conviviality.

Interdiac learning has been following up the understanding that people “read the world” from out of their own biography. Their perception of “reality” is grounded in the everyday life experience of the many different kinds of borders they encounter, seen in the light of the theme of diversity and unity. We can also state that the people diaconia supports, in the contexts of their living spaces and working places, are the experts in their own reality. At the same time, this statement confronted interdiac members with a challenging question: “How do we make it ‘real’ in our daily work and how do we relate that to our understanding of reality which also emerges from our own biography, socialization and education?”

This learning experience is based on the idea that when people gain an understanding of their reality (that they can recognize their knowledge arising from their experience) they are better equipped to start to make changes personally and collectively.

In the light of a diversity perspective, the matter of realities can be recognized in terms of age, sex, minority, culture, nationality, disability, needs and many others.

Recent interdiac Workshops

The international workshops interdiac organized with its members in Český Těšín and Odessa in 2014 were an experiential and participatory venture into the known and unknown differences between people – and especially between diaconal workers and volunteers and “people who,

for different reasons, feel they are living on the borders of major societies.” The participants were chosen because of their direct involvement in the work with these people, and they shared their very diverse contexts and experiences.

The May 2015 workshop “Make Change Yourself: new possibilities for forgotten people in forgotten places” was held with 22 participants from 13 different countries in the cross-border towns of Český Těšín (CZ), where interdiac is based, and Cieszyn (PL), which lies directly on the other side of the river.

The workshop in Odessa “Mutual Learning and Serving, for the Neighbors,” with the diaconia workers and volunteers in congregations of German Lutheran Church in Ukraine (DELKU) proved to be a great opportunity to learn about the people’s involvement in the existing diaconal work in the particular congregations. The learning process with 30 people from all regions of Ukraine and Crimea clearly showed that there is a great potential in people to make personal change in order to create change in their close environment.

As one participant in the first event put it, the workshop “gave space and time to find how many ‘borders’ there are and how many I have ‘within myself.’” Participants explored the obvious and hidden borders in the city, and by taking on specific active roles they also discovered the borders faced by marginalized groups. A guided historical tour provided more food for thought concerning the complexity of the visible and hidden cultures of this border area.

In the second workshop the implication of looking at reality with the eyes of the “other” whom we serve led to concrete ideas for changes in working places, service culture and practice. There were many surprises, for example, how many talents and resources do people seen as “needy” actually have? What steps can

be taken to transform practice in an empowering direction? How does working with marginalized people and communities also imply a commitment to work for change in the wider society?

The interdiac culture strives to work toward conviviality. This practice of living and acting together even for a few days has made the first impressions, which surely will be followed up locally and by our network. The most frequent words spoken, such as hope, love, appreciating the people who are here, joy and friends, used in the final evaluation round, mirror the culture of the learning community. Being connected with weaker and stronger ties creates a net of relationships we can rely on. They are very crucial to the support of trustworthy working together and to the recognition of mutuality and diversity as we think and act differently. Our motto "People are the most important resource," in this specific light, proved to be true.

Crossing Borders

Based on the experiential learning with the interdiac workshop, 22 learners from 13 countries gathered in Český Těšín and Odessa to look at the way in which we are disturbed by diversity, at the effect of the fear inside of us, which leads to nonacceptance of differences. These fears and lack of communication build a wall – they create visible and invisible borders.

In order to start crossing the borders we have to start by crossing personal borders. There may be a whole range of personal borders, arising from personal identity, socialization and identity. Referring to our learning experience from the workshops, the concrete sharing of experiences and reflections is regarded as a confidential act, and that is the reason why they are not recounted in this report. This is also an aspect of trust building.

Coming back to the experience of crossing the borders between Český Těšín

(CZ) and Cieszyn (PL), we discovered visible and invisible borders within both towns and between them. The visible boundaries are clear, e.g., currency, language, security, traffic signs or political borders. The invisible boundaries, such as the frame of the entrance door, the frame of the river channel, places where memorials have been removed, where religion or time have been mentioned. By taking a slow look and by adopting different roles we gradually came to see a more complex picture in what would appear to be a simple situation and to identify both personal and structural borders, which can act as barriers and block access.

Community Diaconia in Ukraine

30 people living in different parts Ukraine and Crimea met in Odessa and were requested to ask the same question concerning the naming of boundaries in light of the actual civil conflict situation in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions and Crimea.

Just expressing those geographical places and making the distinction between the conflict regions and the relatively peaceful regions in the country of Ukraine tends to put the boundaries inside people. It immediately calls up pictures of so many losses in terms of relationships and property. On a deeper level, it raises strong questions in the matter of individual identity and church or diaconal identity, which are challenged within a framework of very sudden changes in the geopolitical and societal frame. On the other hand, it evokes the feelings of injustice, satisfaction or hope for better functioning of the social system. This anticipates the very broad boundaries both inside and outside.

There is also a moment when those boundaries seem to be overcome. The concrete diaconal actions to those injured in the war – widows, orphans and all those

suffering and grieving regardless of their nationality, age and sex – attempt to remove these boundaries. The people from the congregations enter into a space that is beyond their congregational borders and support those in need also by making an alliance with other initiatives. Church buildings or the parish houses subconsciously send a message of open arms and help by opening their houses and welcoming those who come in. The church and diaconal assets are used for wider community.

Conscious or visible signs as well as invisible signs (e.g., past experiences) that stand for church and diaconia shape their organizational identity as well as the identity of those who are active there and also of those “who are helped.” The question of identity has become increasingly important to the minority church, which DELKU also represents. This goes alongside the identification on the “specifics” of their service. Participants clearly pointed out that people come because they feel treated with respect and with love, and they get support and of course material help and food.

Conclusions and Implications

What can the church and diaconia offer, especially in the context of the challenges described above, which are pretty much driven by permanent economic and political changes for which the highest price is paid by the people living in those affected areas?

The dialogue with people and communities is gaining in importance. Building up relationships by preserving an open space encourages mutuality, joint actions and celebrations. Only after being accepted, with all our differences, are we able to work on our dreams and hopes for more just and convivial communities.

Together with its partner organizations interdiac will strive for this, and we invite other diaconal and civil society organizations to join this process through:

Network building: Networking and exchanging experiences to strengthen local national and international actions using face-to-face meetings, the website and other internet-based media.

Training and support for the development of paid and unpaid workers: Continuing to develop training based on the themes of diversity, identity and conviviality, implementing the participatory approach to working with forgotten people and communities and a learner-centered approach to training for reflective practice. Developing training for community-based diaconal initiatives, and develop the skills and strategies to enable diaconia to foster participatory work on impacting public and political policy.

Research and development: Developing research and development projects that are context relevant and provides a comparative analysis and models of work.

Interdiac with its partner organizations is committed to supporting its members and partners in the region to work toward building communities and societies that support justice, human dignity and conviviality.

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Report

Diaconia Under Pressure

Fifth International Conference for Research & Study of Diaconia and Christian Social Practice

Stockholm, Sweden 17–20 September 2014

Introduction

Welcoming over 100 researchers from Europe and other world regions, Bishop Per Eckerdal from Gothenburg challenged the conference to see pressure as a positive element that could lead to setting diaconia free, which he described as “the jewel of the church.” Furthermore, Diaconia which developed its modern form in the 19th century, should now be liberated for the challenges of the 21st century.

Pressures

Among the pressures dealt with in the research papers and lectures, one of the most important was the *growth of poverty and inequality*, now a common feature of most countries. Further, there is the current trend of *introducing market mechanisms* and criteria into the funding and delivery of services. Grace Davie, Emeritus Professor in Sociology of Religion, University of Exeter, traced the evolution of the welfare state using Britain as an example and analyzed the impact of the introduction of private markets into social care. Heather Roy, Secretary General, Eurodiaconia, presented an overview of the *challenges to research arising from present European Union policies*.

A second pressure on diaconia comes from the challenge to develop *diaconal strategies that can address social inclusion and support participation*. This affects work with those with disabilities or learning difficulties as well as with people who have migrated or who have been displaced through civil conflict, war and environ-

mental disasters. Andreas Lub Hüdepohl, Professor in Theological Ethics, Catholic University of Applied Sciences, Berlin, urged diaconal actors to develop strategies for participation and empowerment, drawing inspiration from liberation theology.

Ulla Siirto, Principal Lecturer in Diversity, Diak University of Applied Sciences, Finland, and Trygve Wyller, Professor in Diaconal Studies and Systematic Theology, University of Oslo, introduced *participatory and user perspectives on the research of diaconia and Christian social practice*. Through case studies derived from experiences of developing research, the importance of research in analyzing specific contexts and clarifying the relationships in diaconal practice, which reveal the need to address critical questions of ecclesiology and power. Research needs to address the critical questions of evaluating the impact and effectiveness of diaconal work, especially in view of the pressure of competition for funding and to react to the “contract culture.”

Process of the Conference

More than 45 research papers were discussed, covering themes including challenges to the identity and practice of diaconia and analysis of specific working methods as well as theological research linked to concrete practice. At the cutting edge, the conference also offered two methodological workshops, developing research practice for the future. A further innovation was to organize workshops, which aimed to share the work of research groups in the field and these included:

Research and Practice – developing research at the interface, to give critical support to service providers.

Faith and Community – a project researching the role of faith and worldviews

in the lives of marginalized people and communities and in the practice of diaconia and social work.

YOMA – Youth at the Margins – a project that is researching the experience of excluded young people in Northern Europe and Southern Africa and how faith-based organizations answer to them.

CABLE – Community Action Based Learning for Empowerment – offered an experiential workshop for participants interested to learn about the approach.

Measuring Impact and Social Value – a workshop that shared approaches to the need to develop new approaches to evaluation.

The churches and the role of volunteering in welfare and well-being focused on the changing and expanding role of volunteers and voluntary action.

The researchers were invited to Stockholm City Mission to for dinner and to hear a presentation of the challenges they face in the changing context of the Swedish national policy for welfare and education. The City Mission is a major service provider but also has recently expanded its role in education, based on a long-standing involvement in the field and the need to find a manager for a number of high schools previously managed by a failed private sector provider.

For the Future

A panel including Kim Dong Sun (World Council of Churches) and Janka Adameová (interdiac) chaired by Jarmo Kökkö (Helsinki Deaconess Institute) and Mats J Hansson (Ersta Sköndal University College) presented constructive critical feedback for the future.

The conference was felt to have been an enriching step in developing the field of diaconal research, building greater in-

ternational understanding and cooperation. Critical challenges highlighted included the need to develop the prophetic role of diaconia with and on behalf of people who are marginalized as well as analyzing the role of money and markets in diaconia. Challenges arising from both the phenomenon of growing diversity and the need to re-examine the identity of diaconia and Christian social practice were also highlighted.

A strong plea was made for researchers to take the role of markets in health, education and welfare seriously by offering both constructive analysis and critique. The bridging of research and practice was seen as important and as having been advanced by the conference. In the future more attention should be paid to pedagogy and on enhancing the relationship between theology and the social sciences. Diaconia was seen as “a movement for change in vulnerable landscapes,” and the delegates were challenged to follow up the themes and issues raised in Stockholm over the next 2 years.

Developing the International Society (ReDi)

The conference included the General Meeting of the International Society for the Study and Research of Diaconia and Christian Social Practice and as well as receiving the reports of the work over the past 2 years. New executives were elected: Tony Addy (chair), Annette Leis- Peters (Norway), Ulla Siirto (Finland), Nadine Bowers DuToit (South Africa) as well as representatives of Eurodiaconia and the Diakoniewissenschaftliches Institut of the University of Heidelberg (Germany). Members of the outgoing executive, Kari Latvus and Charlotte Engel, were thanked for their contribution to the development of the Society. In the first 2 years, the office was established and hosted by Eurodiaconia, and the arrangements have been

made for members to receive the journal *Diaconia*. The active program of the society including the conference is also developing. The General Meeting stressed the importance of developing membership throughout the world and in the regions of Europe not so far strongly represented.

Conference Organization

ReDi organized the conference in cooperation with Ersta Sköndal University College and with the support of Bräcke Diakoni, Ersta Diakoni, Stockholm City Mission, Gothenburg City Mission, Ersta Sköndal University College and The Foundation Stora Sköndal.

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First News of the 2016 International Conference!

The Diaconia University of Applied Sciences has invited ReDi to Finland for the next conference! Please note the dates in your diary:

**Helsinki, Finland,
14–17 September 2016**

The planning is already underway, coordinated by the Executive of ReDi, which would be pleased to have your ideas, proposals and contributions!

The conference will provide an opportunity to:

- Share current research issues with colleagues from around the world
- Participate in meetings of networks and working groups
- Learn about innovative approaches to research and development
- Participate in plenaries on topical issues

Special Note: We also will have space for new researchers to share their work, and it is our hope that lecturers will encourage students to attend as well.

Details of the theme and program will be announced on the Research Society's web site: www.diaconiaresearch.org as well as in the eNews of the society.

Please consider becoming a personal member of the society and encouraging your organization to join!

If you have suggestions for the conference please write to Tony Addy (chairperson of the Society),
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