

DIACONIA

– Acts, understandings and stories of service in a pluralistic Southern Africa



Edited by:
Johannes Knoetze & Jacques W. Beukes

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**DIACONIA: Acts, understandings and stories
of service in a pluralistic Southern Africa**

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List of Abbreviations

- 4IR – Fourth Industrial Revolution
- ACSA – Anglican Churches in Southern Africa
- AfCFTA – African Continental Free Trade Area
- AFORD – Alliance for Democracy
- AIC – African Independent/Initiated Church
- AIDS – Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
- AKSE – Algemene Kommissie vir Sending en Evangelisasie
- ALLI – Albert Luthuli Leadership Institute
- ATISCA – Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa
- ATR – African Traditional Religion

- CBS – Contextual Bible Study
- CCAP – Church of Central Africa Presbyterian
- CLF – Christian Literature Fund

- DFG – Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
- DoDMA – Department of Disaster Management Affairs
- DRC – Dutch Reformed Church
- DRCSA – Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa
- DSD – Department of Social Development

- ECD – Early Childhood Development
- EMW – Evangelische Mission Weltweit

- FAK – Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge

- GDP – Gross Domestic Product
- GNI – Gross National Income

- HBU – Historically Black Universities
- HE – Higher Education
- HEI – Higher Education Institution
- HIV – Human Immunodeficiency Virus
- HWU – Historically White University

- IAMS – International Association of Missiological Studies
 IASSW – International Association of Schools of Social Work
 IFSW – International Federation of Social Workers
 IKON – Interkerkelijke Omroep Nederland
- JMTI – Josophat Mwale Theological Institute
 LEAN – Local Ecumenical Action Network
 LWF – Lutheran World Federation
- MCP – Malawi Congress Party
- NEET – Not in Employment, Education or Training
 NGKSA – Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid Afrika
 NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation
 NPC – Non-Profit Company
 NPO – Non-Profit Organisation
 NRF – National Research Foundation
 NUSAS – National Union of South African Students
 NWU – North-West University
- PAC – Public Affairs Committee
 PAR – Participatory Action Research
 PEN – Participate Envision Navigate
 PIM – Providence Industrial Mission
 PIT – Project Implementation Team
- ReDi – International Society for the Research and Study of
 Diaconia and Christian Social Practice
- SACC – South African Council of Churches
 SACSSP – South African Council for Social Service Professions
 SAMS – South African Mission Society
 SDG – Sustainable Development Goals
 SDM – Scaling Diaconate Model
 SLC – Spiritual Leadership Capital
 SPTSA – Society for Practical Theology in South Africa
 SU – Stellenbosch University

List of Abbreviations

- TLF – Tshwane Leadership Foundation
- TRC – Truth and Reconciliation Commission
- TRS – Theology and Religious Studies
- TTL – Together Towards Life

- UCT – University of Cape Town
- UDF – United Democratic Front
- UK – United Kingdom
- UN – United Nations
- UNISA – University of South Africa
- UNSDSN – United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network
- UP – University of Pretoria
- URC – Uniting Reformed Church
- URCSA – Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa
- USA – United States of America

- WCC – World Council of Churches
- Wits – University of the Witwatersrand

- ZTC – Zomba Theological College
- ZTU – Zomba Theological University

List of Contributors

Annette Potgieter

University of Pretoria

E-mail: Annette.potgieter@up.ac.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5987-4912>

Annette Potgieter is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of New Testament and Related Literature at the University of Pretoria. She is the author of *Contested Body: Metaphors of Dominion in Romans 5–8* (2020) and a co-editor of *From Worshipping, Sacrificing and Mourning to Praising and Praying: Key Concepts of the Greek Bible* (2024); *Song of Songs in Sense, Sound and Space* (2024); and *Experiencing God in Everything and Nothingness* (2024). She is also the editor of *Resilience in a VUCA World: Reflections on Teaching, Learning and Health in Turbulent Times* (2022). Potgieter earned her Doctor of Theology at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin in 2019.

Attie van Niekerk

The NOVA Institute, Pretoria, South Africa

Sustainable Communities Research Cluster,

Centre for Faith and Community, Faculty of Religion and Theology,

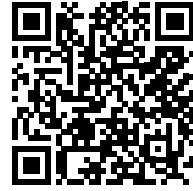
University of Pretoria, South Africa

E-mail: attievanniekerk@nova.org.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0663-6969>

Attie van Niekerk studied theology at the University of Pretoria. From 1978 to 1984, he served as a minister in the (black) Dutch Reformed Church in Africa in Venda. He then became a professor in the church's theological training programme at the University of the North (1984–1993) and served as rector of Stofberg Theological School from 1988 until February 1993. His book, *Dominee, Are You Listening to the Drums?*, which explores four poets from Soweto and Alexandra in the 1970s, was co-winner of the Sunday Times Literary Award for Political Writing in 1984. In addition to publishing several books, he has authored more than 50 academic articles. In 1994, he became a founding member of the Nova

Institute¹, a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to helping poverty-stricken communities improve their quality of life. His latest publication is *Towards the Sustainable Well-Being of Communities: Africa, the Modern Empire and Christianity* (Cape Town: AOSIS, 2024). It is available at <https://books.aosis.co.za/index.php/ob/catalog/book/284>.



Dieter de Bruin

University of Pretoria

E-mail: dieter.debruin@up.ac.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6033-0114>

Dieter de Bruin is a Lecturer in Practical Theology at the University of Pretoria, specialising in Liturgical Theology. He is also a part-time minister of the Dutch Reformed Church.

Erica Meijers

Protestant Theological University

E-mail: pemmeijers@pthu.nl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8599-3336>

Erica Meijers studied theology in Amsterdam, Strasbourg, and Berlin, specialising in contextual theology, ecumenism, and the history of Christianity in the 19th and 20th centuries. She wrote her dissertation on the debate surrounding apartheid in the Protestant churches in the Netherlands, titled *Blanke Broeders, Zwarte Vreemden* (*White Brethren, Black Strangers*) (2008). Meijers has worked as a radio journalist at IKON (Ecumenical Broadcasting Foundation in the Netherlands), editor-in-chief of *De Helling*, a Dutch quarterly on politics and culture, and as a founding editor of the *Green European Journal*. During this time, she published *Populism in Europe* (2011) and *Green Values, Religion and Secularism* (2016). Since 2017, she has been working in Diaconal Theology at the Protestant Theological University. Her areas of interest include modern slavery and racism, urban theology, practices of meal sharing, and the relationship between the Eucharist and diaconia.

¹ <https://www.nova.org.za>

Frikkie (FRL) Coetzee

Research Associate, Department Practical Theology and
Mission Studies, University of Pretoria
E-mail: frlcoetzee@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0836-3098>

Frikkie Coetzee completed his BA in Theology at the University of Pretoria (1984–1986) and his BTh at the University of Stellenbosch (1987–1989). He was then involved full-time in inner city ministry in Cape Town (Straatwerk) for two years (1990–1991). Coetzee returned to the University of Stellenbosch to complete an MTh in Clinical Pastoral Care (1992–1993). Following this, he served as a full-time pastor at La Rochelle Dutch Reformed Church in Bellville for 20 years (1994–2014). Since 2014, he has been a full-time pastor at Lux Mundi Dutch Reformed Church in Garsfontein, Pretoria. He also completed a PhD in Practical Theology and Mission Studies, focusing on evangelism and the gospel of the kingdom of God under the supervision of Prof Malan Nel and Prof Hannes Knoetze. He has served on several synodal committees and is currently on the Synodal Service Board of the Eastern Synod, the chairperson of the Missional Task Team of the Eastern Synod, and the chairperson of the Evangelism Task Team of the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church. Coetzee was part of the team that worked on a report for a theological framework for evangelism that was accepted at the Dutch Reformed General Synod in 2023.

Gideon van der Watt

Department of Practical and Missional Theology,
Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of the Free State
E-mail: gideonvanderwatt5@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5993-636X>

Gideon van der Watt holds a PhD in Missiology. For 40 years, he served as a minister (missionary) and mission administrator in the Dutch Reformed Church, as well as a part-time lecturer in Missiology at the University of the Free State. He also served as editor of CLF Publishers, which provides general Christian literature and theological books for the Southern African context. Van der Watt has authored and published several books, book chapters, and academic articles on missiology, mission history, and diaconia. Since 2021, he has been ministering at the St. Paulus

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bloemfontein, Free State – a small yet vibrant multilingual and multiracial church focusing on table fellowship and diaconia.

Isabel Apawo Phiri

University of Blantyre Synod and Research Associate at Pretoria University

E-mail: phiri.isabel7@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/000-0002-4346-3836>

Isabel Apawo Phiri has been Vice Chancellor of the University of Blantyre Synod in Malawi since February 2023 and Professor of African Theology. She is the former Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, where she was responsible for Public Witness and Diaconia. Phiri was also Dean and Head of the School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. Furthermore, she served as General Coordinator of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Phiri holds a Bachelor of Education from the University of Malawi; a master's degree in Religious Education from the University of Lancaster, England; and a PhD in Religious Studies from the University of Cape Town, South Africa. She co-edited the following books: *Anthology of African Christianity*, edited with Dietrich Werner, Kennedy Owino, and Chammah Kaunda (2016); *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa*, edited with Dietrich Werner (2013); *Postcolonial Mission: Power and Partnership in World Christianity*, edited by Desmond van der Water, with Isabel Apawo Phiri, Namsoon Kang, Roderick Hewitt, and Sarojini Nadar as associate editors (2010); and *African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*, edited with Sarojini Nadar (2006).

Jacques W. Beukes

University of South Africa (UNISA)

E-mail: beukejw@unisa.ac.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4319-2439>

Jacques Beukes holds a PhD in Practical Theology with a specialisation in Community Development from the University of Stellenbosch. He currently serves as an Associate Professor in Christian Spirituality in the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History, and Missiology

at the University of South Africa (UNISA). As an NRF-rated researcher, he is actively involved in research areas such as diaconia, theology and development, religion and development, community development, eco-diaconia, spirituality, eco-spirituality, youth work, youth ministry, and children's ministry. His publications include a range of peer-reviewed scientific research articles, book chapters, and books within his field of specialisation. Beukes serves on the editorial board for the international journal, *Religion and Development*. He also serves on the board of the International Society for the Research and Study of Diaconia and Christian Social Practice (ReDi). He is a member of several academic societies, including the South African Mission Society (SAMS), the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa (SPTSA), the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT), and the International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry (IASYM).

Johan M van der Merwe

Department of Systematic and Historical Theology,
Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria
E-mail: Johan.vdmerwe@up.ac.za
ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7678-5452>

Johan van der Merwe has been an Associate Professor in the Department of Systematic and Historical Theology at the University of Pretoria since 2008. He teaches modules on South African church history and church polity. His research focuses on the history of Christianity in South Africa, particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries, exploring topics such as the onset of apartheid, the role of religion in apartheid, and Afrikaner nationalism. Van der Merwe has published articles and book chapters on the role of the church in apartheid, the history of the Dutch Reformed Church, and the role of the church in reconciliation. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, his research has expanded to include the church's role in addressing poverty. He views the church as a crucial agent of change in the world.

Johannes Eurich

Extraordinary Professor of Practical Theology at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, and Director of the Institute for Diaconal Studies at Heidelberg University, Germany.

E-mail: eurich@dwi.uni-heidelberg.de

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4085-4778>

Johannes Eurich is an Extraordinary Professor of Practical Theology at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, and the Director of the Institute for Diaconal Studies at Heidelberg University, Germany. He holds a master's degree from Bethel University, USA, a doctoral degree, and a post-doctoral degree (Habilitation) from Heidelberg University, Germany. Eurich has held positions at the National German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Protestant University at Bochum before joining Heidelberg University in 2009 as Chair of Practical Theology and Diaconal Studies. He has led international research projects for the European Union and remains actively involved in various national research projects. Eurich has published and edited numerous journal articles, book chapters, books, and reports, and serves on the boards of national and international diaconal and university organisations. He is a member of the editorial board of the international journal *Diaconia* and is currently the chairperson of The International Society for the Research and Study of Diaconia and Christian Social Practice (ReDi).

Johannes J. Knoetze

University of Pretoria, Department Practical theology and Mission Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion.

E-mail: Johannes.Knoetze@up.ac.za

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2342-2527>

Johannes Knoetze received his theological training at the University of Pretoria, where he obtained the following qualifications: BA Theology (1988), BD Theology (1991), and a Doctoral Divinitatis (DD) in Missiology (2002). From 1992 to 2011, he served as a full-time minister in the Dutch Reformed Church of Southern Africa. In 2012, he was appointed Senior Lecturer in the Department of Theology within the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences at the Mafikeng Campus of North-West University (NWU). He was promoted to Associate Professor at the end of 2016 and continued his work in the Faculty of Theology at NWU until August 2020.

In September 2020, he joined the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria as Associate Professor in Mission Studies and was promoted to Full Professor in 2024. His research focuses on Missional Diaconate in Africa, specifically targeting the millennial (emerging adults) population and poverty alleviation. He has also published work on theological education in Africa. Knoetze is a member of several associations, including the South African Mission Society (SAMS), Society for Practical Theology in South Africa (SPTSA), International Association of Missiological Studies (IAMS), World Reformed Fellowship, and the International Society for the Research and Study of Diaconia and Christian Social Practice (ReDi). He also serves as a board member of NetACT Africa and is an NRF-rated researcher.

John Aitchison

Professor Emeritus, University of KwaZulu-Natal

E-mail: aitchisonjjw@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/R-0FQR835D>

John Aitchison is a deacon in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, Professor Emeritus at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and an activist in various fields. Born in Durban, he studied at the University of Natal. During his university years, he became actively involved in anti-apartheid activities and, in 1965, was detained without trial for five years, with a further five-year sentence imposed in 1971. After his release in 1976, Aitchison worked in several distance education and adult education programmes, including the SACHED Trust and Theological Education by Extension College. He also lectured in Theology and Biblical Studies at the Federal Theological Seminary and the University of Natal. Ordained as a deacon in 1976, he became the Education Officer of the Anglican Diocese of Natal in 1979. Aitchison joined the University of Natal in 1981, eventually becoming the Director of the Centre for Adult Education and later the Head of the School of Education, Training, and Development at the School for Adult and Higher Education until his retirement in 2007. Following his retirement, he worked on several major projects, including the Kha Re Gude adult literacy campaign, mathematics workbooks for the Department of Basic Education, and a new plan for community colleges. Since 2022, he has served as the Convenor of an Anglican Church Commission on the permanent diaconate.

Jones Mawerenga

University of Malawi & Research Associate at the University of Pretoria

E-mail: jmawerenga@unima.ac.mw

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4439-6142>

Jones Mawerenga is a Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics at the University of Malawi. He is also a Research Associate in the Department of Practical Theology and Mission Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria. His research interests and publications include religion and sexuality, albinism, and theological education in Africa. He obtained his PhD in Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) at Mzuzu University (Mzuni) in 2017. He is the author of two books, *The Homosexuality Debate in Malawi* and *Systematic Theology*. He has also authored several articles and book chapters.

Marinda van Niekerk

Research Associate, University of Pretoria

E-mail: marinda@pen.org.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5902-972X>

Marinda van Niekerk has over 30 years of experience in community development, with a focus on education, youth development, and homelessness. She has been an ordained minister in the Dutch Reformed Church since 1995. Her contributions include:

- Leading and developing organisational strategy, focusing on community development and outreach programmes.
- Managing a diverse team, fostering collaboration and teamwork to achieve positive outcomes.
- Playing a leading role in many other organisations, contributing to development.
- Spearheading initiatives in education, homelessness, and youth development.
- Monitoring and evaluating programme effectiveness, implementing improvements as necessary.
- Strongly focusing on theological reflection in missions, practical theology, and urban ministry.
- Areas in which she uses her influence include leadership development, children, poverty alleviation, and ecology.

Michael Biehl

Research Associate, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria

E-mail: michael.theo@biehl-web.de

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9360-6540>

Michael Biehl has a ThD and is a retired ordained pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the North (Germany). After his pastoral ministry, he served as Director of the Academy of Mission at the University of Hamburg from 2001 to 2012. From 2012 to 2023, he held the position of executive secretary for mission studies and theological education at the Association of Protestant Missions and Churches in Germany (EMW). Biehl has taught mission studies, ecumenics, and religious studies at the Universities of Kiel and Hamburg as an adjunct lecturer. He is currently a research associate at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.

Nadia von Wielligh

North-West University and Hugenate Kollege

E-mail: nvonwielligh@hugenate.acc.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1521-5667>

Nadia von Wielligh is a trained social worker with experience in both social work practice and the training of social workers and related social services professions. She is currently affiliated with Hugenate Kollege as the Dean of the School for Social Reformation and serves as an Extraordinary Researcher in the Research Focus Area: Community Psychosocial Research at North-West University. Hugenate Kollege is a private Christian higher education institution known for its transdisciplinary focus between theology and social work. This focus fosters an understanding that both theological insights and social work methodologies are essential in addressing complex societal issues such as poverty, inequality, mental health, and social justice, while also providing comprehensive care for individuals and communities in need.

Nioma Venter

Research Associate, University of Pretoria

E-mail: niomav@ngkerk.org.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9213-6110>

Nioma Venter currently serves as the General Secretary of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and is a research associate at the University of Pretoria. Her academic credentials include a master's degree in Social Work and a PhD in Theology. During her 16-year career as a full-time social worker, she specialised in addiction treatment and community development. Following her theological studies, Venter served as a minister in two congregations in Prieska (Northern Cape) and Worcester (Western Cape) before being appointed to a synodical position in 2017, where she led the diaconal ministry of the Western Cape Synod until her current appointment in 2023. Her doctoral research, framed within missional ecclesiology, focused on collaboration between the church and church-affiliated social service organisations. Venter worked with the premise that cooperation contributes to collective impact. She developed a model proposing an integrated approach based on proven practices for interdisciplinary collaboration. Venter's unique combination of theological insight and social work expertise enables her to bridge these disciplines effectively, advocating for strategic partnerships to address complex societal challenges while maintaining the church's relevance and integrated voice in contemporary society.

Sean Esterhuizen

Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, Diaconia

E-mail: sean@kaapkerk.co.za

Sean Esterhuizen is an ordained minister within the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) and currently manages the Diaconal Ministry of the URCSA Cape Regional Synod. Viewing diaconia as integral to the church's nature, he believes it reflects the essence of being a community of faith. He leads cross-functional teams dedicated to developing and implementing strategic initiatives for the congregational diaconate. His approach emphasises innovative and missional theological discernment, encouraging congregations and the Synod to engage thoughtfully with pressing social issues. Under his guidance, the church has undertaken significant efforts to address community challenges,

including poverty alleviation, access to early childhood education, HIV awareness and support, and providing humanitarian aid during disasters. Esterhuizen is well-equipped for this vital work, having earned a master's degree in Theology and Development from the University of Stellenbosch. His academic background, experience in managing a large faith-based organisation, and commitment to service drive his passion for fostering effective ecclesial responses to the social needs of the community.

Stéphan van der Watt

Research Associate, Department of Practical and Missional Theology,
Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State

E-mail: jsvdwatt@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3942-0147>

Stéphan Van der Watt is a full-time lecturer of Missiology as well as Pastoral Theology and Care at Kobe Reformed Theological Seminary, where he teaches in Japanese on various practical theological issues from an intercultural perspective. Before arriving in Japan as a mission partner in 2009, Van der Watt served as a pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa. He has also been involved in theological training and research at Stellenbosch University (SU), where he earned his doctorate in Practical Theology in 2007. Prior to his pastoral ministry, he was a researcher at the *Communitas Research Institute* (SU Faculty of Theology) and served as assistant project manager and co-facilitator of the Southern African Partnership of Missional Churches. Van der Watt has lectured and presented in twelve countries across five continents. He is a member of several international academic societies, including the International Council on Pastoral Care and Counselling (2011–2018), the International Association for Mission Studies (2021–present), and The International Society for the Research and Study of Diaconia and Christian Social Practice (ReDi) (2020–present). Currently, he is a Research Associate at the Theology Faculties of both Stellenbosch and Free State Universities in South Africa and participates in research at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.

Takuze Chitsulo

Zomba Theological University

E-mail: vice.chancellor@zombatheological.org

Takuze Chitsulo has served as Vice Chancellor of Zomba Theological University (ZTU) since July 2017. Prior to this role, he twice held the position of Dean of Studies at ZTU, from August 2007 to January 2012 and again from November 2016 to July 2017. Chitsulo is also a pastor in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) – Blantyre Synod. From November 2004 to April 2007, he worked with the Bible Society of Malawi as Editor of the Chichewa Study Bible Project and is recognised as an authority on Bible translation into Malawian languages. Chitsulo completed his undergraduate studies at Zomba Theological College (ZTC), graduating with a Bachelor of Divinity in 2002. He earned his Master of Sacred Theology in Old Testament from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in the USA in 2006. In 2011, he began his doctoral studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, receiving his PhD in Old Testament in 2016. Chitsulo has contributed to academic and educational governance as a reviewer for the National Council for Higher Education since December 2019. He has also served on the University of Malawi Research and Ethics Committee since September 2019 and is currently the Chairperson of the Board for Theological Studies.

Yolande Steenkamp

Department of Business Management, University of Pretoria

School of Theology and Ministry, Hugenate Kollege

E-mail: ysteenkamp@hugenate.ac.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1577-1938>

Yolande Steenkamp is the Dean of the School of Theology and Ministry at Hugenate Kollege, a non-profit company (NPC) based in Wellington, South Africa. She is deeply passionate about the transformative potential of higher education for both individuals and communities. Prior to her current role, Yolande worked at the Albert Luthuli Leadership Institute (ALLI) at the University of Pretoria (UP), where she managed the South African national network of the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network (UNSDSN). Her research approach is primarily inter- and transdisciplinary, focused on addressing contemporary societal challenges. Steenkamp's research interests include leadership, Christian religious imagination, pedagogy, transcultural competence, diaconate, and collaboration for sustainable development.

Introduction

Jacques Beukes & Johannes Knoetze

Introduction

*DIACONIA*¹ – *Acts, understandings, and stories of service in a pluralistic South Africa* examines the manifestation of diaconia within the context of South Africa’s pluralistic society and its wider array of concerns. These include socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and sociohistorical challenges such as injustice, poverty, and unemployment. The book also addresses inequality, marginalisation, NEET² status, social exclusion and discrimination, along with inadequate service delivery and restricted access to public services. Additional issues include substandard education in disadvantaged communities, poorly located and insufficient infrastructure, spatial difficulties, and an overburdened public health system contending with significant disease burdens such as HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, it explores corruption, crime, gangsterism, violence, warfare, racism, racial divisions, xenophobia, conflicts, and ecological crises, among others (cf. Beukes & Beukes 2023:3; eds. Swart et al. 2022; Beukes 2021; Harold 2018:25; Swart 2016:1; Maluleke 2001).

South Africa has long been a centre of religious pluralism and diversity. Contemporary society is characterised by pluralism, which includes diverse elements such as race, culture, language, gender, and religion (Beyers 2016:3). The country is widely recognised for its extensive diversity, reflected in its multiple ethnic groups, linguistic variations, and religious affiliations (Coertzen 2012:175). South Africa’s rich religious traditions have played a significant role in shaping its social, cultural, and political development throughout history (cf. eds. Swart et al. 2022; Holte & Rabe 2022; Coertzen 2012; 2013).

This brief contextual overview of South Africa’s challenges and

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- 1 Although both “diakonia” and “diaconia” are recognised spellings of the term, this publication predominantly uses “diaconia” for consistency; however, original spellings are retained in quoted text and document titles
 - 2 NEET refers to the high number of people who are Not in Employment, Education or Training.

pluralistic character provides essential contextual and conceptual foundations for a framework that seeks to standardise the understanding of diaconia, which this book explores. This aligns with Knoetze's concise summary of the objectives of diaconia, including the '*elimination of poverty and the reduction of inequality*' and '*transformed [lives] in a sustainable manner*' (Knoetze 2019:209). More than 30 years after South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, it is clear that true transformation and sustainable development require more than political and social change. Personal transformation is also essential. Individuals must become what the Bible describes as 'new beings', embracing reconciliation and reshaping their perspectives, values, and relationships – indeed, their entire way of life (Knoetze 2019:209).

Similarly, Swart (2021:62) observes that engagement in diaconia originates with God. It is within God's diaconia, a fundamental aspect of His purpose, that the church is called to participate. The current discourse on diaconia suggests that recognising this divine summons requires a genuine response to God's diaconal mandate. Thus, participating in diaconia should be understood as an expression of faith – one that compels the faithful to acknowledge their reliance on God and be empowered for their task. The ultimate goal is to transform the factors that contribute to exclusion, injustice, violence, and human greed (Swart 2021:63). In the context of South Africa's pluralistic society, Bowers-du Toit (2021:107) emphasises that diaconia extends beyond the Christian faith. It engages with all individuals in need of aid, empowerment, and advocacy, regardless of their beliefs.

In response to the challenges and complexities outlined above, the editors of this book organised a conference titled 'Diaconal/Diaconate Identities in a Pluralistic African Society: Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Opportunities and Challenges'. Held in Pretoria, South Africa, from 28 to 30 August 2024, the event brought together researchers, scholars, and practitioners from across Africa and Europe. Participants explored developments in the field of diaconate, exchanged innovative ideas, and shared practical insights. This publication presents some of the most impactful contributions from the conference.

Given the critical nature of the discussions, readers will encounter an array of perspectives. As editors, we recognise and respect the diversity of thought among the contributors. While we may not always share their views, we believe it is essential to engage with differing interpretations and approaches. Furthermore, we affirm that none of the content in this book has been plagiarised or previously published elsewhere.

Methodologically, this publication integrates multiple research approaches, including critical literature analysis and empirical studies, as reflected in the various chapters. It features original and innovative contributions from scholars across Africa, alongside insights from three European scholars. The 19 chapters in this volume offer valuable perspectives for academics, practitioners, and congregations in both Africa and Europe who engage with diaconia in contexts shaped by poverty, traditionalism, secularism, and post-Christendom.

The need for this book

Although *diaconia* is a biblical term, it has primarily been shaped by Northern Hemisphere discourse and has since influenced contemporary discussions on the Church's mission in the Southern Hemisphere (Stiles-Ocran 2021:103; cf. Ham 2012). This book examines diaconia and Christian social practice from the perspective of the Global South, specifically Southern Africa, highlighting the need for contextual and multidisciplinary approaches to diaconia.

As a fundamental aspect of the Christian faith – encompassing service, caring, etc. – diaconia manifests in many contextual variations. To effectively address the challenges, complexities, issues, and pluralities of our time, diaconia needs to be contextual, contemporary, and grounded. Since many pressing needs now transcend regional boundaries and emerge as global concerns, the understanding, education, and application of diaconia or Christian social services must likewise remain adaptable, ensuring relevance across different contexts.

This book seeks to understand diaconia from a Southern African (Global South) perspective, highlighting its unique language and contextual issues. While most literature on diaconia is written from a European perspective, this book contributes to the body of knowledge by offering insights from a (South[ern]) African viewpoint. It not only introduces new knowledge but also explores suitable practices and models for embodying diaconal visions within specific contexts – particularly within South Africa's pluralistic society.

This double-blind peer-reviewed publication is intended for a diverse academic and professional audience. It is relevant to scholars and researchers in theology, religious studies, diaconia, development studies, social work, and Christian social services. Additionally, it serves policymakers, practitioners, religious leaders, and faith-based

organisations engaged in diaconal research, ministries, practices, and initiatives.

Book structure and chapter contributions

The book is structured into four sections:

- Section A: The context through Africa's stories
- Section B: Diaconia: A challenge
- Section C: Diaconia: An indicative
- Section D: Diaconia: A practice

Section A: 'The Context Through Africa's Stories' presents various case studies and narratives from Southern Africa, using these stories to explore the dynamics of diaconia. **Takuze Chitsula** opens this section by examining the life of Rev Dr Handwell Yotamu Hara as an illustration of diaconal service. Chitsula argues that Hara's life and legacy serve as powerful testaments to faith, resilience, and a deep commitment to service. From his humble beginnings as a herd boy to becoming the first black PhD graduate of the University of Pretoria, Hara's perseverance and dedication to theological scholarship and practical diaconia left a lasting impact. He broke barriers, inspiring future generations and using his education not for personal advancement but to uplift the marginalised. His work with orphans, widows, and disadvantaged communities embodied a theology of action and compassion.

In the following chapter, **Isabel Phiri** examines the story of Cyclone Freddy in Malawi, arguing that diaconia from the margins fosters agency by empowering people to heal their pain through action. She highlights the experiences of the mothers of Phalombe, who have lost children to natural disasters, emphasising that their healing begins as they collectively address the root causes of climate change. While this task may seem daunting, Phiri asserts that change emerges from responding to pain. Whether this pain is perceived as stemming from God or not, she contends that God is also present in transforming the mindset of those on the margins.

Chapter 3, the final chapter of this section, by **Johan van der Merwe**, recounts a historical event in the small town of Carolina on the Mpumalanga Highveld, South Africa. He describes how a statue of a Boer soldier, damaged and beheaded during political unrest in 2021, was later restored and unveiled in collaboration with the *Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge* (FAK). While this event may seem minor in the broader context of South Africa and the history of the Dutch Reformed

Church (DRC), it gained significance because the statue was unveiled on the grounds of the DRC congregation in Carolina, accompanied by notable events. Van der Merwe argues that the statue's symbolism reflects the sentiments and beliefs of many church members. Given the church's historical connection to apartheid and the current socio-economic and political challenges facing its members, there is a risk that congregations may retreat into past narratives. To prevent this and to confront the lingering presence of apartheid's legacy, he contends that the DRC must actively engage congregations in diaconia, in line with its official policy.

Section B: 'Diaconia: A Challenge' deals with the complexities and challenges of diaconia. In the first chapter of this section, Chapter 4, **Attie van Niekerk** writes about a gap in the theology of the Reformers who led the Protestant movement 500 years ago. He argues that this gap lies in their failure to articulate the 'inner and vital connection between the service of God [...] in the worship of the Church as such, and another form of service, which may be described as a "political" service of God', which pertains to human justice and life in general. While significant efforts have been made in recent decades to bridge this gap, van Niekerk notes that these attempts have seen varying degrees of success depending on the context.

In Chapter 5, **Frikkie Coetzee** addresses the challenge of evangelism, which is often narrowly understood as a purely verbal witness. This reductionist and dichotomous view separates word and deed, placing evangelism on one side and diaconia, social justice, and care for creation on the other. Coetzee engages with the research question: 'Is it necessary to rediscover evangelism through a holistic and contextual approach that includes diaconia as essential participation in the *missio Trinitatis Dei* as *martyria* by the entire faith community?' He argues that in this approach, the good news of the Kingdom is embodied in the practices of a missional congregation – both collectively and individually – through faithful presence (*being*), loving service (*doing*), and words of hope (*telling*) at appropriate times and places within their specific context.

In Chapter 6, **Stéphan van der Watt** examines the enduring dilemma of how a particular historical theological understanding of diaconal ministry led the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) to adopt the term service of compassion and embrace a colonial-style diaconal praxis. His chapter seeks to rediscover a broader Reformed biblical-theological understanding and practice of diaconia – one that intentionally includes justice. By doing so, he argues, the DRC can remain relevant in its context while staying true to its missional nature and calling as part of the ecumenical body of Christ.

In the following chapter, **Johannes Knoetze** explores how diaconal ministry in Afrikaans churches has been narrowly reduced to a ministry of mercy rather than a more comprehensive diaconal practice. His chapter seeks to describe and understand the diaconate within the broader ecumenical framework of the global church and the Trinity. Knoetze argues that any theological description of church ministry must begin by addressing fundamental questions of identity.

Michael Biehl follows this up with his chapter on diaconia as a practice of hospitality. He explores the metaphor of transforming hospitality as a framework for the diaconal dimension of the church, drawing on the concluding vision of the *Together Towards Life* (TTL) document. This vision presents an inclusive image of a feast of abundance for all. As Biehl explains, ‘Mission – as a common witness to Christ – is an invitation to the “feast in the kingdom of God”’. He argues that this broad vision, which includes creation, reshapes our role and presence as Christians at God’s table. While we are messengers, we are also participants in creation. This perspective challenges the notion that Christians are the sole agents of mission, instead emphasising a more interconnected and holistic understanding of diaconia.

In Chapter 9, **Annette Potgieter** shifts the focus away from whether *διακονία* is an office and instead examines what Paul’s actions reveal. She explores how Paul’s use of family metaphors not only persuades Gentiles to embrace a new spiritual family but also serves as a lens for understanding resilience. Her chapter examines the significance of *διακονία* through the perspective of resilience, considering Paul’s role as a missionary. She argues that Paul’s success in mission stems from the core of his engagement with co-workers, his understanding of *διακονία*, and his identity in Christ as one who is sent.

In the final chapter of this section, **Jones Mawerenga** examines the church’s prophetic diaconia in Malawi, evaluating its engagement in this area. His study employs qualitative research methods, including a literature review and historiographical analysis. He argues that the church’s prophetic diaconia is deeply rooted in the all-encompassing mission of God (*missio Dei*). Mawerenga concludes by outlining four key implications that emerge from the church’s prophetic diaconia in Malawi.

Section C: ‘Diaconia: An Indicative’ consists of four chapters. The first chapter in this section, Chapter 11, is written by **Marinda van Niekerk**. She shares strategies and insights that have shaped her understanding of diaconia as a table – a space where community, and ultimately the love of Jesus, is both offered and profoundly experienced. For van Niekerk,

diaconia becomes a form of communion, where the body of Christ is broken to bring healing and restoration to vulnerable individuals. Her chapter also explores the relationship between diaconia, evangelism, and the essence of being the church. She concludes by examining the role of justice within diaconia as a strategy for community development.

The next chapter, Chapter 12, by **Erica Meijers**, continues the theme by exploring the connection between diaconia and the Eucharist, examining the cyclical movement between them. She focuses on two key questions: What theological connections between the Eucharist and diaconia can support the daily ministry of the church? Based on these theological connections, what steps can help us understand, renew, and maintain this relationship? After reflecting on these questions, Meijers concludes by developing a *Eucharistic-diaconal methodology* – structured around several steps (*commit, expose, relate, engage, reflect, and celebrate*) – to articulate the flow of the Eucharistic-diaconal circle.

In Chapter 13, **Dieter de Bruin** explores T.F. Torrance's understanding of ordination, focusing primarily on the office of the presbyter and its relationship to the Eucharist. He demonstrates the inextricable connection between ecclesial offices and the Eucharist, outlining a theology of the Eucharist as it relates to the church's diaconal ministry. Building on the nexus between the office and the sacrament of the Eucharist, he critically examines the office of the deacon in relation to the presbyter, considering its implications for incorporating the ruling elder into this framework. He concludes by identifying the practical theological benefits of this reconfigured understanding of ecclesial offices, reflecting on its potential impact on the DRC and, through her, the broader ecumenical church.

Gideon van der Watt concludes this section with Chapter 14, arguing for a rediscovery of the deep connection between the Eucharist and diaconia. He calls for a reimagining of the relationship between the Eucharistic body of Christ and the broken human bodies in the world, emphasising the need to restore the practice of celebrating the Eucharist within the context of the common meal. Van der Watt suggests that revisiting the historical diaconal roots of the Eucharist can help reimagine the church's diaconal identity and calling. He envisions creating spaces that accommodate both diaconia as *extra nos* (beyond us) and the church's direct agency in diaconia – actively embodying its diaconal mission, particularly at the local level. He concludes that rediscovering the diaconal dimensions of the Eucharist can play a transformative role in shaping the church into a diaconal church, one that both receives and shares the broken body of Christ within a broken world.

The final section, **Section D: 'Diaconia – A Practice'**, explores diaconia in action. In Chapter 15, **John Aitchison** traces the history of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa's (ACSA) engagement with the diaconate, one of the three established orders of ordained clergy. He recounts how, at the 1982 Synod of all Anglican Churches in Southern Africa, the ACSA voted not to debate the findings of a 1979 Commission established to examine the diaconate. However, 41 years later, a new commission was tasked with re-examining the ministry of the permanent (or distinctive) diaconate, culminating in the release of its final report in April this year. Aitchison explores the ecclesiastical and socio-political factors that influenced both commissions, analysing their theological and ecclesiastical perspectives in the context of a changing South Africa, the global landscape, and the Anglican Church – places where, he argues, diaconia is urgently needed.

In Chapter 16, **Johannes Eurich** explores the search for a diaconal identity and examines how a Christian orientation can be maintained within diaconal organisations amidst the challenges posed by religious pluralism. This question is addressed with a focus on diaconal social service providers, which complement the diaconal commitment of church congregations. He notes that in some countries, these providers have evolved into large non-profit organisations distinguished by their professionalism in service delivery, efficiency in organisational management, and strong external orientation towards customers and competitors. Consequently, there are differences from the diaconal commitment of church congregations, which is typically characterised by a high level of commitment from volunteers and correspondingly different decision-making processes. His chapter serves as a supplement to the diaconal commitment of church congregations; however, it should be clear that both types of diaconal action are mutually beneficial to one another, and both can learn from each other, especially when facing similar challenges in a pluralistic society.

In Chapter 17, **Nioma Venter** presents the outcomes of a biographical case study of Little Seeds for Early Childhood Development (ECD) as a collaborative-integrated approach between church and organisation within the Western Cape Synod of the DRC. This study demonstrates the strategic cornerstones and missional transformation necessary for achieving a collective systemic impact in addressing poverty, inequality, and unemployment. It introduces a model designed to assist congregations in scaling up diaconal ministry. This model provides a structured approach to bridging the gap between the congregation's ministry of compassion and social welfare collaboration in the contemporary context.

In Chapter 18, **Yolande Steenkamp** and **Nadia von Wielligh** contribute to the theme of religion and sustainable development from the perspective of Christian *diaconia*. They argue that the discipline of diaconia serves as an entry point for interdisciplinary discussions while also incorporating the discipline of social work to address the South African context, where religious organisations often express their diaconal work in part through Christian-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that employ social workers. Their engagement addresses the basis for dialogue among the disciplines of theology, social work, and sustainable development, thereby advocating for faith-based communities to partner with organisations to implement sustainable development initiatives, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In the final chapter, Chapter 19, **Jacques Beukes** critically examines the principles and practices of diaconia and community participation from both ecclesiastical and scholarly perspectives. He investigates whether theologically engaged scholarship or theologically motivated community engagement within academic institutions can be regarded as diaconia. Furthermore, he explores the complexities of defining a diaconal identity in a secular, pluralistic, and globalised world, bringing to the forefront the challenges this discussion provokes.

Conclusion

This book, *DIACONIA – Acts, understandings, and stories of service in a pluralistic South Africa*, critically engages with contemporary challenges in South Africa, across Africa, and globally. These challenges reflect deep fractures – social, economic, political, religious, spatial, ecological, and environmental – exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19. In this context, the church, faith-based organisations (FBOs), NGOs, and Christians are confronted with their vocation and responsibility.

Through a combination of case studies, theoretical reflections, and practical illustrations, this book examines both short-term and long-term acts of care and empowerment, as well as the underlying principles of diaconia. It thoughtfully engages with some of the most pressing challenges in South African society. Throughout its chapters, the book highlights how diaconia is expressed in both identity and practice, offering diverse perspectives on its manifestation across different contexts.

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SECTION A

THE CONTEXT THROUGH
AFRICA'S STORIES

CHAPTER 1

The Life of Rev Dr Handwell Yotamu Hara: A Legacy of Faith, Resilience, and Service

Takuze Saul Chitsulo

Introduction

Delivering the second Hara Memorial Lecture at the Diaconal Conference hosted by the University of Pretoria was both a profound privilege and a significant responsibility. The inaugural Hara Memorial Lecture was held during a ceremonial session on Thursday, 20 April 2023, at the Zomba Congregation of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). Professor Maake Masango of the University of Pretoria served as the keynote speaker. This inaugural lecture was part of the broader Research Conference on the Centenary of the CCAP, held at Zomba Theological University from 19 to 21 April 2023. The Hara Memorial Lectures are conducted in honour of Rev Dr Handwell Yotamu Hara, the first black student to earn a doctoral degree from the University of Pretoria.

Rev Dr Handwell Yotamu is a monumental figure in the history of theological education and ministry in Malawi. His extraordinary journey, from humble beginnings as a herd boy in Northern Malawi to becoming a university lecturer, exemplifies perseverance, intellectual rigor, and profound spiritual conviction. The Hara Memorial Lecture seeks to honour his remarkable legacy by reflecting on his contributions as a theologian, educator, and servant leader.

This chapter explores various facets of Dr Hara's life, including his early struggles, married life, spiritual calling, and academic pursuits, with a particular focus on his pioneering role in African theological scholarship during the apartheid era. It also delves into his historic experience as the first black student at the University of Pretoria. The chapter concludes by highlighting some of his significant achievements, with a focus on Dr Hara's diaconal services.

Dr Hara's influence transcends his personal achievements, as his contributions to Systematic Theology at institutions such as Zomba Theological College (ZTC), Josophat Mwale Theological Institute (JMTI), and Mzuzu University profoundly shaped the theological landscape in Malawi and across the broader African context. As a man of faith and compassion, he dedicated much of his life to diaconia, embodying Christian service by supporting orphans, widows, and the underprivileged. His legacy challenges us to engage in theology that is not only intellectual but also transformative, urging future generations of theologians and church leaders to integrate scholarship with practical service. In honouring Rev Dr Handwell Hara, we celebrate a life lived in pursuit of justice, knowledge, and spiritual growth, leaving a profound impact on both the academic and faith communities.

Meeting Rev Dr Handwell Hara: A personal encounter

My first encounter with the late Rev Dr Handwell Hara was in December 1997, after receiving word from my Synod that I had been selected to pursue theological training at ZTC, now Zomba Theological University. Overjoyed, I shared the news with the late Rev. Prof. Augustine Musopole, who at the time served as the General Manager of the Christian Literature Association in Malawi (CLAIM) and as the patron of our youth group, the Presbyterian Youth Organisation. His response was memorable: 'Congratulations! At ZTC, you will meet Rev Dr Handwell Hara, an exceptionally learned man who specialises in Systematic Theology. There is no one like him in Malawi'. This remark piqued my curiosity, sparking anticipation about both his appearance and his teaching style.

With complete trust in Professor Musopole as my mentor, I eagerly anticipated meeting Rev Dr Hara. When I finally met him, his appearance immediately caught my attention – his neatly parted hair conveyed an aura of wisdom. I felt ready to absorb the knowledge that Professor Musopole had praised so highly. Dr Hara's students soon discovered that he was both dedicated and deeply passionate about his teaching. One memorable example was his dynamic approach in the classroom. He would arrive in a jacket and tie, but as he began to teach, he would first remove his jacket, then his tie, and carefully fold up his long-sleeved shirt, all the while saying, 'Taleka nkuuze', meaning 'Let me tell you'. This ritual signalled to us that he was about to delve deeply into the subject, and we knew we were in for a session of profound learning. It was clear that teaching wasn't just a profession for him; it was a calling, and he approached it with heartfelt

dedication. This emphasised his hands-on, passionate style, providing a personal and engaging illustration of his commitment to teaching.

The early and married life of Handwell Yotamu Hara

Much of Handwell Yotamu Hara's early and married life is documented in his brief book *From Herd Boy to University Lecturer*, published in 2019. The book provides insights into his theological training and his roles as a lecturer, pastor, and doctoral student. It also highlights his work as Education Secretary for Nkhoma Synod Schools and his teaching career at ZTC, JMTI, and Mzuzu University.

Handwell Hara was born on 9 February 1942, though this date was not his actual birthdate but rather a fabricated one assigned to provide a specific day for celebrating his birthday (Hara 2019:6). He was born into the Yotamu Chimodzimodzi family of Jonathan Hara Village, under the jurisdiction of Traditional Authority Mtwaro in Mzimba District, in Malawi's northern region. At birth, he was given the name Beneka, a shortened version of *Benekelera*, meaning 'to cover'.

Handwell's father was Yotamu Hara, and his mother was Midani Chungwe. Although both were illiterate, Midani was a Christian and a member of the CCAP. Together, Yotamu and Midani had five children: Loyiti, Tuwepo, Beneka, Chihambe, and Makayiko (Hara 2019:6). Later, four of the children – Loyiti, Tuwepo, Beneka, and Chihambe – changed their names to Grandson, Dayivase, Handwell, and Christopher, respectively (Hara 2019:6). This reflected a family tradition where children, upon reaching a certain age, could either retain their birth names or adopt new ones that they preferred (Hara 2019:6).

Handwell Hara's early life was marked by significant adversity. The death of his mother, Midani, at a young age led his father, Yotamu, to remarry Midani's stepsister, Thandiwe. Midani and Thandiwe shared the same father but had different mothers. The elders advised Yotamu to marry Thandiwe, believing that a family member would care for Midani's children better than an unrelated woman (Hara 2019:6). Unfortunately, Thandiwe did not fulfil these expectations (Hara 2019:7).

Instead, her treatment of the children brought further hardship. Handwell and his siblings endured mistreatment under their stepmother's care, which tragically resulted in the death of the youngest child, Makayiko, due to neglect (Hara 2019:6). After Midani's passing, Makayiko was initially cared for by his grandmother, Zigatya Ziwa, Yotamu's mother. However, the baby died a few months later, also due to inadequate care.

This tragic chapter of Handwell Hara's life deepened with the loss of his father, who tragically took his own life by hanging himself in their home. This left the children destitute and scattered among relatives who offered little comfort or stability (Kalonde, 2023:1). The reasons for Yotamu's suicide remain unclear, though rumors suggested he was bewitched by his brother, Timeyo Hara, to either hang himself or throw himself into a river. He ultimately chose to hang himself (Hara 2019:8). In these trying circumstances, Handwell Hara (2019:8) took on the role of a herd boy, tending cattle belonging to the Hayigini family to survive. He reports that he was paid nothing for looking after the cattle, goats, and sheep, receiving only nsima (pap) in the evenings.

Handwell left the Hayigini family to join his brother Christopher, who was living with their uncle Timeyo in Ekwendeni, where their sister Dayivase was married (Hara 2019:9). Their other brother, Grandson, who had been staying in Mponera, Dowa, also returned to join them in Ekwendeni (Hara 2019:12). The living conditions there were an improvement over what Handwell had experienced with the Hayigini family (Hara 2019:12). Hara (2019:12) states that Grandson eventually married, and both Handwell and Christopher were enrolled in school. He reports that Handwell excelled in his studies and passed the Standard 3 Nyasaland National Government Examination. Unfortunately, Grandson could not afford to pay for Handwell's school fees.

Before leaving school, Handwell felt a calling to the Holy Ministry to become an evangelist or preacher (Hara 2019:12). This profound experience, as narrated by Hara (2019:12), occurred in July 1958 when he was 16 years old. One afternoon, during an arithmetic lesson around three o'clock, Handwell heard a voice telling him that he would become an evangelist and a pastor. The voice revealed that he would preach and teach in different places. His peers, noticing his uncharacteristic silence over the following days, thought he was unwell (Hara 2019:12). From that moment on, Handwell's behaviour, the way he spoke to others, and his appearance all changed for the better (Hara 2019:13). He respected other people more than before, and he kept himself smart (Hara 2019:13).

In his unpublished work, Kalonde (2024:2) points out that in 1959, Handwell left Ekwendeni and moved to Mponera in the Central Region, where he was employed as a clerk at Nkhonde Tobacco Estate. After working for two months, Handwell heard a disembodied voice instructing him to resign from his job and prepare for evangelism and preaching (Hara 2019:16). Hara (2019:16) notes that as he was writing his resignation letter, a messenger summoned him to the manager's office, where he was

informed that his employment had been terminated. Despite being an adult, Handwell decided to return to school, joining the Standard 3 class in primary school (Hara 2019:16). He persevered with his education and eventually passed the Standard 8 exams, securing a position as a primary school teacher.

In 1967, Handwell married Lotasi Lungu, the daughter of Village Headman Samu (Chidothi) Lungu of Mponela in Dowa District (Hara 2019:22). Although Handwell and Lotasi did not have any biological children, their home was always filled with children from the time they were married (Hara 2019:24). Hara (2019:24) reports that on the night of their wedding, Handwell had a dream in which he was told they would not have children together. Despite this, he was influenced by his relatives to disregard the dream, and they sought help from both biomedical and traditional medicine, but without success. Nevertheless, their joyful home became a refuge for many.

Handwell Hara as theological student and pastor

After teaching for a few years, Handwell applied for theological training under CCAP Nkhoma Synod. Despite several unsuccessful attempts, he was finally accepted in 1972 and began his studies at Nkhoma Theological College (Hara 2019:24). Throughout these experiences, Handwell was repeatedly encouraged by the disembodied voice that continued to guide him (Kalonde 2024:3). He was instructed by the voice to apply to CCAP Nkhoma Synod, where it turned out that he would be trained as a pastor (Hara 2019:24). Kalonde (2024:3) states that Handwell Hara was ordained in 1975 and began his ministry at the Chileka Congregation, where he served from 1975 to 1978.

Kalonde (2024:3) notes that the Synod appointed Hara as a lecturer at Nkhoma Theological College, where he taught from 1978 to 1979. He further mentions that Hara later pursued a master's degree in Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary in the USA, graduating in 1981. This suggests that Handwell Hara was among the first Malawian ministers to ambitiously pursue further education. Upon his return to Malawi, he was appointed Director of the Namoni Katengeza Lay Training Centre at Chongoni (Kalonde 2024:3). In the same year, the Synod nominated him to teach at ZTC (now a university), where he taught from 1981 to 1984.

Handwell Hara as a doctoral student at the University of Pretoria

The aspirations of the former herd boy continued to grow. In 1983, Handwell embarked on doctoral studies at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. His enrolment at Pretoria was historic, as he was the first black student to be admitted to the institution since its founding in 1908. Despite facing the harsh realities of apartheid and racism, Hara did not give up. It is no wonder that Professor Maake Masango, in a letter dated 17 July 2018, described Hara as a man who fought apartheid while climbing the stairs to receive his doctorate.¹ Masango said:

He came to South Africa at the height of apartheid and was educated at the University where some of the theologians were creators of Theology of Apartheid. He did us proud, graduated and received his doctorate. That meant, as he climbed the stairs to receive his doctoral certificate, he was killing apartheid.

It should be noted that the experience of being the first black student at the all-white University of Pretoria during apartheid South Africa was likely a profound and challenging journey marked by both isolation and resilience. Although Hara (2019:23) claims that he and his wife lived comfortably among people of different races in the USA, Scotland, and South Africa, and felt at home in all these places, it is undeniable that navigating such circumstances may not have been easy for them.

As a pioneer in a deeply segregated society, Hara would have faced the harsh realities of institutionalised racism daily. The university environment, steeped in the ideologies of apartheid, would have been unwelcoming, if not openly hostile, with limited support and acceptance from peers, faculty, and the administration. Beale (1998:34) provides a detailed account of the structure of the university education system during apartheid in South Africa. She notes that 90% of university students at the time were white, while black students faced severe restrictions, being barred from enrolling in many courses and having access to only a limited number of institutions. A significant proportion of black students relied on part-time and correspondence studies to access higher education (HE), with very few progressing to postgraduate studies.

1 On 17 July 2018, Professor Masango wrote a letter that was read as a eulogy at Rev Dr Handwell Hara's funeral.

Beale (1998:46) further highlights the social isolation experienced by black students at institutions such as the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). At UCT, the prevailing sentiment was that black students should neither be seen nor heard outside of classes. In 1937, a student debate advocating the unconditional admission of non-Europeans to the university was defeated (Beale 1998:46). At Wits, although the Principal supported the advancement of black students, he upheld a policy of ‘white ascendancy’, arguing that the university should avoid fostering social interaction between white and non-European students. In the 1940s and 1950s, nearly every aspect of life for South African students was shaped by segregation, from the residential areas they lived in to the schools they attended (Beale 1998:60). Beale notes that students transitioning to segregated institutions experienced a sense of continuity with their previous environments, whereas those moving on to ‘open’ institutions were confronted with entirely new and unfamiliar experiences.

However, even segregated universities were not merely extensions of South African society’s segregated structure; they developed their own distinct and powerful internal cultures. At the University of Natal, segregation was endorsed and entrenched through the arrangement of classes (Beale 1998:71). In 1928, John W. Bews, the Principal of the Durban campus, proposed the establishment of separate colleges for Indians and Africans. However, this plan was met with resistance from the local Indian community and was ultimately abandoned during the Great Depression.

Thiven Reddy (2024:22), in a report on HE in South Africa, highlights how the government actively bolstered the trend toward white-exclusive institutions on English-speaking campuses through measures such as the Universities Amendment Bill and the Extension of University Education Amendment Bill.

The first bill aimed to override objections from the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) by protecting individuals who advocated for or promoted racial segregation (Reddy 2024:22). The second bill prohibited the admission of black students to a white university without ministerial approval and restricted them from joining student organisations, except those confined to their own ethnic group or focused solely on academic matters (Reddy 2024:22). Mlambo, Saul, and Buys (2024:11) highlight that apartheid in South Africa significantly complicated the HE sector by fostering educational inequalities through explicit racist policies that limited the educational opportunities of black people.

They note that higher education institutions (HEIs) were governed and funded differently, with historically white universities (HWUs) receiving greater benefits from the government – such as more funding, administrative support, staff, and subsidies – than historically black universities (HBUs) (Mlambo et al. 2024:11). In contrast, HBUs faced greater constraints in their decision-making processes (Mlambo et al. 2024:11). Additionally, Beale (1998:33) states that apartheid affected university members in their daily lives, as citizens, students, and staff faced new restrictions.

Despite these obstacles, Handwell Hara's journey exemplified perseverance and quiet defiance. His determination to pursue education in the face of adversity required immense courage and inner strength. Khumisho Moguerane (2007:57–58) highlights an example of a black student who steadfastly refused an offer of accommodation in white students' units at Student Village. The student perceived racially mixed quarters as hostile environments where the freedom of black students was restricted and undermined. The student is quoted as saying:

... at the moment, I'm convinced that if they [whites] don't like blacks, they don't like me, because I've never been in a Situation whereby I come to a place – a white dominated place, and they just treat me good. So I'm under the impression that, you know, whites don't like me. I can't live with those boys. I won't be free, you know. I won't be myself. I won't be happy – let's just put it like that (Moguerane 2007:58).

Hara might have felt the weight of representing an entire community or race in a space where they were not expected or wanted, adding an extra layer of pressure. Yet, this experience would also have been transformative, not just for the individual but for the institution and society at large. By breaking the racial barriers at the University of Pretoria, Handwell Hara paved the way for future generations, contributing to the slow dismantling of apartheid's oppressive structures and laying the groundwork for a more inclusive academic environment.

Graduating with a Doctor of Divinity as the first black student at the University of Pretoria was an extraordinary achievement, symbolising both personal triumph and a historic breakthrough in the fight against racial inequality. This accomplishment reflects not only the individual's intellectual rigour and academic excellence but also unwavering resilience in the face of systemic racism and adversity. The journey to this milestone

would have been fraught with challenges, requiring immense courage, determination, and perseverance.

Handwell Hara's success, in this sense, serves as a powerful testament to his ability to rise above the barriers that were designed to hold him back, and it stands as an inspiration to countless others who may face similar struggles. By breaking this significant racial barrier, Handwell Hara left a lasting mark on the university's history and contributed to the broader movement for social justice and equality. His legacy will be remembered as a beacon of hope and progress, demonstrating that excellence knows no colour and that the pursuit of knowledge can transcend even the most entrenched forms of discrimination.

Upon completing his doctorate in 1989, the Synod did not assign him to another position; instead, he returned to Mdzobwe CCAP, where he served as a pastor while also holding the roles of Synod Clerk and Deputy Synod Clerk (Hara 2019:30). When the Synod sought to remove him from the position of Deputy Clerk by transferring him from Mdzobwe CCAP to the Namon Katengeza Church Lay Training Centre as the Director, Hara refused because the centre's main focus was not training the laity but organising conferences for different organisations. He felt he would be preoccupied with the centre's activities of purchasing food and arranging accommodation (Hara 2019:30). Hara was later appointed Education Secretary for Nkhoma Synod Schools, a position he held from 1992 to 1996.

In December 1996, Handwell Hara joined the teaching staff at ZTC, where he served from 1996 to 2007. During this time, he also taught at the University of Malawi and the Evangelical Bible College of Malawi. Subsequently, he served as a lecturer at JMTI, Mzuzu University, and the College for Christian Ministry before retiring in 2012. In addition to his work as a lecturer, Hara held various significant roles, including Nkhoma Synod Education Secretary, Synod Clerk, Dean of Student Affairs and Vice Principal at ZTC, and Principal of JMTI.

Handwell Hara's accomplishments

While lecturing, Hara taught courses in Systematic Theology, Christian Ethics, and Pastoral Care, with a strong emphasis on nurturing spiritually mature church ministers. Despite being the first minister in the CCAP Nkhoma Synod to earn a doctorate, he remained humble and deeply concerned for the welfare of others, as everyone can testify. As Synod Education Secretary, he played a key role in reclaiming mission secondary schools such as Robert Blake in Dowa, William Murray at Nkhoma, and

Mlanda Girls at Ntcheu, as well as primary schools like Dedza, Lilongwe, and Chidothi at Mponela, from the government (Hara 2019:31). His leadership also enabled the Synod to convert a construction camp for the Lilongwe-Salima road into Mvera Girls Secondary School (Hara 2019:33).

Hara made a significant contribution to the development of Home of Hope, a Mchinji-based non-governmental charitable organisation that cares for vulnerable children from different parts of Malawi. According to the organisation's founder, Hara and his wife were the first to embrace the vision of establishing the orphanage, assuring their support from the start (Kalonde 2024:4). Additionally, drawing from his own experience of growing up in poverty, Hara founded his own non-governmental charitable organisation, Life-Style Christian Ministry, which focuses on assisting vulnerable children, widows, the elderly, and disabled individuals (Hara 2019:40). He personally funded the education of orphans and needy children, built houses for widows and the elderly around Msundwe in Lilongwe, and welcomed orphans into his home, raising them as his own children (Hara 2019:40). Hara could not bear to see children endure the hardships he himself had experienced in his youth.

Hara also made a major contribution to theological scholarship in Malawi, authoring several significant books. His book *Philosophy of Living Together* aims 'to help people live in a community, society, or group in peace by avoiding conflicts caused by a lack of respect, love, and consideration for others' (Kalonde 2024:4). Drawing on his experience in various leadership roles, Hara outlined methods for both leaders and followers to maintain peace at all times. His book *Reformed Soteriology and the Malawian Context*, based on his doctoral thesis at the University of Pretoria, explores the Reformed doctrine of salvation through the perspectives of John Calvin, Karl Barth, and G.C. Berkouwer, and seeks to apply their teachings to the Malawian context, questioning whether the Reformed doctrine of salvation is applicable to the African situation.

His final book, *From Herd Boy to University Lecturer*, is his autobiography. In this small but powerful book, Hara explains how God transformed a poor young herd boy into a scholar and leader with significant influence. This was evident at his funeral in 2018, where a broad spectrum of people from different sectors of society testified to the impact of his life. Many of these individuals were his students. He passed away unexpectedly on 13 July 2018, after a short illness, and was buried at the Heroes Acre of Home of Hope in Mchinji. Through his perseverance in overcoming adversity and his selfless dedication to serving others, Hara is regarded by many in the CCAP family as a great guru of the faith.

Rev Dr Hara's lecturing career is as follows: from 1978 to 1979 at JMTI, from 1981 to 1984 at ZTC (now Zomba Theological University), from 1996 to 2007 at ZTC, from 2007 to 2009 at JMTI, from 2009 to 2012 at Mzuzu University, and concluding his career in 2012 at the College for Christian Ministry. This highlights his 37 years of service as a CCAP Nkhoma Synod Church minister, with 21 of those years devoted to lecturing. Of his lecturing tenure, 15 years were spent teaching at ZTC.

The legacy of Rev Dr Handwell Hara and diaconal service

In exploring and reflecting on the theme of *diaconia* – the Christian concept of service to others – we are drawn to the life and legacy of Rev Dr Handwell Hara. Dr Hara was not just a distinguished theologian and academic; he was a living embodiment of diaconia, dedicating his life to serving the marginalised, the vulnerable, and the disadvantaged in profound and meaningful ways. According to Nordstokke (2020:172), the concept of 'diakonia' may not belong to the vernacular of most churches in Asia or Africa; instead, they more frequently use terms such as 'social ministry' or 'social action' when referring to their involvement in this kind of work. This implies that in Malawi, as in many other contexts, churches and individuals have been actively engaged in diaconal work – helping communities, advocating for justice, and promoting social welfare – without necessarily using the term 'diakonia'.

Diaconia means service to the world, and this definition, whether consciously or unconsciously, shapes the mission of the church (Donfried 1992:3). In an effort to define diaconia, Kjell Nordstokke (2011:13) quotes a letter from the Global Consultation held in Johannesburg in November 2002, titled 'Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World'. The letter states:

Diakonia is central to what it means to be the church. As a core component of the gospel, diakonia is not an option but an essential part of discipleship. Diakonia reaches out to all persons, who are created in God's image. While diakonia begins as unconditional service to the neighbour in need, it leads inevitably to social change that restores (Nordstokke 2011:13).

This implies that those engaged in diaconal service are called to a distinct ministry, which John N. Collins (1990:244) refers to as 'the ministry of the ordained'. According to Donfried (1992:3), these individuals represent

Christ, the Servant, in the servant church, enabling all believers to become servants to one another, as well as to their brothers and sisters in the wider human family. Hara's work with orphans, widows, and the elderly serves as a testament to his deep commitment to this ministry, affirming that he was indeed called to this sacred service.

Hara's charitable organisation, Life-Style Christian Ministry, became a beacon of hope for those who, like him in his early years, faced profound adversity. He understood that service was not just an abstract concept but a lived reality, a calling that required not only words but tangible actions. Donfried (1992:3) observes that when the primary purpose of the church is diaconia, understood as service to the world, and when Jesus becomes the pattern of that service, the ministry is oriented toward service rather than the word. Through Hara's efforts, he provided education to orphans, built homes for widows, and offered comfort to the elderly and disabled, embodying the very essence of Christian service (Hara 2019:40). In his acts of kindness and generosity, Dr Hara demonstrated that diaconia is not confined to the walls of the church or the pages of theology books; it is expressed in the daily acts of love and compassion that touch the lives of those in need.

It should be emphasised that Handwell Hara's life serves as a powerful example of what it means to live out the call to service. His life's work, as Nordstokke (2020:171) puts it, challenges us to see service as integral to our faith, urging us to step into the lives of the vulnerable with a heart of compassion and a hand extended in assistance. He asserts that diaconal work is not optional for the church, but an integral part of its being and mission to the world (Nordstokke 2020:171). As a result, Hara's legacy reminds us that true theological reflection must always lead to action – action that transforms not just the individual but the community and the world at large. In honouring him, we are called to carry forward his commitment to service, ensuring that our work and our lives reflect the same dedication to diaconia that he so faithfully demonstrated.

Handwell Hara's approach to diaconia serves as a profound reminder that theology must be lived, not just theorised. Diaconia, as Nordstokke (2020:171) explains, is a theological concept that reflects the very identity and mission of the church, calling it to respond to human suffering, injustice, and the care of creation. He views diaconia as encompassing both theological reflection and church-based action. Hara's life exemplified a theology deeply rooted in action, demonstrating that true faith and service cannot be confined to academic discourse alone. Thus, a theoretical reflection on diaconia, as Nordstokke (2020:172) suggests,

should integrate various theological disciplines – such as social ethics, practical theology, systematic theology, and biblical interpretation – while also examining relevant forms of social action in response to human suffering and injustice in today’s world. Dr Hara’s commitment to the most vulnerable members of society – orphans, widows, the elderly, and the disadvantaged – underscores the urgent need for theologians today to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Hara showed that theology, when translated into compassionate action, has the power to transform lives and communities in profound ways. In following Dr Hara’s example, theologians today are called to move beyond intellectual exercises and engage in the tangible work of service. His legacy challenges us to ask: How are our theological reflections informing our actions? How are we, as theologians, contributing to the betterment of society and the alleviation of suffering? Dr Hara’s diaconia encourages us to ensure that our teachings and research do not remain in the realm of ideas but are embodied in acts of love, justice, and compassion. It is a call to be experts in theology, demonstrating through our actions the transformative power of the gospel.

Conclusion

Rev Dr Handwell Hara’s life and legacy stand as powerful testaments to faith, resilience, and a deep commitment to service. From his humble beginnings as a herd boy to becoming the first black PhD graduate of the University of Pretoria, Hara’s perseverance and dedication to theological scholarship and practical diaconia left a notable mark. He broke barriers, inspiring future generations and using his education not for personal gain, but to uplift the marginalised. His work with orphans, widows, and the disadvantaged embodied a theology of action and compassion. Today, we honour not only his academic achievements but also his profound impact on students, the community, and theological education in Southern Africa. His legacy challenges us to ensure that our theological work fosters real change, inspiring us to live with the same passion, humility, and commitment that defined his remarkable life.

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CHAPTER 2

Missiological and Diaconal Imperatives in the Context of Cyclone Freddy in Phalombe, Malawi

Isabel Apawo Phiri

Introduction

In the joint study document by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and ACT Alliance, 'Called to Transformation – Ecumenical Diakonia' (2022) provides a clear definition of the concept of 'ecumenical diakonia' and offers guidance on how churches and ecumenical partners worldwide can collaborate effectively. The document defines *ecumenical diakonia* in two key ways:

The first links to a theological understanding of diakonia as a dimension integral to the nature and mission of the church. This perspective shows that diakonia is a key expression of the strong link between what the churches are and do. Reflection on ecumenical diakonia requires understanding both dimensions: the churches' being and their joint action as a worldwide communion of Christians and institutions. The second perspective is practical, describing how churches are engaged in diaconal action across confessional and geographical boundaries (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:10).

In the above quotation, the focus is on ecumenical diakonia and what the churches can achieve together as an expression of their faith in God. This essay departs from the approach that emphasises the church and instead focuses on diakonia from the margins. This means responding to the ecumenical call to reimagine diakonia from the:

“[V]antage point of those who are, in many cases, traditionally considered as recipients or objects of churches’ diakonia – the vulnerable and marginalized communities.” Recognizing that many of the current models of diakonia are designed and put in practice by agents located in the global North, it wanted to explore an alternative approach, asking, “what diakonia would be if seen from the vantage point of the global South where the dynamics of life are radically different.”

... Instead of presenting marginalized people as an object or target group for diaconal action, it spoke of “the diakonia of marginalized people.” On the one hand, this refers to how marginalized people struggle for a better life; on the other, it points to the biblical accounts of “God’s attention and caring love to people in situations of oppression and consequent deprivation. This is the diakonia of God: a diakonia of liberation as well as of restoring dignity, and ensuring justice and peace” (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:41).

Therefore, this essay highlights ecumenical diaconia from the experiences of rural women in the Phalombe district of Malawi in response to climate disasters. It resonates with the assessment that the impact of pandemics and natural disasters is felt much more by the poor than the rich in all countries (cf. Kim 2011:195–211). It also highlights experiences of trauma during pandemics and natural disasters, based on the knowledge that up to 80% of Africans are estimated to be traumatised as a result of violence, poverty, disease, natural disasters, and other causes (Moyo 2019).

Within the context of natural disasters, it focuses on Cyclone Freddy, which hit Southern Malawi in 2023 and brought untold suffering to many people who lost family members, their livelihoods, and their homes. Such loss resulted in experiences of trauma. It will build on the understanding that the religions and cultural practices of Africa are well-equipped to provide communal support to people dealing with trauma (Monteiro & Wall 2011). During field research, I observed the church leadership itself overwhelmed by the accumulated trauma suffered by the people; they too were experiencing trauma.

The study draws its insights from a focused group discussion with 15 women from Khokola Village in Phalombe, Southern Malawi. Storytelling methodology was used in the focus group to deepen understanding of the personal effects of trauma while allowing traditional communal lament to lead to communal healing. The presentation and analysis of the data

collected highlighted the experiences of two women who lost children during two separate cyclones. In analysing their stories, I will examine the concepts of 'lament', 'grief', and 'Christian spirituality of healing'. I will also discuss the women's disconnect between their experiences of trauma and their awareness of the worsening climate conditions in the country that led to floods damaging their fields.

In conclusion, it will be argued that the search for transformational healing for the affected women should lead to a mindset change so that they do not see themselves only as victims of climate change but can channel their pain to become champions of climate justice. This search is one section of a larger research project that focuses on the role of church leadership in diaconia ministry at the church level.

Theories

Mission and diaconia

My first theoretical framework is the connection between mission and diaconia. In the above-mentioned study document (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022), a connection between mission and diaconia is made. It says:

The ecumenical movement is carried by the conviction that unity and sharing are intimately interrelated as God's gracious gift and vocation. At the same time, this commitment to unity and sharing cannot be limited to the life of the churches and their wellbeing. It is a calling to serve in the world, participating in God's mission of healing and reconciliation, and of lifting signs of hope, announcing by word and deed of God's reign, its justice and peace (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:16)

The women from the focus group did not report on unity and sharing within the churches. Instead, they noted the absence of churches in the camps where they stayed as displaced persons. According to them, it is the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that provided sustained help to the displaced people. This contradicts the common belief that the church is present at the grassroots level to assist the needy.

The women spoke about the unity found in lamenting together and sharing experiences of pain and suffering drawn from their faith in God and their cultural affinity. They expressed concern about the disunity of the churches in Phalombe in reaching out to them. It is possible that this was the experience of the women from this village. In my next research, I

will focus on discovering where the church was united in its missiological and diaconal actions in other parts of Phalombe.

Naming women's experience

The study acknowledges that both men and women experience pain when children die due to natural disasters. Patriarchy highlights men's experiences as standard, while women's particular ways of experiencing pain as caregivers are sidelined. Therefore, by using African Women's theology, women's experiences are treated as a key category in the analysis of past, present, and future experiences of African societies. Additionally, it captures the physical functions unique to women, such as pregnancy, giving birth, and caregiving, along with the psychological, spiritual, and mental implications when a child dies in a cyclone. Lucy Chibambo explores this uniqueness in her PhD thesis, which focuses on grandmothers who have lost their adult children to AIDS (Chibambo 2015). She vividly highlights the profound and unique pain experienced by women in this situation.

The concept of 'I see you' is central to this study. It draws from the biblical story of Hagar, the marginalised slave girl in the household of Abraham and Sarah, whose pain was seen by God. By focusing on women's experiences of pain and trauma, the study affirms to women, like Hagar, that they are seen by God.

Furthermore, Phiri and Nadar (2006) stress the importance of being specific about women's experiences to avoid generalisation. They argue that if it is difficult to universalise women's experiences in Africa, how much more challenging is it on a global scale? Thus, this study examines the experiences of a group of women from a particular village in Phalombe.

Communitarian ethos

The third theory is communitarian ethos. In *Healing Together: A Facilitator's Resource for Ecumenical Faith and Community-Based Counselling*, Fulata Lusungu Moyo (2019) used the communitarian ethics of care and logotherapy as a framework for interpreting the trauma experiences of women and men from South Sudan, Nigeria, and Cameroon. This theory posits that, in the African context, issues such as natural disasters are experienced collectively as a community. Consequently, individuals find meaning to move forward by focusing on what they can accomplish with others. Moyo (2019) states:

The deepest concern in a communitarian ethos is not to selfishly gain pleasure or accumulate power, but rather to realize the meaning of each life as part of the created whole. That search for meaning is also the search for how we can contribute to make life meaningful for those we care about and are in community with. The freedom of will and the will to find meaning in every situation are tied into ensuring that our highest potential of being the best self can be reached by focusing on others' well-being rather than our own. By reaching out to others, especially those in need, we make that significant contribution that only we can uniquely make.

It may seem that there is a contradiction between focusing on women's unique experiences and employing a communitarian ethos. In this study, while the emphasis is on the unique experiences of women, individual experiences are combined to inspire collaborative efforts aimed at finding healing for oneself, the community, and the environment. The pursuit of climate justice collectively is what facilitates healing for the individual. The earth, like women, faces domination, and seeking justice for the earth brings personal justice for women.

Method

In the introduction to this essay, it was mentioned that this study is based on qualitative field research and data interpretation grounded in a feminist theory that prioritises women's experiences, utilising storytelling as a central methodology in feminist research. The field research was conducted in February 2024, almost a year after the devastating Cyclone Freddy. Since then, regular communication has been maintained with Emma Makoka Kavalo, my key informant, to verify and clarify facts.

A visit was made to Khokola Village in Phalombe, Malawi, which falls under the jurisdiction of Group Headwoman Thumba. Although the chief was unavailable on the day of our visit, her representative participated in the group discussion. The villagers identified themselves as belonging to the Lomwe ethnic group, though the younger generation primarily speaks Chichewa rather than Chichewa. The majority of the villagers claimed to be Christians. Emma Makoka Kavalo belongs to the Church of Christ. In fact, we passed three Pentecostal and Charismatic churches near the village.

Although I had sent a message in advance indicating that I wanted

to have a group discussion with five women who lost children during Cyclone Freddy, word spread, and 15 women turned up. We therefore had a group discussion with 15 women of all ages. The majority of them were young mothers who brought their babies with them.

I was especially eager to meet Emma Makoka Kavalo after hearing her story from her brother about the profound impact Cyclone Freddy had on her in March 2023. Her story stayed with me, and I couldn't stop thinking about her. I met Emma in Khokola Village, where she grew up, although she now lives with her husband, Mr. Madalitso Kavalo, at the Phalombe-Malawi border with Mozambique. Both Emma and Madalitso are primary school teachers.

Overview of the location: Phalombe

Besides discussing the 2023 Cyclone Freddy, the women in the focus group referred to previous cyclones in 1991, 2015, 2019, and 2022. The group also mentioned how they had been affected by HIV, COVID-19, and cholera in the past. They talked about the failed crop of 2024 due to El Niño. The frustration of ongoing food insecurity and hopelessness was becoming evident.

Phalombe has been hit by many cyclones in recent years because of its geographical location.

Phalombe (It) is situated below the Fort Lister Gap between the two larger parts of the Mulanje Massif. Due to this location, it is vulnerable to flash floods, which can easily occur during the rainy season. The most devastating one in recent history occurred in March 1991, which left Phalombe with a 2–3 meter (7 to 10 feet) high mud layer and killed hundreds of people. On this spot a monument was erected to remember the named and unnamed victims (Phalombe 2024).

Similarly, in January 2015, heavy and continuous rains resulted in landslides with significant impacts, affecting 15 districts in Southern Malawi. Phalombe was one of the areas that was badly hit, leading to the deaths of many people and the displacement of approximately 230,000 individuals. In March 2019, Malawi experienced floods and sustained heavy rains caused by the Tropical Cyclone Idai weather system, which also severely affected Phalombe due to land and rock slides. Furthermore, Phalombe was impacted by Tropical Storm Ana from 28 to 31 January 2022. The

Malawian government agency, the Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DoDMA), reported several blocked roads in the Phalombe district, which negatively affected the daily lives of many households relegated to camps and obstructed their access to essential services, such as health facilities (DTM IOM/DoDMA 2022). This occurred during a time when the country was also shut down due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Consequently, by the time Tropical Cyclone Freddy struck in March 2023, Phalombe had not recovered from the landslides of 2015, 2019, and 2022.

The most affected districts by Tropical Cyclone Freddy are Blantyre, Chikwawa, Nsanje, Mulanje, Phalombe, Zomba and Mangochi. Over 426,04 families had their shelters completely/partially destroyed as a result of flash floods and Landslide caused by Tropical Cyclone Freddy, displacing over 500,000 individuals to at least 500 camp/collective sites.

Mythical story of Napolo

For the local people, these landslides are explained through a mythical story of Napolo. The story of Napolo is very popular in all the flood-prone areas of Southern Malawi. It is believed that Napolo is a two-tailed huge snake that lives in the mountains. When heavy and continuous rain falls, Napolo makes roaring sounds as it moves from the mountain to the valley and then to another mountain. Where it passes, it leaves a trail of destruction: rivers become deeper, new rivers are formed, rocks are suspended, trees are uprooted, and farmland is destroyed; animals and people are either killed or displaced.

Songs have been written and sung about what Napolo does. Napolo mythology also appears in Malawian literature in the form of poetry and play scripts. The poems of Steve Chimombo (1994) reveal the African traditional religious interpretation of the Napolo mythology. All these stories demonstrate that the climate disaster in this area has existed for a very long time. What has changed is the frequency and the scientific explanation of the phenomenon. The focus of this essay, however, is its religious explanation and its effect on women, who can become agents of change on the issue of climate justice if they go beyond the traditional story of Napolo.

Highlights of Emma Makoka Kavalu's experience of pain

Emma Makoka Kavalu recalls that it was on Saturday, 11 March 2023,

when it started raining in her area. On Tuesday, 14 March, around 11 pm, they heard a huge roaring sound like a large vehicle approaching their house. Her husband, Dalitso, went outside to investigate and discovered that the sound was not from a vehicle, but from rushing water. He quickly returned to the house and told Emma to wake up the children and run in the opposite direction from where the noise was coming. He grabbed two children from his first marriage and ran outside. Emma woke up their eleven-month-old baby girl, placed her on her back, and tied her with cloth in the traditional Malawian way of carrying children. She also grabbed a few essential items. However, by the time she opened the front door, she was swept away by a massive wall of landslide. She lost all sense of time and direction. Reflecting on the experience, it felt as though she was pushed for a long distance before hitting a large fallen tree. She found a branch or root to hold on to. As it was dark and still raining, she could not see much or figure out where she was. She does not know how long she clung to the root before being swept away again by a second wave of landslide. She is also unsure how far down she was carried by the second wave before being thrown against another uprooted tree trunk. For the second time, she held on to a root. When the second wave of landslide passed, she regained a sense of being alive. She still had the baby carrier on her back but discovered that it was full of mud. The baby was gone. She lamented the loss of her baby girl, her husband, and the other two children.

From a distance, Emma saw a house standing alone. With difficulty, she walked towards it and found three other women who were also survivors of Cyclone Freddy. They too had lost their children, and together they lamented their losses. The rain continued for another three days while they were in the house. The mud made it difficult to seek help or for help to reach them. During that time, she replayed the events of that fateful night and wondered why she had not died in the mud like her children and husband. On the fourth day, when it stopped raining, the four women set out to find a camp to join, as was the case in previous natural disasters. When she reached one camp, she learned that her husband and the two children had survived and were at another camp for displaced people. She reunited with them, and they lamented together for their lost baby girl. She was also relieved that her mother and other family members had survived. The communal lamentation continued. In the meantime, they heard that dead babies had been found in the mud downstream, including hers. However, they refused to go and claim her body; they wanted to remember her as she was – alive – despite the absence of rituals to mark

closure for her passing. Emma says she has accepted that God allowed her baby to die while she survived and endured the torment of losing her first child. She finds strength in the biblical story of Job, where God demonstrated that He can allow the devil to strip people of what they hold dear and later restore it. Even though the experience still hurts, and sometimes she feels no motivation for life, she perseveres because she believes God was present in what happened.

Analysis of themes from Emma's experience and group discussion

This essay will focus on the analysis of three key themes: communal lament, communal grieving, and communal transformational healing, which ultimately inspires activism for climate justice.

Communal lament

Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Graham Hill (2024) call on Christians to embrace the path of communal lament, which includes confession. Kim and Hill quote from Emmanuel Katongole's book, *Mirror to the Church* (Emmanuel & Hargrove 2009), in which he encourages communal lament as the first response to injustices. With the influence of Katongole, in their devotional piece, Kim and Hill describe lament as:

a demonstrative, strong, and corporate expression of deep grief, pain, sorrow, and regret. Lament and repentance deal with issues of the heart. They pave the way for outer change. Lament is a personal and corporate response to many things: evil, sin, death, harm, discrimination, inequality, racism, sexism, colonization, oppression, and injustice. It is about mourning the painful, shameful, or sorrowful situation, about confessing sin and complicity and sorrow, about calling God to intervene and to change the situation. Finally, lament is about offering thanksgiving and praise to God, knowing that God will intervene and bring change, hope, and restoration.

The above definition of lament is particularly relevant to this study, as it provides insight into how each cyclone rekindles memories of unhealed pain for those who lost children in previous disasters. For instance, upon hearing Emma's story anew, one woman in the focus group lamented the loss of her fifteen-year-old son during the cyclone of 1991. These narratives

resonate with the work of women's church organisations in Malawi, such as *Mvano* in the Presbyterian Church, whose diaconal ministry offers support to those grieving the loss of loved ones, caring for the sick, and encouraging the weak in faith. The areas of accompaniment for the women of Phalombe could include lamenting the visible poverty caused by the loss of farmland, food, and domestic animals due to recurring cyclones. Moving forward, church women's organizations could also lament the slow government responses to relocating people from cyclone-prone areas and the weak enforcement of national policies on natural disaster management. These organisations could transcend ethnic and political divisions to collaborate with local and international communities, advocating for sustainable lifestyle changes that protect the earth. For example, many women buy charcoal to cook for their families, unaware that charcoal production involves cutting down indigenous trees vital for protecting the environment. Notably, the focus group did not recognise the connection between deforestation and the increased vulnerability to floods. That lack of connection should be lamented.

The lament is also for the lack of capacity among religious leaders to speak prophetically about the lives of those who are hurting due to climate-induced disasters. The lament should include misleading religious teachings that do not go beyond the Book of Job, leading the faithful to believe that their suffering is God's will and that they can do nothing about it. Such teachings hinder the agency of women who have experienced the loss of a child through natural disasters.

Communal grieving for the lost children

Mirabai Starr (2024) has powerfully stated that 'the combination of grief illiteracy in the culture, and the emphasis of the patriarchal religious structures to get us to rise above the messy realities of our humanity, is a recipe for avoiding grief'. Starr experienced how individual loss allowed her to enter into collective belonging. She said:

What I experienced when my daughter died was two things. One was that nobody could possibly know what I'm going through right now. But quickly on the heels of that was, "Oh, every person ever who has experienced the death of a child knows."

I was realizing in the bones of my own body ... that there had been mothers throughout time whose children had died and mothers right now [whose children are dying] We all belong to each other. In some ways that was the first time I ever

took my seat in the web of interbeing—when I realized that I belong here and we belong to each other. Even if right now it was my turn to be held by that web, I couldn't imagine it yet, but I knew somehow, someday I would be able to do some of that holding of the other mothers to come. And I have and I do.

It is this kind of connection across time and space that unites mothers who have lost their children to cyclones with those who lost their children during the time of biblical Herod, who killed all Hebrew children under the age of two in his search for baby Jesus. This connection extends to Jewish mothers in Israel and Arab mothers in Palestine, as well as mothers in Ukraine and Russia whose children have been killed in senseless wars. It includes mothers in the path of Cyclone Freddy, from Australia, Madagascar, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi, where Cyclone Freddy passed. It also encompasses mothers in the United Kingdom (UK), South Africa, and the USA whose children have been killed due to careless gun ownership, particularly those killed by law enforcement. These mothers, who have lost children for various reasons, seek healing through solidarity with one another. Who then connects these mothers to find each other and offer healing hugs? A look at other issue-based solidarity initiatives indicates that it is the concerned influencers who rise up to inspire like-minded individuals to take action. Disseminating the results of studies like this one raises awareness, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit encourages like-minded people to form transformational groups to change their circumstances.

Communal transformational healing as agents of climate justice

Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (2012) retell the history of the Zulu people in the context of male circumcision to highlight the change in communal mindset when life is threatened. Shaka stopped male circumcision in the 18th century because his kingdom was under attack at a time when his fighting men had just been circumcised. This cultural practice was reintroduced in the 21st century to combat HIV and AIDS when research showed that circumcision, along with other methods, reduces the rates of new infections in men by up to 60%. Similarly, I argue that mothers who have lost children to disasters like Cyclone Freddy can turn their pain into a catalyst for raising awareness about climate injustices and begin to form village groups that work towards climate justice. The question of how this can be achieved can be explored in another research project.

This is where the churches play a vital role in educating their members about African Christian theological and biblical perspectives on climate injustices and climate justice. Such actions align with the Malawi Vision 2063 document (Malawi. National Planning Commission 2021), which recognises the power of religions to reach out to families at the grassroots level and transform their thinking for the betterment of the country. The UN now views faith leaders as partners in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. This should motivate the churches in Phalombe to collaborate and become champions of climate change.

Conclusion

The main argument of this essay is that diaconia from the margins promotes agency originating from the people, enabling them to heal their pain through action. The mothers of Phalombe, who have lost children due to natural disasters, can begin to heal as they collectively address the causes of climate change. This may seem like a daunting task, but change arises from responding to pain. Whether this pain is perceived as stemming from God or not, God is also present in the transformation of the mindset among those from the margins, allowing them to work towards the abundant life that Jesus Christ promised in John 10:10.

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Diaconia in the Dutch Reformed Church: Is the Ghost of Apartheid Arising?

Johan M. van der Merwe

Introduction

On 31 of May 2024, a historical event took place in the small town of Carolina on the Mpumalanga highveld. A statue of a Boer soldier, which was damaged and beheaded during political unrest in the town in 2021, was unveiled after being restored in cooperation with the *Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniging* (FAK). This seemingly insignificant event in the context of South Africa and the history of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) would not have attracted attention if it weren't for the fact that the statue was unveiled on the grounds of the DRC congregation Carolina, and even more so for the events that accompanied the unveiling. The Dutch Reformed minister opened the proceedings with a Scripture reading and prayer, while the Commando of Carolina rode on horseback through the streets, carrying old Boer republic flags and the old South African flag, which is associated with apartheid, to promote the event in the town.¹ Although the event seems harmless and sincere in its historical intentions, it becomes an important indicator when addressing the role of the DRC in diaconia today.

The following important indicators underscore the significance of the event: Firstly, the statue was beheaded during a time of political unrest because it served as a symbol of something evil (apartheid) from the past. This makes the event critically important when considering the role of

1 The photos described in this chapter are included in the article, Cilliers, S., 'Monument onthul nadat kop in onluste afgekap is', *Netwerk24*, Junie 3, viewed 11 October 2024, from <https://www.netwerk24.com/netwerk24/nuus/aktueel/monument-onthul-nadat-kop-in-onluste-afgekap-is-20240602>.

the church in the community. Secondly, one must ask what message the events surrounding the unveiling of the statue on the grounds of the DRC Carolina, the participation of the local minister, and the statue itself send to the community of Carolina.

A possible answer to these questions can be found in the history of Afrikaner nationalism, when it was customary to place statues referring to the history of the Afrikaner on the church grounds of the DRC and other Afrikaans churches. Well-known examples include the statue of Sarel Cilliers in front of the DRC congregation in Kroonstad, the soldier on horseback on the grounds of DRC Ermelo, and the entrance to DRC Coligny, to name just a few. To many Afrikaners, these statues symbolised the link between church and Afrikaner, between theology and nationalism.

Does the replacement of the statue on the grounds of the church in Carolina signify a resurgence of Afrikaner nationalism within the DRC? If so, does it represent the re-emergence of the ghost of apartheid? This chapter seeks to address this specific question by revisiting the mission policy of the church during the apartheid era. It will then provide an overview of the policy changes implemented during and after apartheid. Finally, I will argue that the DRC missed a significant opportunity in 2014 when members of the Church rejected the Confession of Belhar. This missed opportunity, I propose, highlights the risk of apartheid's legacy re-emerging if the Church does not tread carefully in the current context. The root of this challenge lies in the Church's history.

Diaconia as prisoner of the mission policy of the church

History shows that the diaconia in the DRC became a prisoner of the mission policy and the apartheid theology of the church. The significance of this statement is confirmed by Van der Merwe (2023), who wrote: 'A church's diaconal ministry is influenced by a specific frame of reference, be it a historical perspective, a specific theology, or tradition'. In the case of the DRC, it was the church's support of apartheid policy and the development of apartheid theology that significantly influenced the evolution of diaconia within the DRC. This assertion by Van der Merwe is further elucidated by Naude (2005:164, italics in original): *'When the missionary task and object is formulated in such a way that mission becomes a cultural project of Volkschristianisering with the establishment of differentiated, independent Volkskirchen (subjective genitive), the very nature of the church as communio sanctorum, and her catholicity as one church, are undermined'*. According to Naude, this is precisely what happened to the DRC. He continues:

After the formation of the Zuid Afrikaanse Zendingsgenootskap as [a] separate missionary arm of the DR church (1799), a binary system of ministry developed: The normal ministry to white congregants was augmented with a missionary ministry to mostly coloured and black people who were accommodated in separate “oefenhuisse”, although accepted as members of the same congregation (Naude 2005:165).

This all changed with the shifts in socio-economic and political circumstances in the country. Naude (2005:166) defines the problem that the church faced when he states: ‘The church did not have a developed social ethic at that time and the channel through which it made its most far-reaching policy decisions was the area of mission. The emerging mission policy, adopted in 1935, proved to be far more than a mere mission document’. The mission policy was based on the work of Gustav Warneck, which ‘unmistakably provided a theological rationale for defending the earlier establishment of separate churches for different race groups based on the notion that the ultimate aim of mission is *Volkschristianisierung*’ (Naude 2005:166, italics in original). When the Federal Missionary Policy was developed in 1935, it stated, according to Naude (2005:169): ‘Unambiguously that evangelisation can never imply denationalisation, because “Christianity does not want to rob the [B]antu (*naturel*) of his language and culture but wants to permeate and cleanse (*deursuiwer*) his whole nationalism”’. This aligns with Hoekendijk’s note on Warneck and other nineteenth-century German missiologists, where he explains that by relinquishing the eschatological proviso, the missiological praxis became normative via a romanticised and ethnologically structured Volksidee. The church is no longer seen as the sign of the coming kingdom in this world but is perceived as a prolongation of the Volk, as the blessed fulfilment of its naturally evolving ethnic structure (Hoekendijk 1948:107).

This meant that the church developed two directions within its diaconate: one care for and outreach to the ‘other’, termed mission or missionary work, and another direction where the church reached out and cared for its ‘own’, referred to as the ministry of compassion.

Focusing for a moment on the first direction, namely *mission*, Crafford confirms that the mission policy of the DRC was influenced by the context of the country. The fear of the Afrikaner people (Volk) that they could be overrun by the black masses, along with the rejection of racial mixing, led to the formulation of the policy of reaching out to the other (Crafford 1994:1). This policy not only defined the goal of missionary work by the church

but also became one of the cornerstones of the theology of apartheid. It was articulated in the policy regulations for missions tabled at the General Synod of 1966: ‘Sodat elkeen in sy eie taal die groot daade van God kan hoor en verkondig, word afsonderlike selfstandige kerke uit verskillende bevolkingsgroepe tot stand gebring’² (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid Afrika [NGKSA] 1966). This policy was further developed and approved by the General Synod of the DRC in 1974, and subsequently published under the title *Ras, Volk en Nasie (Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture)* (Van der Merwe 2023:60).

Although the DRC has been involved in the ministry of compassion since its inception in the 17th century, it was particularly the needs of poor white Afrikaners and the political circumstances in South Africa that challenged the church to reach out to ‘onze verarmde en verachte landgenoten’ (Van der Merwe 2023). This situation arose due to the First and Second South African Wars, as well as the drought of 1933-32. In 1915, the Cape Synod of the DRC decided to establish a Commission for Inner Mission. The purpose of this commission was ‘betere behartiging van de belangen van onze verachte geloofsgenoten, volwassenes zoowel als kinderen, buiten zoowel als binnen het gebied van gevestigde gemeenten, met het recht om alle maatregelen te nemen tot de behoorlijke organisasie, uitbreiding en uitvoering van hare werkzaamheden, zooals door haar van tijd tot tijd nodig geoordeeld mocht worden’ (NGKSA 1915:78) In 1919, the name of the commission was changed to ‘Kommissie vir Algemene Armesorg’ (Commission for Caring for the Poor). The choice of names, as it further developed, was based on a specific theology. De Klerk (1976:1) indicates the thought processes in the DRC when he wrote that *hesed* (compassion), which was used in the DRC, was actually a concept associated with the covenant between God and his people, Israel. In the context of apartheid South Africa, the Afrikaner Volk was associated with Israel and the covenant, which made it a very small step, according to Naude, to a binary understanding of diaconate.

Change in the DRC came in 1986 with the adoption of a new policy document called *Kerk en Samelewing (Church and Society)*. In this document, the DRC officially stepped away from the theology of apartheid by declaring that membership of the church was open to members of all races and that church doors were open to all members of the population

2 So that every person can hear and proclaim the great deeds of God in his/her own language, separate churches must be founded for different groups of the population (Translation by the author).

for common worship (Van der Merwe 2023:62). The synod also stated in this new document that ‘the conviction has gradually grown that a forced separation and division of peoples cannot be considered a biblical imperative. The attempt to justify such an injunction as derived from the Bible must be recognised as an error and rejected’ (Gaum 1996:19).

Additionally, the synod declared:

[The] Dutch Reformed Church is convinced that the application of apartheid as a political and social system by which human dignity is adversely affected, and whereby one particular group is detrimentally suppressed by another, cannot be accepted on Christian ethical grounds because it contravenes the very essence of neighbourly love and righteousness and inevitably the human dignity (Gaum 1996:19).

This declaration symbolically unlocked the metaphorical prison in which diaconia in the church had been confined. Crafford affirms this, noting that the DRC’s mission policy had freed itself from apartheid (Crafford 1994:124). This shift led to the adoption of a new mission policy in 1990 that emphasised the unity of different churches (Crafford 1994:125).

The next significant step occurred when two commissions³ of the General Synod of the DRC tabled a proposal at the General Synod of 1994 regarding inter-church collaboration and the diaconate across church boundaries (NGKSA 1994:214). This initiated a new debate on missions in the DRC, rendering the binary definition of missions impossible (NGKSA 2002:230).

A report tabled in 2002 emphasised that the distinction between mission and the ministry of compassion was not only pragmatic but also contrary to the church’s calling to engage in the service of God in the world. This perspective was shared by the Algemene Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid (AKDB), and in 2004, the two commissions reported to the synod that they had met together, presenting a combined report under the title: ‘Diensgetuienis’ (Service Witness). The outcome of this combined report was the establishment of the Verenigde Diensgroep vir Diens en Getuienis (Combined Service Group for Service and Witness) in

3 These commissions, the Algemene Kommissie vir Sending en Evangelisasie (AKSE) and the Algemene Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid (AKDB), het ‘n aanbeveling oor die onderskeid tussen ‘interkerklike hulpverlening’ en ‘diakonaat oor kerkgrense heen’ aan die Algemene Sinode voorgelê.

2006. This development brought an end to the superficial binary division (Naude) within the DRC (Van der Merwe 2023:4).

From 2007, discussions continued and culminated in a new definition for missional diaconate formulated by Dr Wille van der Merwe. It read as follows: ‘Die missionale diakonaat is gerig op die herstel van God se heerskappy in die wêreld. Deur missionale diakonaat is die kerk in verskillende gestaltes, as dienskneg en deelnemer aan God se sending, betrokke by die voorkoming en bestryding van die lyding en maatskaplike nood van individue, groepe en gemeenskappe, asook die bevordering van regverdigde verhouding binne die kerk en samelewing’ (Van der Merwe 2023:214).

It falls outside the scope of this chapter to discuss further developments in detail, but one important development cannot be ignored. The discussion in the DRC led to a document titled ‘Raamwerkdokument oor die missionale aard en roeping van die NG Kerk’, which was accepted by the General Synod of the DRC in 2013. In the document, it was stated that this is a document which expresses the faith-discerning processes that have, over the past decade, focused attention on the essence and nature of the church and its witness in the world (NGKSA 2013:8). Van der Merwe emphasises the importance of this document by stating that it became a basis for the theology on which a new ecclesiology has since been developed in the DRC. Although this document was accepted by the General Synod, introducing a proverbial escape from the prison of the theology of apartheid and the old mission policy of the church, proof of this new direction’s acceptability in congregations depended on whether congregants embraced this new theology. The question remains: where can proof be found? I believe the process of accepting – or not – the Confession of Belhar in the DRC serves as a clear indicator.

The non-acceptance of the Confession of Belhar: A serious breakdown instead of a breakthrough

The acceptance of the Confession of Belhar as a confession in the DRC has a long history.⁴ It is not within the scope of this chapter to discuss that history or the technical process followed to incorporate the Confession of Belhar into the confessional basis of the DRC.⁵ What is important is to

4 See NGKSA (2015a:436).

5 See NGKSA (2015b:2–39).

examine the outcome of the process in which members of the church had the opportunity to vote for or against the acceptance, specifically focusing on the reasons why the confession was not accepted. To understand these reasons, I will provide an overview of the outcome: The result was as follows:

↓ **TABLE 1:** Outcome of Belhar

Synod	Date	Votes for Art 1	Votes against Art 1	⅔?
Wes- en Suid-Kaapland	6 May 2015	401 (73,3%)	144 (26,3%)	Yes
Oos-Kaapland	26 Nov 2014	156 (70%)	65 (30%)	Yes
Noord-Kaapland	9 March 2015	57 (33,9%)	111 (66,1%)	No
KwaZulu-Natal	26 Aug 2015	64 (52%)	58 (48%)	No
Vrystaat	17 March 2015	109 (32%)	240 (68%)	No
Wes-Transvaal	7 Mei 2015	116 (42,6%)	155 (57,4%)	No
Noordelike Sinode	19 Jun 2015	142 (49%)	150 (51%)	No
Hoëveld	18 Apr 2015	138 (50,9%)	133 (49,1%)	No
Oostelike Sinode	21 Okt 2015	169 (73,2%)	62 (26,8%)	Yes
Namibië	21 Feb 2015	57 (58%)	40 (42%)	No
Total		1409 (54,9%)	1158 (45,1%)	No ⁶

It is clear from the outcome of the voting process that the required 2/3 majority was achieved in only three of the 10 synods of the Church. Although 1,409 congregations voted in favour, 1,158 voted against. While the overall outcome might not seem particularly gloomy – since the majority decided in favour – the implications of the proposal paint a much darker picture. The proposal was framed in such a way that the decision was not only to accept the confession of Belhar but also to accommodate those within the Church who did not wish to accept it. It read as follows:

‘Kerkorde Artikel 1

1 Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk is gegrond op die Bybel as die heilige en onfeilbare Woord van God.

2.1 Die leer wat die Kerk in ooreenstemming met die Woord van God bely, word verwoord in

6 Article 44.1 of the Church order of the DRC reads as follows: Amendment of the Confession is only possible after it has been approved with a two-thirds majority by each synod and two-thirds of all the church councils, each supporting it with a two-thirds majority (NGKSA 2019:21).

- 2.1.1 die ekumeniese belydenisse, naamlik die Apostoliese Geloofsbelydenis, die Geloofsbelydenis van Nicea en die Geloofsbelydenis van Athanasius; en
- 2.1.2 die Drie Formuliere van Eenheid, naamlik die Nederlandse Geloofsbelydenis, die Heidelbergse Kategismus en die Dordtse Leerreëls.
- 2.2 Die Belydenis van Belhar is deel van die belydenisgrondslag van die Kerk, op so 'n wyse dat daar ruimte is vir lidmate, ampsdraers en vergaderinge wat dit as in ooreenstemming met die Woord van God bely, sowel as vir lidmate, ampsdraers en vergaderinge wat dit nie as 'n belydenisskrif onderskryf nie.
- 3 Die Kerk aanvaar dat haar roeping om haar geloof te bely, altyd geld en dat 'n uitbreiding van haar belydenisgrondslag sonder dwang geskied' (NGKSA 2015b:3).

The fact that not two-thirds of the congregations supported the proposal, even with the 'cop-out' clause, is important for this chapter. Adding the reasons given by congregations for not accepting the confession shows that the ghost of apartheid is not only reappearing but also alive and well.

The most notable reasons given for not voting in favour of Belhar are the following:

- 1 Many people don't trust the leadership of the church and feel that leaders are not always honest. There is an outspoken mistrust in the leadership of the church – and this has been ongoing since the adoption of Church and Society. Whether we want to acknowledge it or not: Synod creates suspicion.
- 3 There is an intense negative experience and even anger about church communication regarding the declaration of church leaders in the media.
- 7 Many members of the church have misconceptions about the Confession of Belhar. There is ignorance. Some members don't trust the origin of the confession. They see Belhar as a political document while the church is called to keep itself busy with spiritual issues.
- 8 There is still objection from some members against the theological content of the confession. Ministers who support this objection transfer that to their congregants.
- 9 Belhar carries a lot of emotional baggage (for example, the 1986 experiences, Dr Allan Boesak, etc.). The background of Belhar makes it unacceptable to many members of the church.

- 10 Members are against diversity.
- 20 There are still members of the DRC who don't want to acknowledge that apartheid brought the gospel of love, justice, and reconciliation into dispute and that the acceptance of Belhar could be a final break with that history.
- 23 There are many members of the church who see Belhar as a threat within the economic and political context of the country.

(NGKSA 2015b:12–13).⁷

Just by reading through the reasons – though I by no means claim that this is a bulletproof analysis – the following points become noticeable:

- 7 Baie mense vertrou nie die leierskap van die kerk nie en voel dat die leiers nie altyd eerlik is nie. Daar is sonder twyfel 'n uitgesproke wantroue in die kerkleiding – en dit kom al sedert die aanvaarding van Kerk en Samelewing. Of ons dit wil weet of nie: 'sinode' is 'n woord wat agterdog wek.
- 3 'n Intense negatiewe belewenis van kerklike kommunikasie: uitsprake deur kerkleiers soos weergegee in die media; woede oor 'eensydige propaganda' (so sien talle dit) in die spesiale uitgawe van Kerkbode (dis ongelukkig ook versterk deur uitlatings deur die redakteur); uitsprake deur bv Mary Anne Plaatjies van Huffel; ens.
 - 4 Die gesprek van die VGKSA op die radio in die tyd van die stemming is in Wes-Transvaal negatief beleef. Lidmate het beleef dat hulle Artikel 1, Apartheid en Belhar nie los van mekaar hanteer het nie en dat daar vir hulle agendas agter die aanvaarding van 'n Artikel 1 is.
 - 7 Lidmate het wanpersepsies van die Belydenis van Belhar. Daar is onkunde. Vir sommige lidmate is die ontstaansgeskiedenis van Belhar verdag. Belhar is politiek en die kerk moet hom met geestelike sake besig hou.
 - 8 Daar is steeds, onder sommiges in elk geval, beswaar teen die teologiese inhoud van Belhar en predikante met sodanige mening dra hierdie standpunte duidelik oor aan die lidmate.
 - 9 Daar is steeds 'n klomp emosionele bagasie tov Belhar (bv 1986-ervarings, dr Allan Boesak, ens). Die sogenaamde "agtergrond" van Belhar stuit mense steeds op 'n emosionele vlak teen die bors.
 - 10 Baie lidmate wil nie ruimte maak vir diversiteit nie
 - 20 Daar is steeds NG Kerk-lidmate wat glad nie erken dat Apartheid op talle maniere die evangelie van liefde en geregtigheid en versoening in gedrang gebring het nie, en dat die NG Kerk wat dit gelegitimeer het, met die aanvaarding van Belhar finaal met daardie verlede kan breek nie.
 - 23 Polities en ekonomies was dit 'n baie slegte tyd te midde van al die slegte goed wat gebeur en waarvan ons elke dag lees: eiendomsreg, korrupsie, eise, wanbestuur, gebrekkige dienslewering, misdad, plaasaanvalle en -moorde, ens ... daar was beslis lidmate (die omvang daarvan kan seker nie bepaal word nie) wat in Artikel 1 'n bedreiging gesien het (NGKSA 2015b:12–13).

- The fact that the process was viewed in the light of *Kerk en Samelwing* (1986) reopened old wounds.
- The accusation against church leaders of propaganda – a term that is politically charged and foreign to the concept of being church.
- The context of Belhar (SA 1982–1990) provided an important political framework for the confession.
- Members are opposed to diversity within the church.
- There are still members of the church who refuse to acknowledge that apartheid and the consequences of that policy were sinful and evil.
- The socio-political and economic situation in other countries played an important part.

Kruger remarks on the non-acceptance of the Confession as follows: Although there are divisions on this matter, the non-acceptance of the Belhar Confession in 2015 speaks volumes about the experiences of the DRC's members at the social grassroots level (Kruger & Van der Merve 2017:2).

When the events in Carolina are viewed through this lens, along with the DRC's support for apartheid and its mission policy, it becomes clear that although the Church has formally bid farewell to apartheid and is pursuing a new direction regarding diaconia, the ghost of apartheid is not only reappearing but is also alive and well in the minds and hearts of many members of the DRC.

What should represent a significant breakthrough in diaconia within the DRC, following the adoption of new policies, may still indicate a serious breakdown at the grassroots level in congregations. The danger of this is that the Church could once again become a space where white Afrikaners gather to foster neo-Afrikaner nationalism.

Is the ghost re-emerging? – Neo-Afrikaner nationalism

Kruger refers to this important fact when he says: 'Members of the DR Church feel unsettled by social change, and if they do not find personal identity in new social discourses, they resist it' (Kruger & Van der Merwe 2017:2). This is also confirmed by De Klerk and Van Helden (2011:8), who remark that many Afrikaners feel that the social set-up of late, with the government's system of affirmative action, black empowerment regulations, and new racial discrimination – which worsen relationships – has marginalised them. They do not have much choice but to accept these matters and are therefore negative and critical towards the government and the social situation in South Africa. The year 1994, with its radical

transformations, also brought anomie to the DRC, in the sense that the Church lost its credibility and prophetic role in the country. The fact that the DRC lost its prominent and privileged position in South African society and its ability to dictate public morals (Du Toit et al. 2002:3) only contributed to the awareness of anomie (Kruger & Van der Merwe 2017:3).

In an extensive study conducted by Prof C. van der Westhuizen, the aforementioned fear is clear and present. She writes: After South Africa's democratic transition, with the apartheid imaginary in tatters, whiteness, particularly its Afrikaner permutation, is delegitimised, as 'Afrikaners cannot escape the fact that the system was put in place in their name' (Steyn 2003:222). Afrikaner nationalism is a discourse in disarray, catapulting 'the Afrikaner' into states of confusion and defence (Steyn 2003 2004; Van der Westhuizen 2007; Verwey & Quayle 2012; Vestergaard 2001). She then continues: 'In a global context of a generalised upheaval in identity, the destabilisation of identities after apartheid provokes pushback, in this case by the formerly hegemonic identity of apartheid, "the Afrikaner"'. Although Afrikaner nationalism's territorial claims to a nation-state were defeated, neo-nationalist remnants seek to reclaim a purchase on white Afrikaans identities, albeit in shrunken territories' (Van der Westhuizen 2016:8). One of these territories can be found in local congregations of the DRC, which provide a safe space for neo-Afrikaner nationalism.

If what happened in Carolina is interpreted in light of the above, the ghost of apartheid is looking over the shoulder of the church.

Conclusion: Where to now?

What happened with the unveiling of the monument in Carolina is, of course, not happening everywhere in the DRC. There are many 'good' stories where the church plays an important role in transforming communities. What it represents is a symbolic proof of what many members of the church feel and believe. When we take into account the journey of the church with apartheid, as well as the current socio-economic and political context of many church members, it may occur that congregations choose to revert to what was. This is the pushback to which van der Westhuizen refers. To prevent this and to make room for the proverbial ghost of apartheid, the DRC will need to involve congregations in diaconia, which aligns with the policy of the church.

Kruger gives the following important direction:

- Show critical solidarity with its members without becoming a sympathiser of the cause of the Afrikaner exclusively.

- Expel its members' experiences of anomy and collective anxiety amidst challenging political and economic times.
- Create awareness amongst its members to have an integrated and sensitive presence through their charitableness and witnessing, although they are increasingly focused on their private spheres.
- Restore its credibility as an institution by advocating moral values in a world where its impact has been decreasing.
- Advance collective systems of faith and involvement amongst members whose participation has become erratic because of privatisation and some degree of alienation.
- Preserve its historical identity despite growing religious pluralism and deconfessionalisation in its midst.
- Engage in meaningful ecumenical relations to contribute to addressing public issues.
- Assist its theological enterprises to be relevant to the church and society at large (Kruger & Van der Merwe 2017:9).

If the DRC succeeds in the above, the ghost of apartheid will disappear forever.

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SECTION B

DIACONIA:
A CHALLENGE

CHAPTER 4

Dabar as Word and Deed: Exploring the Relation Between Helping Those in Need and Winning People for Christ

Attie van Niekerk

Introduction

Thirty years ago, in 1994, three lecturers of Missiology at the University of Pretoria and the University of South Africa (Kritzinger, Meiring and Saayman) published a book, *On Being Witnesses*. The book begins with the threefold goal of mission, as formulated by Gysbertius Voetius in the 17th century. In 1991, David J. Bosch regarded this formulation as 'still unparalleled'. Voetius stated that 'the immediate aim of mission was the conversion of 'Gentiles'; this immediate aim was subordinate to the second goal, the planting of the church; and the ultimate goal, to which both these were subordinate, was the glory and manifestation of God's divine grace' (Kritzinger et al. 1994:1)

These authors do not interpret these goals in a narrow sense. The glory and manifestation of divine grace imply socio-political action. For example: 'The followers of Jesus Christ, who live out of this magnificent grace, can never acquiesce in any passive acceptance of injustice and oppression, or be satisfied merely to provide charity to the victims' (Kritzinger et al. 1994:3). Such actions are a secondary event, based on the character or identity of the believer. In this chapter, I endeavour to reflect further on this topic.

Since 1994, I have been working for the Nova Institute, a not-for-profit NGO. This followed 16 years of work in the church, during which the missionary movement of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (DRCSA), to which I belonged, phased out. Nova works with low-income

households and communities to find solutions for everyday problems such as energy poverty, air pollution, food security, sanitation, and caring for vulnerable children. It is not an explicitly Christian organisation, but five of us, out of about 24 staff members, are former students of this faculty, and many of the others are tentmaking ministers in various denominations. We have received support from the DRCSA and the Protestant Church of the Netherlands for many years, but the vast majority of our projects are secular in nature and are carried out in collaboration with industries and the government. The heading of this chapter relates to the question: What is the relation between our work at Nova and our work in the church?

Views from the theological literature

H. Berkhof

Berkhof (1973:435–436) asserts that mission involves the church's engagement with the world, guided by the Holy Spirit as the active presence of God and grounded in the work of Jesus Christ. He identifies four dimensions of mission: prayer for the world; witness to the world, primarily through words; providing help to those in need; and prophecy, which extends beyond addressing individuals to challenging larger structures, such as through social criticism and resistance against the forces that perpetuate need and suffering.

The salvation that God provides is comprehensive; it heals both the guilt and the need of the world. Assistance to those in need is expressed through both the institutional diaconal work of the church and the more spontaneous, voluntary diaconal efforts of church members (Berkhof 1973:387–391).

The Hebrew word '*dabar*' means both word and deed. In the life of Jesus, words, deeds, and relations with people – specifically those in need – were intertwined. However, they represent two distinct aspects: the word of witness seeks to win people for Christ, while the deed does not have this aim. Instead, it is focused on the needs of the helpless and serves as a witness to the love of Christ (Berkhof 1973:436). In the broader context of the work of the Kingdom, there is a mutual interaction: preaching the Word of God includes offering consolation to those in need and resisting injustice. Additionally, in the interaction with those in need, the forgiveness of God must eventually be communicated (Berkhof 1973:391).

Reflection

This is a nice pragmatic approach, but given Berkhof's remark that the Hebrew word *dabar* means both word and deed, can we truly separate need and guilt in this way? To view the poor as helpless, pure victims who bear no responsibility and therefore no guilt does not help them overcome their poverty. Steve Biko emphasised the dignity of the black masses, which restores self-respect and initiative. In their book *When Helping Hurts*, Corbett and Fikkert (2012) show that poverty can only be overcome if the poor are enabled to take responsibility for themselves. This requires, among other things, a restoration of the spiritual and mental health of the poor.

How this relation between word and deed must play out in practice will be considered further below.

David Bosch

In his book *Transforming Mission*, Bosch discusses several elements of an emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm. We will consider a few of these themes below.

Mission as missio Dei (Bosch 1994:389–393)

Since the 1930s, under the influence of Karl Barth, mission has increasingly been understood as primarily the work of God, rather than merely as something that the church does. Some interpret this in such a way that activities not involving the church or Christ can be seen as the work of God in the world, through His Spirit. Bosch does not agree with this radical interpretation but maintains the concept of *missio Dei*, concluding: 'It is inconceivable that we could again revert to a narrow, ecclesiocentric view of mission'.

Bosch does not clearly specify how the *missio Dei* should be understood in practice. It seems to open the way for an organisation such as Nova, which is not a direct church or even explicitly Christian organisation, to play a role in the *missio Dei*. However, how does that relate to calling people to believe in and follow Jesus Christ?

Mission as mediating salvation (Bosch 1994:393–400)

The understanding of salvation has shifted from narrower views, such as the salvation of an individual's soul for heaven after death, to more comprehensive perspectives. These include the salvation of the whole person – encompassing deliverance from suffering and hunger, liberation from oppression – and the restoration of all creation (Wright 2010:17–26).

At the 1973 Bangkok conference of the WCC, there was a tendency to define salvation exclusively in this-worldly terms. This paradigm was rooted in the optimistic belief that modern development could independently resolve the world's problems without reliance on Jesus Christ. However, this optimism proved unsustainable in the face of global crises, such as the ecological crisis, the growing disparity between rich and poor, and persistent wars in various regions (Bosch 1994: 96-398).

Bosch concludes that while social distress has never been as widespread as it is today, Christians are uniquely positioned to address it. However, he emphasises that the church cannot replace salvation in Christ with modern development; personal repentance and a commitment of faith remain the essential path to salvation. Human self-redemption is an illusion. However, we cannot cling to a narrow view of salvation that overlooks the suffering of the world, especially when we are in a position to make a difference. Our actions are driven by the hope that Christ will ultimately redeem all of creation and by the conviction that his Kingdom is both a present reality and a tangible possibility (Bosch 1994: 399-400).

Mission as evangelism

Bosch (1994:416) highlights that the goal of evangelism is to inspire an individual response to follow Jesus, leading to conversion: 'Only people can be addressed and only people can respond'. He further underscores the necessity of both word and deed in evangelism, stating: 'In a society marked by relativism and agnosticism it is necessary to name the Name of the One in whom we believe'. However, he aligns closely with Berkhof, asserting: 'The deed without the word is dumb; the word without the deed is empty'. Bosch insists that mere deeds are insufficient, noting that 'their lives are not sufficiently transparent for others to be able to recognize whence that hope comes'.

Mission as contextualisation

Contextualisation emphasises that mission begins not with words, but with action. Bosch (1994:423–424) cites Barth, who in 1933 stated that the theologian cannot be like a 'lonely bird on the rooftop', observing

the world's agony from a detached position. Instead, the theologian must engage directly with people in their daily lives. Theology, Barth argued, must sustain a dialectical relationship with the events and realities of its own context.

Mission as ministry by the whole people of God

This is an interesting development. Bosch (1994:467–468) describes the movement away from ministry as the monopoly of ordained individuals to ministry as the responsibility of the whole people of God as one of the most dramatic shifts taking place in the church today. He argues that Jesus chose his disciples not from the Jewish priestly class but from fisherfolk, tax collectors, and the like. The Jesus movement began as a movement within Judaism, not as a new religion. The terminology used for this movement, for example, in reference to its gatherings and officials, was taken not from either Jewish or Greek religious culture but from the secular sphere. It was only by the 80s of the first century A.D. that it became clear that Christianity could not be contained within Judaism any longer. The church gradually took on the character of a new religion in which the clergy played a leading role.

The ministry by the whole people of God is a fundamental movement away from the paradigm that has dominated since the Enlightenment, which holds that the private sphere of life, including the church, must be separated from the public sphere.

In this process, the laity must avoid becoming 'mini-pastors'. Bosch (1994:473) prefers the term *service* over *ministry*, as it carries less of a 'churchy' connotation. The service of the laity is expressed through their participation in the ongoing life of the Christian community – in shops, villages, farms, cities, classrooms, homes, law offices, counselling, politics, statecraft, and recreation (quoting Burrows). The specific form this service takes must be relevant and meaningful within the given context.

Mission as action in hope

This section deals with eschatology. There have been many permutations of eschatology within the Christian church, but the question that concerns us here is the meaning of secular history and its relation to salvation history. One extreme perspective posits that secular history has no meaning and that we must only await the perfect salvation, the new heaven and the new earth, which God will provide at the end (Bosch 1994:504–506). The other extreme asserts that secular history is salvation history, evolving towards a state of perfection and the regaining

of the lost paradise through human effort (Bosch 1994:506-507). As one might expect, Bosch (1994: 507-510) seeks to maintain a creative tension between the two views: secular history is not empty or meaningless, as Jesus announced the Kingdom of God as a present reality in this world and its history. Therefore, Christians must engage with worldly matters, resist destructive forces, transform structures, and heal suffering and conflict. They serve as the yeast of the Kingdom, bringing light and hope into darkness. These actions are performed in hope, meaning they are anticipatory of the eventual salvation that will not be achieved through human effort, but will be the work of God. The Kingdom is already transforming secular history, in both micro- and macro-structures, but it is not yet fully realised and cannot be built from below.

Barth (1960:154) points out that: '[T]he object of the promise and the hope in which the Christian community has its eternal goal consists [...] not in an eternal Church, but in the polis built by God and coming down from heaven to earth, and the nations shall walk in the light of it [...]'].

We cannot build the New Jerusalem; it is established by God and comes down from heaven to earth – yet the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it (Rev 21:24). This city will not endure on the ruins of the annihilated glory of the peoples and kings of this earth, but rather the entirety of their earthly glory will be brought into it as a supplementary tribute (Barth 1960:124; cf. Wright 2010:227–228).

Reflection

The theological views we have considered so far illustrate that both evangelism and diaconics are important, though the relationship between them is not straightforward. The church has focused extensively on the preaching of the gospel, but less so on the actions that should accompany our words.

Bosch (1994:519) references Van der Aalst, who noted that 'there have been countless councils on right believing, yet no council has ever been called to work out the implications of the greatest commandment – to love one another'.

Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder

In their book, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, Bevans and Schroeder (2009) provide an overview of the diverse ways in which the Christian church and faith have been expressed since the time of the New Testament.

In their last chapter, 'Mission as prophetic dialogue', Bevans and Schroeder (2009) endeavour to synthesise these traditions into a cohesive framework. Like Bosch, they distinguish between various aspects encompassed by the concept of mission, allowing for different emphases and roles while striving to maintain an encompassing whole — 'a single but complex reality' (2009:351).

We will reflect on a few of these aspects.

Witness and proclamation as prophetic dialogue

Witness here refers to what is sometimes called 'lifestyle evangelism'. It pertains to the actions of the church and its members and plays a central role in Bevans and Schroeder's (2009: 352) missiology, as it relates to the authenticity of the Christian message: 'Perhaps the church's greatest problem today is that its witness does not measure up to its preaching; it does not always "practice what it preaches".'

In the first centuries after Christ, the Christian community had a strong witness: they 'risked their lives to nurse people during devastating plagues; their attitudes towards women and children were especially appealing to women; their strict morality was an inspiration in what had become a very unstable and corrupt world' (Bevans and Schroeder 2009: 354). The meaning of their faith for their own context was clear.

Bevans and Schroeder (2009: 353, 383) state: 'First of all, and perhaps most basic, witness is about individuals of faith living their lives in the light of that faith'. This includes being involved in the local community and engaging with people of other faiths, which can be seen as a fundamental kind of 'dialogue of life'. Sometimes, this is the only way in which mission can be accomplished.

Members of movements such as The Gospel and Our Culture Network speak of a 'missional church' that draws people not so much by explicit words as by lived Christian authenticity. They refer to a number of 'practices' that need to be 'cultivated', such as the worthy celebration of the sacraments, reconciliation, hospitality, and community decision by discernment. Here, life and witness coincide: 'authentic witness is a question of authentic community' (Bevans & Schroeder 2009:355). One can assume that 'community' in this context refers to the church.

Witness prepares the way for, and underpins, proclamation, which is the direct verbal communication of the gospel of Jesus. It is 'the permanent priority of mission ... The explicit proclamation of the person and message of Jesus Christ, or at least the burning intention of doing so, is what ultimately makes mission mission ... without the practice or

intention of introducing others into a relation with God through and in Jesus, the church's missionary activity is not participation in God's activity' (Bevans & Schroeder 2009:358).

That having been said, Bevans and Schroeder emphasise that proclamation must be conducted properly. They refer to several key considerations.

Proclamation must occur within a context of respectful dialogue, 'in order to respond to the requirements of those to be evangelised and to enable them to interiorise the message received' (Bevans & Schroeder 2009:358). Dialogue is an effort to understand both the context and the meaning of our faith within that context. It fosters a relationship of trust with the people we wish to reach. As they note, '[T]he proclamation of the gospel should most often, if not always, be an answer to a question'. They reference 1 Peter 3:15: 'Should anyone ask you the reason for this hope of yours, be ever ready to reply, but speak gently and respectfully' (2009:360).

Lastly, proclamation must take the context into account (Bevans & Schroeder 2009:361). Over the centuries, the church has emphasised different aspects of the gospel in various eras, and the same applies to the specific context of an individual or a local community. We must be able to discern what is best suited to that particular context (Phil 1:10).

Bevans and Schroeder (2009:359–360) quote Bosch on the mutuality of word and deed: 'The deed without the word is dumb; the word without the deed is empty'. They contend that authentic witness holds a certain priority over proclamation, not only temporally but also missiologically. Due to the 'malpractice' by the church's missionaries in the past, the authenticity of Christian practice is a *sine qua non* for proclaiming the gospel.

Reflection

Newbigin (1969:94–95) also stated that proclamation must take place within a given context.

Secondly, Bevans and Schroeder's emphasis on authentic witness – asserting that it has a certain priority over proclamation 'because of so much "malpractice" by the church's missionaries in the past' – needs consideration.

We have individuals in our communities who have had unpleasant experiences with the church, often involving a church minister, and consequently have written off the church, and sometimes even its message. It is not always solely the church's fault; these individuals were sometimes part of the problem. Be that as it may, words alone have little effect on

such individuals. They may merely interpret messages according to the understanding of the gospel that they already hold in their minds.

Apart from the negative experiences in the past, South Africa is hardly a secular country. There are many churches and numerous ‘prophets’ in all cultural contexts, which brings with it a devaluation of religious language and cynicism regarding church initiatives to evangelise. Proclamation easily gets lost in this cacophony of views, where all try to market themselves. In such a context, authentic witness can hopefully help to build trust in the church and its message.

Moreover, in the present era there has been a strong devaluation of the word. In 2016, Dictionary.com chose ‘post-truth’ as their word of the year; in 2017, it was ‘fake news’, and in 2018, it was ‘misinformation’.¹ In such a context, honest deeds, service, can help to demonstrate the authenticity of the gospel message.

According to Christopher Wright, God intended to reach the nations in the Old Testament by illustrating through the life of Israel what it means to be a community marked by righteousness, justice, and good relations. This definition can also encompass the element of aesthetics, representing a good life – a life worth living. It must be an attractive life, one that earns the respect of those who observe it. In a world of oppression and injustice, such a lifestyle should draw the nations to God. This now applies to the church as the people of God. Wright (2010:93-94) emphasises: ‘The ethical quality of life of the people of God is the vital link between their calling and their mission. God’s intention to bless the nations is inseparable from God’s ethical demand on the people he has created to be the agent of that blessing. There is no biblical mission without biblical ethics’.

This was effectively realised in the church of the early centuries after Christ (see above).

Justice, peace and the integrity of creation as prophetic dialogue

In this section, a lot of attention is given to ‘speaking’. The section on justice (Bevans & Schroeder 2010:369–373) discusses three aspects: speaking to and for the poor, empowering the poor to speak for themselves, and demonstrating solidarity with the poor. The latter includes sharing the lifestyle of the poor as much as possible in particular circumstances. ‘Christians are called to a ‘simple lifestyle’, that includes: avoiding empty

1 <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2018/misinformation-is-dictionary-coms-word-of-the-year/>

consumerism, cultivating a spirituality of patience, for example, while waiting in line', finding joy in simple things, etc. Solidarity encompasses 'an analysis with the poor of their poverty or exclusion and the formulation of plans of action to resist or overcome those causes'. Those who have opted for solidarity must not take the lead in these actions but must encourage the disadvantaged to take the lead.

In the section on the integrity of creation (Bevans & Schroeder 2010:375–378), it is emphasised that the church is called to repentance and a new vision for ecological responsibility. Repentance is not about feeling bad, but about thinking differently. They make a strong statement: salvation has always been understood in terms of anthropology, with the human person at the centre: 'But again, the ecological revolution has 'de-centred' the human person in philosophical, political and theological thought [...] God's entire creation, not the human person, is the measure of all things'.

There is a reference to 'one of the few sustained reflections on mission and the integrity of creation' by Andrew Kirk. He offers several suggestions on how the church might live out its mission in this respect, such as living in ways that persuade others to adopt a lifestyle that uses fewer of the world's resources, recycling, driving automobiles less, using fuel-efficient vehicles, remodelling buildings to be ecologically sound, promoting legislation that enhances environmental sustainability, supporting organic farming, and backing any initiatives to develop and preserve wildlife areas.

These guidelines are basic, but the Anthropocene confronts us with questions that still require years of involvement with and reflection on how a new relationship with creation can be expressed. This reminds us of Van der Aalst's earlier statement that 'there have been countless councils on right believing, yet no council has ever been called to work out the implications of the greatest commandment – to love one another'.

Reflection

In the overviews so far, the basic approach has been to examine different aspects of mission and diaconia, and to ask what the relationship between them is. Is there not an approach in which word and deed are inherently part of one process?

Berkhof's remark that the Hebrew word '*dabar*' means both word and deed resonates well with the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt's view of truth. According to Vanneste (2023:36), Arendt struggled with two types of knowledge: scientific knowledge and the experience of everyday life. The classical philosophical tradition keeps truth, *aletheia* in Greek, and the

lifeworld of everyday life apart. In this tradition, truth has its own terrain; one must make an effort to attain it, and above all, one must abstract from it – dealing with ideas rather than events. Facts can be captured once and for all through logical or mathematical reasoning. This approach has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy, particularly in the philosophy of Plato (Vanneste 2023:36-37). Arendt, on the other hand, considered life experience as a different kind of knowledge in which truth relates to meaning, emerging from talking, listening, and discussing (Vanneste 2023:39). Thus, she connects with the Jewish ‘*emeth*’, which associates truth with faithfulness and reliability. It pertains to relationships and working together in trust. It is something upon which one can rely in daily life. Classical truth, *aletheia*, can be grasped by an individual, whereas for *emeth*, one needs a relationship with others. The power of a reliable promise serves to accommodate the unpredictability of action (Vanneste 2023:36). This approach does not deny the facts of scientific knowledge but situates these facts in the context of life.

It seems that the church has often perceived the truth of the gospel more in terms of *aletheia* than in terms of *emeth*.

A few options are considered below: Newbigin’s view of conversion; Bonhoeffer’s perspective on religionless Christianity; the concept of relationships; N.T. Wright’s understanding of the cross as the decisive victory over the powers that shape this world; and Luc Kabongo’s views on empowering the poor.

Leslie Newbigin

Newbigin (1969:94–95) objects to the popular notion that conversion to Christ, as a purely religious phenomenon separated from its sociological context, will more or less automatically find expression in an ethical quality of life. This is supposed to happen almost instinctively, as argued even by the esteemed theologian Van Niftrik (1971:118).

Newbigin (1969:94–95) describes this as ‘[...] the wrong conception of conversion as a purely religious phenomenon separated from its sociological context’ (sociological context can be seen as something similar to lifeworld as understood by Arendt). Many churches have preached such a conversion for decades, and even today, the resultant ethical quality of life is often limited to a few personal issues, and often not even convincingly.

Newbigin refers to the message of Moses and Aaron to the people of Israel in the house of bondage. Moses and Aaron told the elders of Israel

that God had seen their plight and was ready to lead them out of the house of slavery: '[...] and the people believed [...] and bowed their heads and worshipped' (Ex 4:30–31). From that moment onwards, the people were facing the other way; turning towards God inherently meant turning away from slavery and preparing to journey towards freedom. They could not believe Moses and simultaneously remain in Egypt, nor could they, in a separate act, decide to leave Egypt. They believed in a message that related to certain drastic actions in that context. The message was a truth, a promise, that they could rely on and entrust their whole lives to.

When faith is separated from its context, conversion becomes an inner, privatised matter that does not alter the person's relationship to their surroundings: life continues pretty much as before in the major areas of the person's life. What is needed is a conversion that is inseparable from its sociological context, a dedication to seeking a different world.

Newbigin (1969:47) maintains that the meaning of Christ is realised in the relations and events of daily life rather than in a religious experience. Furthermore, 'The new thing which Jesus announced, the kingdom of God as present reality, was to be grasped through a deeper understanding of ordinary human experience'.

In this context, word and deed cannot be separated; they are intrinsically unified in the ongoing process of salvation – liberating humanity from the bondage in which it finds itself, a work that unfolds over time.

D. Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer's reflections on a 'religionless' interpretation of Christ had a profound influence on me, particularly during my student years and in my first congregation. His ideas compel us to ask: *What does our faith in Christ mean for how we engage with the challenges of everyday life?* The following discussion of Bonhoeffer's thought offers a clear articulation of what I seek to express.

For Bonhoeffer, a non-religious interpretation calls individuals to participate in the suffering of God in his involvement with the world, 'not in the first place thinking about one's own needs, problems, sins and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ, into the messianic event'. A non-religious interpretation is not merely a hermeneutical task; it involves the whole existence of the church itself. It is an interpretation that is not concerned with religion but with life:

The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. ... It would be a great mistake to understand Bonhoeffer as abolishing the worshipping church and replacing service and sacrament by acts of charity ... The church must not throw away its great terms "creation", "fall", "atonement", "repentance", "last things", and so on. But if it cannot relate them to the secularised world in such a way that their essence in worldly life can immediately be seen, then the church had better keep silent (Paulose 2009).

Bonhoeffer's earlier writings indicate his growing unease toward religion. For example, in some of his writings, he rejected religion as a purely spiritual, inner, pious feeling that offered 'emotional uplift' and was based on human needs and desires.

In Bonhoeffer's terminology, how can we relate the 'great terms' of the church to the everyday world of church members 'in such a way that their essence in worldly life can immediately be seen?'

This is not done only by theologians; it should be undertaken by all Christians in their diverse contexts. For example, in the 20th century, poets like T.S. Eliot and especially W.H. Auden integrated the Christian faith with secular modern thought into a new synthesis.

... in Auden we see modern man exposed to the risks and costs of our social dilemmas on all fronts ... He (Auden) is initiated into our intellectual as well as our social dilemmas. He has fought through all our issues and wrestled with our distempers ... all these dilemmas are taken up and canvassed in his poems directly ... His poetry knows how to make room for the outlook of Montaigne as well as Pascal, for Nietzsche as well as Kierkegaard, for Marx and Freud as well as for Dante. Auden represents the new Christian synthesis in the making. He starts with the disarray and the sense of meaninglessness of the time but gives it a Christian construction (Wilder 1975:303-309).

N.T. Wright

In his book *The Day the Revolution Began*, N.T. Wright painstakingly investigates the New Testament and shows a new way in which the cross of Jesus must be understood. In short, he demonstrates that Jesus fulfilled God's covenant with Abraham, the covenant in which God stated that

Abraham and his descendants would be the means of blessing for the world by providing a demonstration of what a public life shaped by serving God means – an alternative way of life that all nations would see as a better way of life, thus attracting them to pursue that type of existence too. Instead of fulfilling this mission, Israel followed the gods of the nations (the powers of the New Testament), resulting in their failure to present an alternative example of what life should be to the nations.

Jesus fulfilled this calling on their behalf by refusing to submit to any power other than God, his Father, the God of the covenant. By choosing to submit to God and refusing to conform to the powers of this world, he was able to demonstrate through his own life the radical alternative of a way of living that brings life. He maintained this refusal to bow before other gods until his death on the cross. Without the resurrection, this would have signified failure, but the resurrection provides a completely new perspective: Jesus was in the right and had defeated the powers of the world by not following their ways. His Kingdom is one in which the powers of the world are rendered powerless, not only by telling a different story but by living it too (Wright 2016:240–241).

In this way, Jesus broke the power of the ‘present evil age’ once and for all. The ‘powers’ that lead the world to destruction and death are robbed of their power (Wright 2016:241).

Rejecting the rule of the powers leads to suffering. Jesus was crucified, and he calls us to take up our cross and follow him. This leads to the ultimate new creation, when the present creation, groaning in travail, will be set free from the slavery of corruption and decay ‘to enjoy the freedom that comes when God’s children are glorified’ (8:23). The work of the cross is not designed to rescue humans from creation but to rescue them for creation (Wright 2016:290).

That is why N.T. Wright gave his book the title: *The Day the Revolution Began*. The cross and resurrection provide us with a new, revolutionary perspective on the world, on history, and on our own lives. Followers of Jesus should be people who do not bow to the powers that rule this world.

Writing from Scotland, Wright (2016:393–397) discusses three false deities that have wreaked havoc in the world in which we live because people have given them power by believing in them: sex, money, and power, or Aphrodite, Mammon, and Mars. People have given Aphrodite power by believing that our desires must be lived out freely, resulting in the destruction of many lives and relationships through infidelity and other forms of irresponsible behaviour, as well as the lives of vulnerable individuals who are sexually exploited on a large scale, even by clergy.

People have given Mammon power by regarding it as the ultimate good that should be pursued as a goal in itself, at all costs, leading to the belief that violence can solve our problems, thereby giving Mars power. ‘Shakespeare’s warning, “Cry Havoc! and let slip the dogs of war” comes true again and again’. Disasters such as millions of refugees and orphans, as well as countless ruined cities, are the telltale signs of an idolatry of which we should repent. Serving Mammon has resulted in relatively few people becoming extremely rich while a large number of people have become extremely poor. Giving Mammon, Mars, and Aphrodite unquestioning worship and obedience has destroyed many lives.

In our context, these powers are also misleading millions, and we can add a few local ones to the list, such as our cultural traditions, both traditional and modern, which shape our lives even when they take away our freedom and destroy our future.

T.S. Maluleke

In 1996, T.S. Maluleke criticised both black and African theologies for failing to ‘become a viable weapon of struggle in the hands of the exploited masses themselves’, asserting that at least some of these theologians ‘fail to connect meaningfully with the struggles of the poor’. He quoted Oduyoye: ‘African Christians are in the process daily of shaping a Christianity that will be at home in Africa and in which Africans will be at home’ (Maluleke 1996:11, 14, 16, 17).

In this process, being church means being involved with human need. Maluleke (2021:301) considers Northern theologies, on the whole, as ‘[...] too nice and too neat for the dirty, smelly, messy, chaotic contexts of Africa’. African, Black, and Feminist theologies engage with the African context, continuing to reflect theologically on the implications and legacies of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. These theologies walk alongside:

People who live in never-ending war situations, in states that are so weak they do not deserve the name; in situations where nothing works, from the water tap to the local police station, so that the people suffer repeated and multiple losses – loss of future, loss of community, loss of humanity, and loss of God [...] With them and on their behalf, African theologies must “wrestle with God” (Maluleke 2021:306, 308).

In these contexts, ‘there is no public/private binary to speak about’ (Maluleke 2021:307). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) would not succeed if ‘judicial reconciliation’ and personal reconciliation between individuals – those who give and receive forgiveness – are not accompanied by economic and other forms of reconciliation and restitution (Maluleke 1997:329).

African Traditional Religion (ATR) is deeply integrated into traditional African cultures. The division that modern culture makes between public life, which is secular in nature, and private life, where one can believe and act as one wishes, as long as no laws are broken, has had a strong impact on African Christianity. However, given the African tradition, it should come as no surprise that there are many efforts across the spectrum of churches in Africa to bridge this gap. Ignatius Swart refers to African Initiated Churches (AICs) that engage in local community issues such as housing, unemployment, entrepreneurship, financial empowerment, skills development, health care, rehabilitation from substance abuse, and education. This represents both development and politics from below, ‘in which religion and religious faith are not antithetical to development and progress’ (Swart 2019:80–83).

Luc Kabongo (2021) reflects on the ministry of InnerCHANGE, which proactively mobilises ordinary people in the community of poverty in Soshanguve to emerge as transformation agents who generally adhere to principles of human dignity and worth, human rights, good social values, and socio-political transformation. Scripture inspires these agents to work for the healing of both the outer and inner lives of community members by studying the history of the community, healing feelings of inferiority and naivety, networking with churches in their diversity, and promoting a can-do attitude. A comprehensive overview is provided of the various aspects of the community in which the transformation agents are actively involved.

Conclusion

In 1938, Karl Barth referred to a gap in the theology of the Reformers who led the Protestant movement 500 years ago. This gap lies in their failure to articulate the ‘inner and vital connection between the service of God [...] in the worship of the Church as such, and another form of service, which may be described as a “political” service of God’ (Barth 1960:101–102). The ‘political’ service of God pertains to human justice and life in general.

In recent decades, serious efforts have been made to bridge this gap. In some contexts, these efforts are more successful than in others. For instance, in contexts where more affluent Christians serve the poor and

destitute – such as in inner-city missions –leiturgia, koinonia, diaconia, and kerugma can be united in a practical manner. However, a congregation in a middle-class suburb may be isolated from the poor and encounter them, if at all, in situations that are far removed from the leitourgia on Sundays.

Bonhoeffer stated that if the church cannot relate the major themes of the Christian faith to the secularised world in such a way that their essence in worldly life can be immediately recognised, then the church had better remain silent (Paulose 2009). I do not believe we are very clear on the meaning of our faith within the context of poor households and communities in Africa today; however, I also do not think that we should remain silent. We should continue to seek structures and approaches that can connect the great themes of our faith to the various lifeworlds in which we live. In this respect, African theologies can play an important role.

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CHAPTER 5

A Holistic and Contextual Approach to Evangelism That Includes Diaconia as Essential to Participating in the *Missio Trinitatis Dei*

F.R.L. Coetzee

Introduction

I present this chapter from my own context and background as a white male pastor in an Afrikaans congregation of the DRC (Lux Mundi) in a privileged area of the eastern part of Pretoria. This context is still predominantly Afrikaans-speaking, amid a larger environment that is becoming multicultural and multi-religious, with increasing needs in various respects. As part of our participation in the *missio Dei*, the Lux Mundi congregation operates a community centre with a full-time social worker and two full-time staff members who manage professional services as well as various community projects that provide relief to vulnerable individuals with diverse needs. This local context exists within a broader South African landscape characterised by poverty, a significant gap between the rich and the poor, post-modernism, post-colonialism, post-post-apartheid dynamics, and an increasingly post-Christendom reality.

Problem statement

Evangelism is often narrowly understood as solely verbal witness (words). This reductionistic and dichotomous view separates word and deed, positioning evangelism on one side and diaconia, social justice, and care for creation on the other. This leads to the following research question:

‘It is necessary to rediscover evangelism from a holistic and contextual approach that includes *diaconia* as essential participation in the *missio Trinitatis Dei* as *martyria* by the entire faith community?’ In this approach, the good news of the Kingdom is embodied in the practices of a missional congregation – both collectively and individually – through faithful presence (*being*), loving service (*doing*), and words of hope (*telling*) at appropriate times and places, within their specific context.

Evangelism as only verbal witness: A reduction

Several proponents of evangelism view it as solely verbal witness. For example, Thiessen (2020:368) finds the approach of Stone (2007) regarding embodied witness for evangelism very important in our pluralistic context but identifies it as ‘incarnational witness’, which serves as a foundational guideline for ethical evangelism. Thiessen (2020:369) argues that incarnational witness is not evangelism; he states that evangelism is understood as the proclamation of the gospel. Traditionally, many Christians have understood our evangelistic task as proclamation (Flemming 2013:260). This perspective can be described as a kerugmatic reduction of evangelism. From the contexts of pastoral care and counselling, Louw (1993:41; 1997:45) warned that the various functions of the pastorate cannot be reduced to proclamation, as this would be a kerugmatic reduction of the pastorate. The same argument applies to evangelism.

With a reduction of the gospel, Guder (2000:102, 132; cf. Gibbs 2013:11) says that it is not that the gospel is not heard, but that what remains is too little or too small (cf. also Knoetze 2022:294). The radical, larger, cosmic, transforming and revolutionary power of God’s love gets reduce to an individualised and privatised reduction of it (cf. Guder 2000:189–190; cf. also Coetzee 2022:161–162).

De Beer (2024:177) made an important point: ‘The reduced understanding of the good news of euangelizomai to individualized, spiritualized, and abstract terms, allowing the dictates of a colonized faith to reign supreme over the costly grace of Christ’. For De Beer, this is a deeply theologically rooted problem, not merely a pragmatic challenge. Wallis (1976:9-10; cf. De Beer 2024:178) argues that the consequence of this tragic reduction of the good news is evangelism without the gospel.

Evangelism, with its traditional revivalist emphasis on preaching to strangers or solely verbal proclamation, leads many ordinary Christians to experience it as quite distant from their daily lives, causing them to

believe that evangelism is not for them (Paas 2024:270). An emphasis on proclaiming the gospel at the expense of living it reduces the view of mission to a narrow stream that seldom widens beyond verbal evangelistic witness (cf. Flemming 2013:259). Flemming (2013:260) argues that the perspective that the good news cannot be conveyed without words – and that evangelism is solely verbal – separates the church’s testimony into words and life in a manner that is biblically untenable.

Words alone represent a disembodied form of witness. These disembodied forms of evangelism have ‘turned the church into an impotent body, that cannot transform social structures, listen deeply to the earth, and care well for the wounded’ (Wallis 1976:13; De Beer 2024:179). Flemming (2013:260-263) contends that evangelism is also a social practice and cannot be separated from the church’s embodied witness in practices such as corporate worship, fellowship, caring for the poor and creation, and advocating for justice (cf. also Stone 2007: 249, 285).

The conversion of reductions, according to Guder (2000:121), is part of an ongoing conversion process if the church wishes to embody a more faithful testimony of the good news. Coetzee (2022:181) states that a congregation serious about evangelism within the framework of the *missio Dei* must recognise that ongoing honest self-examination and conversion are essential to uncovering the blind spots of reductions and undergo profound transformation for the sake of the integrity of the gospel. Reducing evangelism to only verbal witness has serious consequences for the credibility of the church’s testimony and for evangelism itself.

Contextual

The theme of this chapter is an approach to evangelism that takes context seriously. Paas (2019:212; cf. Knoetze 2024a:21) describes one of the major obstacles to mission work as the lack of meaningful contacts between the Church and its context. This is also true of evangelism. The gospel message can only be ‘good news’ when it enters ‘the bloodstream of the people’ (Ikenga-Metuh 1989:6; cf. Flemming 2013:69). A significant temptation faced by evangelism is the tendency to reduce the message to a ‘one-size-fits-all’ formulation that is neither significant nor grounded in people’s life situations (Flemming 2013:69).

Bosch (1991:454; cf. De Beer 2024:186) argues that authentic announcement or mediation of the good news, or credible evangelism, is always ‘inevitably and unavoidable’ contextual and incarnational (cf. eds. Chilcote & Warner 2008:xxvi; Bosch 1991:417). Knoetze (2024a:22)

formulates this even more strongly, emphasising its high contextuality. De Beer (2024:176) points out that evangelism ‘should not be seen as a-contextual, generic, generalizing or in a colonizing manner’, but argues for an understanding of euangelizomai that should be discerned incarnationally and contextually. Only then can good news truly be good news (cf. De Beer 2024:186). The implication of this is that the needs of the specific context (people, place, neighbourhood, creation) should be observed with compassion. It is then essential to discern together with the people of that context what the good news will look like in that specific situation (cf. De Beer 2024:182, 188).

Local congregations are God’s gifts for a specific part of God’s creation, their direct context (cf. Nel 2017:6). Congregations are always local, as they have an address in a specific community (cf. Schoeman 2015:369). God’s people also understand themselves as being sent into a specific context (cf. Schoon 2018:191). The local congregation gains missional credibility precisely by being contextually relevant (cf. ed. Nel 2021:xxiv; cf. also Nel 2011:1). The context of local congregations is often challenging and painful. Therefore, the temptation to flee from contextual involvement is quite attractive, especially in South Africa and Africa (cf. Nel 2017:7; Coetzee 2022:89). Knoetze (2024:16-17) argues that evangelism is not about a ‘pie in the sky when you die’ but should involve our everyday struggles in our South African context, which is marked by poverty, corruption, hunger, illness, ecological crises, etc.

A contextual and balanced approach to evangelism and diaconia in the African context should be characterised by humility, openness, and a willingness to learn from local communities (cf. Njabili 2024:222). The embodied, incarnational, and contextual core practices of evangelism, discipleship, worship, and diaconia should reflect the specific time and place in which they occur (cf. Franke 2020:170-171; Coetzee 2022:159). Therefore, practices of evangelism are contextually discerned in faith as participation in God’s mission and are determined by the theology (content) and servant style of Jesus (cf. Coetzee 2022:xv-xvi).

Diaconia

The theme of this chapter is an approach to evangelism that integrates diaconia as an essential element of participating in the *missio Trinitatis Dei*. Consequently, the concept of diaconia is now explored. Knoetze (2022:293) emphasises that diaconia represents the gospel in action and must be distinguished from mere developmental activities or efforts

aimed at achieving a good life. He argues that a deeper understanding of diaconia is rooted in the being of the Triune God (Knoetze 2022:296): ‘The Father as Creator and Sustainer; Jesus Christ as Saviour and Liberator; and the Holy Spirit as the Giver of Life, the one who equips with gifts and empowers with faith. As such the theological grounds for missional diaconia is doxology, to worship God for being God’.

Diaconate, according to Venter (2023:11), is based on the Trinity in God himself: ‘God’s love, grace, mercy, justice, and the shalom-wholeness that He desires for this world’. The purpose of diaconate is first and foremost the glorification of God. The motivation for the diaconate is not born from the needs of people or the world but from the heart of God (Knoetze 2023:4). God’s mission is also diaconate because it has to do with the hurt and pain of ordinary people and creation (cf. Knoetze 2023:3). Diaconia can then be viewed as the invitation to participate in God’s caring and liberating action towards all people (Knoetze 2022:293) and creation. God will therefore be glorified by the relief of the needs of people (Knoetze 2023:4) and creation.

Van der Watt (2024:198) reflects on a trinitarian grounding of *diaconia* in the *missio Dei* characterised by the compassion of God or the *passio Dei* (cf. Louw 2011:9; 2016:343). This understanding of God’s presence flows from the innermost being of God and attempts to offer a more compassionate approach within the reality of human suffering (Louw 2016:9; cf. Van der Watt 2024:198–199).

The church participates in the mission of God because the mission is God’s mission, and God takes the initiative. In this process, the church has the privilege to embody the life-giving presence of the Triune God (cf. Venter 2023:11). The *missio Dei* has more to do with ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ than with ‘doing’ (Knoetze 2023:3). Niemandt and Meiring (2013:5) make the point that diaconate is essentially part of God’s mission and is an integral aspect of every other facet of the church’s participation in God’s mission: *diaconia* (service), *leitourgia* (worship), *koinonia* (fellowship), and *kerugma* (preaching) (cf. Venter 2023:11).

The service (*diaconia*) of the faith community should be understood as the ministry of the Triune God (cf. Nel 2015:118). *Diaconia*, as part of the missional ministry of the church, is central to missional ecclesiology because it is rooted in the essence of God (cf. Knoetze 2023:2). The *diaconia* of Christ serves as the source and example from which the diaconia of the congregation flows and should align with the characteristics of Christ’s diaconia, guided and controlled by the Holy Spirit (Nel 2015:118).

Diaconia emerges from the incarnation and sacrificial life of Christ and

is never neutral (Knoetze 2022:293). The mercy and compassion of God are embodied in the incarnation of Jesus Christ (cf. Van der Watt 2024:200). Diaconia is characterised by ordinary actions or a good life through this Christ-centredness (Knoetze 2022:293). Knoetze (2022:293) states it as follows: ‘The ministry of Jesus as the great Diakonos is the best example and understanding of *diaconia* as it is with mission’. The compassionate action of God in Christ manifests in different forms, responding to specific needs. Flemming (2013:74) articulates this as ‘Jesus’ love and restoring power intersect people at the point of their life circumstances’.

Diaconia takes on various forms within communities, such as emergency relief, acts of care and service, justice (social, economic, political), and stewardship of creation (cf. Brienens 2017:143; Van der Watt 2024:193). The gospel is the good news for every part of creation and every aspect of our lives and society. It is essential to view God’s mission in a holistic and cosmic sense and to ‘affirm all life, the whole *oikoumene*, as being interconnected in God’s web of life’ (ed. Keum 2013:7; cf. Conradie 2022:346-347). *Diaconia* possesses a holistic and integrated approach (cf. Knoetze 2023:4; Venter 2023:11-12), which is not merely strategic but fundamentally theological (cf. Venter 2023:12). Consequently, diaconia can never be a ministry in isolation or just a project of the church, because ‘it is the nature and essence of God Himself’ (cf. Venter 2023:11).

Diaconia helps the church to cross borders (cf. Brienens 2017:143), creates opportunities for ecumenical cooperation (cf. Brienens 2017:145), erects signs of the kingdom, and facilitates the verbal sharing of the good news (cf. Brienens 2017:148). Consequently, it takes the church outside its comfort zone to engage with the marginalised. In this regard, diaconia has a prophetic task to unmask injustice and promote justice (cf. Knoetze 2022:293) for both the poor and the environment (cf. Van der Watt 2024:200).

‘Sharing’, as in fellowship, serves as a metaphor for diaconia and evangelism (cf. Van der Watt 2024:203; Mogensen 2015:50; Stone 2007:79). This concept enhances mutuality, equality, and dialogue (social dimensions) and aligns with a holistic and integrated approach that links *diaconia*, *kerugma*, *koinonia*, and *leitourgia* to the church’s *martyria*. Mogensen (2015:50; Van der Watt 2024:203) argues that mutual sharing is also key to understanding the Holy Trinity: ‘The church’s mission (*martyria*) consisting of the modes of *kerugma*, *koinonia*, *diakonia* and *leitourgia* is founded on the Trinitarian image of mutuality, reciprocity and shared life – moved by God’s compassionate love’.

Paas (2024:274) contends that the *missio Dei* should not be reduced to

good-neighbour work that shields us from the vulnerability of sharing Christ or inviting others to follow him. Instead, the *missio Dei* continues to challenge individuals to initiate bold conversations and ask questions about God. From the perspective of diaconia, a servant approach to evangelism is essential. Nel (2002:79) asserts: ‘When God’s people begin to understand themselves as a servant people, everything begins to change. Only then we are getting ready to earn the right and, hopefully, to serve in return’ (cf. Nel 2002:65, 83).

Faith community as an embodiment of the Good News

Evangelism is an essential part (heart/centre) of the *missio Dei* (cf. Bosch 1991:412; 2008:8–9; Paas 2019:11; Niemandt 2016:3; Coetzee, Nel & Knoetze 2023:2). From a holistic perspective, evangelism cannot be allowed to exist in isolation from the broader life and service of the congregation (Castro 1978:88; cf. Bosch 1991:412; Spong 1982:15). It should be viewed as an integral component of a missional ecclesiology (cf. Coetzee et al. 2023:4).

In a pluralistic society, evangelism can be understood as a non-competitive practice of faithful and embodied witness within a specific context, rather than merely the production of converts (cf. Stone 2018:14). An embodied expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ through the local, contextualised togetherness of God’s people (cf. Schoon 2018:190) is fundamentally a part of evangelism and the communication of the Good News. These communal embodied expressions aim to imitate the Triune God by participating in the *missio Trinitatis Dei* (cf. Schoon 2018:191), thereby representing the Triune God in the local context.

The local context is the appropriate place to credibly and holistically embody the love of God among neighbours in the community (Heath 2017:3). This expression of a loving community represents the character of God’s people and articulates the gospel in a communal embodied manner, which serves as an authentic apologetic for the gospel in a post-Christendom context (cf. Heath 2017:3; Schoon 2018:190).

According to Newbigin (1989:227), the local congregation that believes in and embodies the gospel is indeed the hermeneutic of the gospel. Stone (2007:314–315) expresses it as follows: ‘The evangelistic invitation is, in the first place, a matter of living beautifully and truthfully before a watching world’ (cf. Gehring, Kinsey & Baker 2019:11). A contextual embodiment of the Good News in the local setting is essential for authentic evangelism in our pluralistic and multicultural context in Africa.

Holistic evangelism: An attempt to an integrational approach

A holistic approach to evangelism is emphasised in most modern definitions of the term (cf. Reppenhagen 2017:61; Coetzee et al. 2023:5). According to Coetzee et al. (2023:5), this approach includes both words and deeds (cf. Verkuyl 1978:50), proclamation and presence, explanation and example (cf. Reppenhagen 2017:61), in public and in private, politically and personally, spiritually and socially (cf. Alexander 2014:21), as well as through justice and care for creation (cf. Heath 2017:103–104). Heath (2017:103–104, 161) states that evangelism is good news for all of creation. Evangelism was already understood from a holistic perspective by Verkuyl (1978:50–51; cf. also Nel 1982:42) as the communication of the gospel of the kingdom of God, by the whole congregation, in her own community through the proclamation of the gospel, through *koinonia*, through *diaconia*, and through the struggle for justice (cf. Coetzee 2022:202).

The unfortunate legacy of separating ‘word’ and ‘action’ can be overcome by a holistic approach to evangelism (Reppenhagen 2017:61). Bosch (1991:420) expresses this inseparable relationship between words and deeds as follows: ‘The deed without the word is dumb; the word without the deed is empty’. Words interpret actions, and actions confirm the value of words (Newbigin 1982:146–149; cf. Bosch 1991:420). Newbigin (1989:137) provides special insight into this perspective by remarking: ‘It is clear that to set word and deed, preaching and action, against each other is absurd. The central reality is neither word nor act, but the total life of a community...’ (cf. Coetzee et al. 2023:5).

Both ministries that are word- and works-based create opportunities for God’s people to embody the character of Jesus Christ more authentically (Schoon 2018:173–174; cf. Coetzee et al. 2023:5). Hirsch (2006:114) states that the personal and combined embodiment of the gospel, both in words and actions, makes the evangelistic witness of the missional church credible (cf. Goheen 2011:198; Schoon 2018:172–173; cf. also Coetzee et al. 2023:5). Jesus embodies his kingdom mission in the Gospels through the synergy between what He said, what He did, and who He was (Flemming 2013:70). This embodiment of the kingdom has implications for the presence of God’s reign and rule in all areas of society (cf. Flemming 2013:84). Flemming (2013:276) states that our words, our works, and our identity are inseparable.

The most common approach to evangelism, according to Brien (2017:143), is loving service (*diaconia*) in the community as part of a holistic understanding of mission and evangelism. This *diaconia* (loving service) is unconditional. There remains hope that people who are reached

will be attracted to the gospel and the church (cf. Brienens 2017:143). It can also provide an opportunity for participation in *diaconia* for people inside and outside the church (cf. Morisy 1997:ix; Brienens 2017:148-149). This can be a meaningful experience on the journey to discipleship for those serving alongside Christians in the community, where discipleship begins even before faith is acquired (cf. Brienens 2017:149).

It is important that *diaconia* is not seen only as an instrument of evangelism through verbal witness, but as an essential dimension of the *missio Dei*. Van der Watt (2019:163–164) reflected on the disasters in Japan that changed their thinking about evangelism and diaconia in this regard. They experienced that through unconditional service (*diaconia*), several people who were apathetic towards the gospel became responsive. The role of words or verbal witness in evangelism is mistrusted by many because of negative experiences with evangelism and approaches that confront strangers with ‘a prepacked’ message (cf. Flemming 2013:263). When the gospel is embodied in a holistic way, opportunities to speak will hopefully follow (cf. Flemming 2013:263). Both words and works (embodying) are essential parts of the witness of the gospel (cf. ed. Keum 2013:24; Flemming 2013:266).

Mogensen (2015:58) presents a more integrated understanding of the missional task of the church by referencing Luke 10:1-12. He describes mission as witness (*martyria*), stating that the church, in alignment with the mission of Jesus into the world, is sent by the Triune God to be (*koinonia* and *leitourgia*), to do (*diaconia*), and to say (*kerugma*) as a witness (*martyria*) to the kingdom of God. Evangelism as *martyria* (witness), which is central to the *missio Dei*, manifests in all modes of ministry as part of the communication of the gospel (Nel 2015:72; cf. Coetzee et al. 2023:5). Therefore, evangelism is not an add-on for only a few, but an integrated aspect of holistic congregational ministry (cf. Coetzee et al. 2023:5). This is also true of *diaconia* as an essential part of *martyria*.

Holistic evangelism can be understood through Guder’s perspective (1985:91; 2015:132; cf. Rawson 2015:loc. 137; Reppenhagen 2017:63; Coetzee et al. 2023:6) on witnessing, which asserts that ‘the Church and the Christian are *to be* the witness, *do* the witness, and *say* the witness’. Flemming (2013:18) similarly argues that Paul’s concept of congregational and individual mission encompasses three interrelated dimensions – being, doing, and telling – forming a unified and holistic understanding of mission.

Flemming (2013:83, 256–257) states that in the ministry of Jesus, being,

doing, and telling function like instruments in a classical or jazz trio, playing together in perfect harmony; they relate seamlessly and cannot be separated. All the instruments are essential. Word and deed witness is always anchored in the identity of the people of God. This does not imply that they always function in equal balance (Flemming 2013:256). The needs of the context determine which aspect will take the lead, while the others support in the background. Subsequently, one of the other dimensions may take the lead. This is a dynamic and interactive process (Flemming 2013:257).

The implications of this understanding of holistic evangelism suggest that in a specific context, Christians may begin their missional calling with Christian presence, compassionate service, and social justice, whatever the need may be. In the process, they will also be open to opportunities to share the life-changing good news in words (cf. Fleming 268–269). Van Gelder and Zscheile (2018:410–411) emphasise that embodiment and actions, without interpretation, are insufficient. Verbal witness is a vital and necessary aspect of Christian mission, but it must be rooted in deep listening, a demonstration of love and care, and relationships built over time. As noted earlier, all three dimensions – being, doing, and telling – are interconnected and cannot be separated. Fitch (2016:10) refers to this Christian presence as ‘faithful presence’, representing the reality of God’s presence in the world. He uses faithful people to make himself concrete and real (to embody his presence) amid the struggles and pain of the world.

Such an intentional, integrated approach emerges through faithful presence in the community, practical acts of compassionate service to alleviate need (including care, liberation, justice, and healing for all creation), and through appropriate and spontaneous sharing of faith. The ‘how’ is discerned both together and individually within the specific local context, forming part of a faith-discerning process (cf. Coetzee 2022:382–383). This understanding of evangelism and *diaconia*, grounded in the good news of the kingdom and as an essential part of the *missio Trinitatis Dei*, will hopefully help to liberate evangelism and *diaconia* from the reductionism and dichotomies that have led to negative experiences of both in the past (cf. Coetzee 2022:xv–xvi, 198). It will also facilitate a move beyond polarising, fragmenting, silo-functioning, and prioritising arguments over what should come first or what is most important, fostering a more authentic way of embodying the good news of the kingdom of God.

A possible holistic and integrated approach

Based on the above, I propose the following as an attempt to develop a holistic and integrated approach to evangelism, incorporating *diaconia* as an essential aspect of participation in the *missio Trinitatis Dei*.

1. Evangelism and diaconia are both essentially part of the church's integrated martyrria (witness) and participation in the mission of the Triune God (*missio Trinitatis Dei*).
2. The motivation for evangelism and diaconia is the same: God's compassionate love for the whole of creation and participation in God's mission. The purpose of the church's martyrria is doxological – glorification of the living God.
3. Holistic evangelism that includes diaconia is the core and heartbeat of God's mission and is an essential part of the martyrria of the church.
4. Participation in God's mission and God's compassionate love is embodied by followers of Jesus (disciples) both collectively and personally through faithful presence (being), acts of compassionate love (doing), and appropriate words at the right time (telling) within a specific context.
5. The way in which God's compassionate love is embodied collectively and personally is discerned in faith, in close connection with the needs of people and creation, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
6. The metaphor of sharing is preferred to communicate the Good News in such a way that mutual togetherness, embodiment, presence, respect, listening, conversation, and the sharing of each other's stories (storytelling) occur within equal and mutual relationships and encounters that are a blessing to all involved. The style and content of this mutual embodiment and sharing align with the serviceable love of Jesus and serve as an invitation to participate in a life in the Trinity and God's compassionate love.
7. The invitation to participate in the reality of kingdom life and in a lifelong discipleship of Jesus the Lord is offered with

the servant attitude of Jesus Christ and within a respectful space where the invitation can be accepted credibly, or not yet accepted, or even rejected.

The holistic approach and the embodiment of God's compassionate love can be realised in the following ways, distinguished both collectively and individually, and shaped contextually in faith under the guidance of the Holy Spirit:

1. *Faithful presence* (being):

Faithful presence involves participating in and representing God's compassionate presence and love. It is both contextual and incarnational, being among people and creation, and serves as an embodiment (a sign) of the kingdom of God.

This presence is spontaneous yet intentional. Guided by God's love, it attentively observes and listens to what is happening in the context. The needs of the context – whether they relate to individuals, communities, creation, or particularly marginalised people – are discerned with unconditional love. Through this process, faith enables us to recognise and distinguish what the Triune God is doing in that specific context.

2. *Acts of compassionate love* (doing):

Through faith, it becomes possible to discern how to join God's movement of love and how His love can be further embodied and lived out through actions that reflect His compassion.

What is done in a given context emerges from continuous observation and attentive listening to the needs present, the building of trust-based relationships, and mutual dialogue. Acts of compassionate love may include alleviating people's needs, empowering individuals, reconciling and healing relationships, caring for creation, pursuing justice, and engaging in prophetic actions. These acts can occur both spontaneously and informally or in more structured and professional ways, particularly in complex situations. Authentic expressions of God's compassionate love require mutual conversations, respectful relationships, and the affirmation of human dignity for all involved. In this way, acts of love become a genuine and practical embodiment of God's unconditional service and compassion.

3. *Appropriate words* (telling):

From the embodiment of God's compassionate love through faithful presence and acts of servant love, appropriate occasions may arise for mutual conversations about faith. Listening to people's stories and sharing our own is essential. These stories are received with genuine compassion and a healthy curiosity about how God is present and what He is doing in people's lives. Opportunities can emerge where the experience of God's love and work in our lives is shared freely, respectfully, and without judgement. Such conversations are mutually beneficial and instructive for both parties. They can be part of a process in which individuals are spontaneously invited to embrace life in the reality of the Kingdom and to follow Jesus, the Lord, alongside others, sharing the adventure of getting to know him better.

This process is not linear but rather interactive, shaped by the context of faith in which it unfolds. While different forms of embodiment can be distinguished, they should not be separated, as they occur holistically and in an integrated manner.

Conclusion

In a post-colonial, post-post-apartheid, and post-Christendom South African context, it is critically necessary to view evangelism through a holistic and contextual lens that incorporates *diaconia* as an essential aspect of *martyria*. This approach emphasises participation in the *missio Trinitatis Dei*, helping to move beyond the reductions and dichotomies of the past. In this way, the witness of both evangelism and diaconia can avoid practices that perpetuate these reductions and dichotomies, striving instead for integrated practices that authentically embody the Good News.

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Transforming Diaconia in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa: Compassionate Service Demanding Justice and Reconciliation

Stéphan van der Watt

Introduction

Since shortly after its inception in the second half of the 17th century, the DRC has been involved in addressing the social needs of its members and the surrounding community through care, social welfare, and skills development projects (Niewoudt 1990:75). Due to significant socio-economic challenges and the plight of (Afrikaner) DRC members at the end of the 19th century, the Church initiated its relief ministry aimed at assisting (mainly white) poor individuals. A few decades later, the renowned Carnegie Commission was established to examine the issue and offer recommendations. It was found that approximately 300,000 Afrikaners were impoverished by the early 1930s. The DRC recognised early on that a holistic and scientific approach was necessary to address the complex issue of ‘white poverty’ (Van der Merwe 2023b:2). This understanding led to the professional training of social workers by the Church.

During the second half of the 20th century, the DRC campaigned for a partnership with the state that would allow the church to act autonomously, preserving its identity, values, and ethos. The relationship between the DRC and the South African government was strong, and the church made a significant impact on society. The DRC established highly effective, professional welfare services coordinated through its ten regional synods. According to Willie van der Merwe (2014:2), who was until recently a leading DRC scholar-practitioner in diaconia, the DRC was the largest

provider of welfare services to South Africa's white population throughout the 20th century. These services included housing, care institutions for children with special needs, and various other social welfare services. However, the DRC's substantial impact was solidified and executed under the umbrella of the unjust (theologically 'justified') system of *apartheid*. Afrikaners' colonial and ethnocentric self-conception affirmed their conflation of 'civilisation' and 'Christianity' as two notions that were 'indissolubly connected', in the words of Willem Saayman (2007:21).

Consequently, the church's skewed focus on Afrikaner people, as well as its misdirected, paternalistic definition of mission, led it to create a false separation between mission and compassionate service (*diaconia*) (Van der Merwe 2014). Essentially, when DRC church members' care and social welfare were directed towards fellow white people, it was termed 'compassionate service',¹ but when it was directed at people from other racial groups, it was referred to as 'mission work'² (Van Aarde 2002:442; Van der Watt 2010:166). This anomaly can possibly be explained by the dualism – typical of puritan and pietistic evangelicals – that separates evangelism from sociopolitical involvement, although biblical teaching clearly focuses on a holistic approach that can be termed integral mission (Anderson 2022:79; Benadé 2019:110-115).

Hannes Knoetze (2023:1) argues that the historic one-dimensional approach of the DRC has constrained *diaconia* to mere acts of compassion. Knoetze therefore positions diaconia within its rightful ecumenical context in the global church and within Trinitarian theology (see Knoetze 2019). This research aligns itself with this perspective by tracing the evolving (Reformed) theological notions and practices of diaconia in the DRC over the past decade, following the explanation of the DRC's 'new' ecclesiological understanding in its official Framework Document in 2013 (cf. DRC 2013).

In this chapter, I specifically grapple with the lingering dilemma of how a peculiar historical theological understanding of diaconal ministry led the DRC to adopt the term 'service of compassion' and a colonial-style diaconal praxis.³ The aim is to rediscover a broadened Reformed biblical-

1 In Afrikaans: 'diens van barmhartigheid'.

2 In Afrikaans: 'sendingwerk'.

3 See also Beukes (2023), who argues that the DRC (along with other Afrikaans-speaking Reformed churches in South Africa) still often engages in diaconal work "for" others, instead of "with" them; in other words, more in line with a charity model, rather than truly empowering and transforming marginalised communities.

theological understanding and praxis of diaconia that intentionally includes justice, which will help the DRC remain relevant in its context while simultaneously staying true to its proper missional nature and calling as part of the ecumenical body of Christ.

In this regard, the WCC and ACT Alliance (2022:27) recently affirmed: ‘There is a growing understanding, also among leaders of missionary organisations, that mission and diakonia are intimately connected, and that diaconal work in itself is an unfolding of the missional mandate. There is also growing recognition that mission and justice belong together’. An earlier WCC publication provides a succinct phrasing that is especially helpful in understanding the relationship between diaconia (as part of mission) and justice: ‘Justice wrestles with the underlying issues that make diakonia necessary. Diakonia without justice becomes anemic. Justice without diakonia can be heartless and even destructive’ (WCC 2013:186).

Current socio-economic realities in the South African society

Many millions of South Africans are suffering due to poverty. Structural unemployment reached 33.5% in April 2024 cf. International Monetary Fund [IMF] 2024a). The nation ranks among the lowest globally in terms of income equality, as indicated by its GINI coefficient of 63.0, based on the latest data from 2014 (cf. World Bank 2024a). Piet Naudé (2023) noted that although income from labour has improved since 1994, this has not sufficiently altered the fact that the richest 10% of South African citizens hold 71% of the total wealth, while the poorest 60% hold just 7%.

The socio-political and economic reasons for this dire situation are vast and diverse. Some propose that South Africa is a failed state, as evident in its ailing infrastructure concerning healthcare, roadworks, and a general lack of efficient municipal services. Struggles in education are another significant indicator of the situation. In 2021, 81% of Grade 4 learners were unable to read for meaning in any language, up from 78% in 2016 (cf. PIRLS 2021). Naudé (2023) identifies three core issues confronting South Africa: (1) A failed and corrupt state – systemic corruption exposed by the Zondo Commission of Inquiry’s report on state capture in 2022; (2) Escalating government debt – as of April 2024, the government’s gross debt stood at 74.6% of GDP (IMF 2024b); and (3) Declining gross national income (GNI).

If we take the World Bank’s (2023) definition of poverty, approximately

half of the South African population is currently living in poverty. These individuals struggle to get by daily without proper basic services (water, sanitation, and electricity) and with less than \$2.15 to spend each day (World Bank 2024b). Most still bear the brunt of intergenerational wealth that disproportionately benefited white people during the apartheid era. The lack of income from capital remains the main problem for the poor. Thomas Piketty (2014:242) explains: ‘By definition, in all societies, income inequality is a result of adding up these two components: inequality of income from labor and inequality of income from capital. The more unequally distributed each of these two components is, the greater the total inequality’.

The prevalence of corruption, violence, and many other challenges have become significant stumbling blocks in the daily lives of countless South Africans over the past decade. It is often so overwhelming that DRC church members, along with millions of fellow South Africans – 85% of whom identify as Christians (cf. StatsSA 2022) – are engaged in a struggle for survival on a psycho-emotional level. The Church, in this crisis/opportunity, is called to share justly as one body. The church is not called to be successful but to facilitate healing as a wounded community of believers, readily and joyfully using their gifts to serve and enrich others. This principle aligns with the Heidelberg Catechism, question and answer 55, which reminds Christians from a Reformed background. It can be argued that unless the DRC adopts a radical ecclesiology where justice is embodied, it will remain part of the problem in South Africa rather than be part of the solution.

Diaconal work emanating from the DRCSA and its relation to government social welfare services

There is wide ecumenical consensus in the South African Council of Churches (SACC) that Christian faith communities have a distinct calling and a vital role in shaping the South Africa envisaged in governmental documents such as the *National Development Plan: Vision for 2030*. These communities gather and connect people in networks that foster creative and hopeful renewal in a society marked by brokenness and suffering. As the body of Christ, they are called anew to follow their Head – Jesus Christ the Wounded Healer – in this calling for the purpose of God’s glory.

Since the 1950s, the development and professionalisation of social work, along with the regulation of the social welfare sector, caused the DRC’s social welfare services to drift further from their theological roots.

This shift had an unintended consequence by the late 20th century: the diminished role of churches in social welfare. Churches often became relegated to providing financial support for social services rather than engaging in direct, embodied fellowship (*koinonia*). As a result, church-based welfare services gradually ceded ground to the secular welfare sector within South African society.

However, the DRC still took the lead in forming welfare service policies for/with the government until 1994 (Van der Merwe 2014). Some current diaconal practices in the DRC range from Early Childhood Development (ECD) to Local Ecumenical Action Networks (LEANs), disaster responses, and pastoral care activities in old age homes and hospitals, all of which are traditionally incorporated under the ministry umbrella of ‘Service of Compassion’ (*Diens van Barmhartigheid*). At its annual general meeting AGM – which I attended – held in Emseni (Johannesburg) in August 2021, the DRC’s National Council for Church Social Services (*Kerklike Maatskaplike Diensteraad in Afrikaans*) concluded that diaconal ministries have largely stagnated and become ‘charity projects’ and short-term outreach actions. Meanwhile, church social welfare organisations – organised by the DRC general synod – have developed into well-established and professional institutions, primarily working in the formal social welfare sector. This diverging development has led to the independent formation of services and a reduction in faith-based and church-led diaconal ministries (of compassion) (cf. Van Aarde 2023).

Moreover, during the past few decades, the sustainability of church social welfare organisations and the complexity of the transformation of the social welfare sector in South Africa have become problematic (cf. Naidu 2022). Today, the DRC’s social services still form an integral part of the governmental social welfare system. However, the current problem is that the government’s national and regional welfare systems are dysfunctional in many ways. Unrealistic demands are placed on the church by the government, which causes many administrative challenges. It seems as if the government believes that all church resources (e.g., foster homes) and welfare services are simply part of its own system and resources. This is why it is becoming increasingly difficult for the church to maintain its theological basis and identity with regard to its own social services.

Indeed, the DRC family of churches is already proactively participating in the healing and restoration of communities by embodying a faithful presence to protect and care for the vulnerable, advocate on behalf of the voiceless, and seek God’s *shalom* for those suffering injustices in many

forms. When it comes to an issue like land reform, we all still need to discover how to do this wisely and effectively by accommodating all role players from different socio-economic sectors. For instance, the work of PALS should be noted here.⁴ Hope-filled pockets of innovative transformation that foster reconciliation and restorative justice, going beyond charity, are emerging through local DRC congregations (cf. Marais 2023). Now, DRC members have the (socio-political) prophetic responsibility to seek deeper *koinonia* (solidarity) with the marginalised (Knoetze 2023:6).

Recent developments concerning the concept and practice of *diaconia* in the DRC (2013–2023)

Recently (2013), the DRC intentionally oriented its identity towards becoming a missional church. This shift provides a strong basis from which to discern the calling of churches to serve society through missional-diaconal work. New practices need to be developed that will utilise the God-given gifts of its members. A new role for deacons also needs to be established. For this reason, the DRC is proactively investigating diaconal work, the role of deacons, as well as the terminology concerning diaconia at its General Synod level (cf. Van der Merwe 2023a).

Innovative ideas are needed regarding diaconal work and church-based welfare services as part of God's mission. A sound theology of the church's diaconal involvement is required to serve the purpose of God's Kingdom in the world collectively. The church is called to be part of God's reconciling work, addressing the needs of suffering people and promoting justice for those who are marginalised and for the whole ecology/environment. This is why the current DRC Board of Church Social Services is asking, 'How can we achieve this?' Transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary discussions with other ecumenical churches and organisations are also intentionally pursued by this board (Van Aarde 2023).

Nioma Venter (2023:1) argues that the current state of diaconal work, traditionally known as *diens van barmhartigheid* (service/ministry of compassion) in the DRC, falls prey to the problem of fragmented

4 'PALS is the acronym for Partners in Agri Land Solutions, a private land reform and development initiative. It was established as Witzenberg PALS (NPC) in Ceres in 2015 by farmers in partnership with local communities and all three spheres of Government'. For more information, see: <https://www.sapals.co.za>.

functioning rather than an integrated approach consisting of effective networking. Venter highlights the DRC's outdated policy framework concerning its ministry of compassion as the main reason for this problem. Venter's work in the DRC Western Cape Synod, via its ministry group *Diaconia*, has provided leading initiatives that are currently creating a revised theological foundation and innovative practices in this regard (NGKSA, Wes-Kaapland 2023). Along with Van der Merwe (2014:159), Venter emphasises the need for a thoroughly overhauled system that meaningfully integrates cooperation between local DRC congregations and church-based social welfare organisations.

At least two contextual realities necessitate the above-mentioned quest for change and vividly expose the need for an amended theology and praxis of diaconia in its multiple forms. The first reality is the complexity and severity of socio-political transformations in South African society since its democratic transition in 1994 (which I elaborated on above). Secondly, significant developments concerning the missional church movement in the South African context, propelled by the Southern African Partnership for Missional Churches, have prompted the DRC leadership to rethink its ecclesiological foundations (cf. Benadé 2019).

At least two contextual realities necessitate the above-mentioned quest for change and vividly expose the need for an amended theology and praxis of diaconia in its multiple forms. The first reality is the complexity and severity of socio-political transformations in South African society since its democratic transition in 1994 (which I elaborated on above). Secondly, significant developments concerning the missional church movement in the South African context, propelled by the Southern African Partnership for Missional Churches, have prompted the DRC leadership to rethink its ecclesiological foundations (cf. Benadé 2019).

The DRC undertook a thorough revision of its Framework Document in 2013 (cf. Niemandt & Meiring 2013:9–10). However, a significant task remains: clarifying this document's implications for the church's *diaconia*. While Van der Merwe's (2014) impactful doctoral dissertation and consequential research have established a robust foundation for a diaconal theology, Venter (2023:2) rightly observes that this theological base has yet to be formally incorporated into the DRC's official policy guidelines. This raises a critical question: has the Church's missional theology, developed over the past two decades, had a genuinely constructive and formative influence on the DRC's ministry practices, particularly in its diaconal work?

Venter (2023:1) rightly bemoans the lack of 'collective impact' in the

DRC's recent social care and development practices. She affirms (2023:7) that, over the past two decades, the missional movement has shifted the DRC from an ecclesiocentric to a theocentric starting point for ministry in general, particularly concerning the diaconate. The diaconate derives its meaning from the essence of God himself: the Triune God who is relational in his nature; the Triune God who sends; and the Triune God who reigns over all creation, of which the church is an instrument and sign. Diaconia essentially actualises the nature of who the Triune God is (see Mic 6:8; Amo 5:24; Dt 32:4, 10:17-19; Mk 10:45).

The movement from fragmentation to integration in the DRC's diaconal efforts aligns with global ecumenical sensibilities and strategies. In this context, Venter argues that the DRC should not only focus on the theological deepening of the diaconate but must also take seriously the development of practical models to ensure that good intentions translate into actions. This is a significant and necessary indication that deserves urgent attention. However, this issue – specifically the focus on church practices – is not the primary concern of this chapter. Instead, this chapter examines the content of the DRC's theological foundation regarding diaconia, upon which its varied practices are built.

Reformed (public) theology and diaconia

Although John Calvin cannot be credited as the sole originator of Reformed theology, his significant impact on the movement has led to it often being referred to by his name. However, long after the demise of its founder, Calvinism and Reformed theology are facing numerous challenges and have inevitably undergone various transformations. The topic of discerning the positive changes that have contributed to its constructive development, as well as the misconceptions that have hindered it, remains a subject of significant interest and controversy.

When one reads Calvin's *Institutes*, it is significant that he often speaks about God's justice in close relation to God's wisdom, goodness, providence, and power. Calvin argues that, since God has control over the universe beyond our understanding, let this be our rule of sobriety and modesty: to accept his supreme rule and consider his will as the only right and most worthy cause of everything, without profanely separating God's justice and providential power (Calvin 1845).

Commenting on Jeremiah 9:23-24, Calvin (1845) proclaims:

For how could we have that knowledge, which is here required, of his righteousness, mercy, and judgment, unless it were supported by his inflexible veracity? And how could we believe that he governed the world in judgment and justice, if we were ignorant of his power? And whence proceeds His mercy, but from his goodness? If all his ways, then, are mercy, judgment, and righteousness, holiness also must be conspicuously displayed in them.

In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, Calvin (2003:26) remarks (on Ps 135:13) that ‘The world is a theatre for the display of divine goodness, wisdom, justice and power’. Dirkie Smit (2022:337) summarises Calvin’s love for justice succinctly as follows: ‘If anything, this longing for justice probably best describes the Reformed way of being in the world’.

The DRC needs to examine the historical development of diaconia critically and constructively. Furthermore, the church needs to assess the enduring influence of Calvin and his Reformation colleagues within the context of our contemporary missional-diaconal framework. By doing this, we can begin to see our ancestors not just as remote figures but as important players in discerning what kind of diaconal church we ought to be today. The identity and praxis of the DRC as a missional church can benefit from the insights gained through Calvin and his colleagues’ passion and vision as faithful pilgrims in exile, whose lives and theologies testified to their vivid missional-diaconal focus (cf. Van der Watt 2021). The Reformed church tradition is called to continually solidify its ingrained missional impetus, as part of ecumenical Global Christianity, through its theology and praxes.

It is essential to acknowledge the contributions within the discipline of Reformed Public Theology in this context. A prominent South African scholar in this field is John de Gruchy, who argues that Calvinistic piety is oriented toward constructive engagement with the world and culture, rather than withdrawal from it (De Gruchy 1986:26–29). The Calvinistic tradition has played a significant role in shaping South Africa’s social history since the onset of colonialism. While its influence has not been entirely positive, it is vital to distinguish Calvin’s orthodox theology from the DRC’s theological justification of apartheid when discussing Calvinism in South Africa.

Afrikaner Calvinism, which contributed to the ideology of apartheid through its fusion with Afrikaner Nationalism and the influence of Kuyperian neo-Calvinist theology in the first half of the 20th century,

does not inherently reflect the true essence of Calvin's theology. In fact, it has profoundly misrepresented Calvin's teachings, writings, and proposals.⁵ Afrikaner Calvinism was dysfunctionally tied up in the struggle for Afrikaner power.

Thus, De Gruchy's relevant contention that Calvinism in South Africa needs revitalisation, so that it can properly be understood and implemented as a theology of social criticism and transformation. White Afrikaner believers have often in the past bullied Calvinism beyond the boundaries set by Calvin. But, as De Gruchy (1986:41) reminds us, 'what is not permissible for Calvinists is to go beyond the Word of God, for that is the point of departure for Reformed theology'. Moreover, De Gruchy is stunningly accurate when he asserts, 'Perhaps the main problem which the proponents of Calvinism have to overcome is the tendency, which has recurred several times in history, for it to start out as a theology of social critique and transformation and end up as a theology of totalitarian dominance'.

Henceforth, I utilise De Gruchy's argument by extending it to the issue of how the DRC should understand and embody justice and reconciliation through diaconia as means of social critique and transformation in South Africa today. I argue that one of the core challenges that remain for the DRC in its journey toward a transformed diaconia is to theologically address and more extensively implement prophetic diaconal practices concerning justice and reconciliation issues.

Essentially, the rediscovery of a Reformed theology and praxis of diaconia is needed within its broader ecumenical setting. Such a theology and praxis should proactively include justice and reconciliation to help the DRC remain relevant in its context *and* true to its missional nature and calling. This rediscovery can help the DRC to continue steering away from the sad and sinful stigma of apartheid (in De Gruchy's words 'a theology of totalitarian dominance') towards constructive social critique and a truly Reformed transformation. The Belhar Confession (cf. Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa [URCSA] 2008), with its clear focus on justice, reconciliation, and unity, continues to hold significant validity

5 South Africa has experienced two instances of the reception of Kuyper. On one hand, Kuyper is interpreted as having a position that promotes liberation, but on the other hand, there is a description of his influence as ideological and authoritarian, as was the case with apartheid (see Botman 2000:354). Piet Naudé (2005) contends that the 'theology of apartheid' was established from a mix of three nineteenth century European theological streams, including not only Kuyper's neo-Calvinism, but also significantly, the missiological thinking of the German Gustav Warneck, and Pietism.

and relevance as a critical measure for the church's diaconal practices. It is indeed a mirror and window on social cohesion and justice, as Eugene Fortein (2023) asserts.

Piet Naudé (2017) argues that for the DRC to properly engage in justice and social transformation issues, the Church needs to 'appeal to the tradition against the tradition'. The main factor determining whether the DRC can be a constructive force for social transformation and justice is the interpretation of the Bible and the main proponents of the Reformed tradition (Calvin, Barth, etc.). In a milieu where Calvin's voice was muffled by neo-Calvinism, notably a specific reading of Abraham Kuyper, how might Calvin help us escape ideological support for (racial) divisiveness and selective justice? Can we use Calvin to regain a critical conscience about our being imprisoned in exclusive culture and separated peoples, supported in the name of Calvinism? Reclaiming the Reformed tradition requires appealing to it, indicating that it has been misrepresented and that its deepest core has been forfeited (Boesak 1984). Can Reformed theology be liberated afresh to bring Calvin's true colours into full view?

Calvin revived the biblical notion of humans bearing God's image, which helps us better understand how we 'injure' God himself when we treat another human being unjustly or cause harm to them. Nicholas Wolterstorff (1987:17) even claims that God suffers personally; thus 'to pursue justice is to relieve God's suffering'. In a poignant article titled 'The Wounds of God', Wolterstorff (2011) discusses Calvin's social ethics, indicating that all who value Calvin's teachings appreciate his perspective that the Christian life is centred on the *amor iustitiae*, i.e., the love of justice. Many other leading Reformed scholars from South Africa have emphasised this need for a deeper understanding of justice in recent decades (Koopman 2016; Botman 2000; Boesak 1984; Pillay 2022).

The question arises again: What is justice? Similar to any other era, postmodernism has led to conflicting interpretations of what constitutes 'justice'. God is entitled to justice. Scripture never abstracts or isolates justice from God, who is seen as its source. This crucial aspect is lost when someone speaks without mentioning God and deifies the concept of justice (Bruckner 2006:1). The Bible contains around a thousand instances of terms related to justice. 'But the meaning of justice in Hebrew thought is not the same as the Greek view, popular in Western society, that each person receives their due. Compassion and mercy are inherent to justice in the biblical understanding' (Swartley 2006:30). From a New Testament perspective, according to Punt (2024:16), talking about God 'as a God of justice and reconciliation is tautologous'.

Gleaning insights on diaconia from the missional calling of the DRC (from 2013 onwards)

During the latter part of the 20th century, the rediscovery of *missio Dei* – greatly influenced by David Bosch’s (1991) constructive missiological insights – led the DRC to realise how misdirected its church-centred and ethnocentric approach had been in the past. Through this new understanding, the DRC’s focus shifted towards humble missional-diaconal service to advance the Kingdom of God. However, the DRC today must function in a post-Christian society, where the church’s influence is hampered in many ways and where Christians live surrounded by non-Christians (or ‘post-Christians’). South Africa’s democracy is still developing, with the DRC’s complicity in the *apartheid* ideology remaining a lingering backdrop to everything the church does. This massive change in context demands that we re-examine the church’s way of embodying *missio Dei* and find creative ways of being faithful Christian witnesses.

Moreover, various significant developments in the ecumenical Church have occurred during the past decade. In 2013, the *Together Towards Life* statement was presented at the WCC’s 10th assembly in Busan, South Korea, and the WCC initiated its *Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*. Isabel Phiri (2018) delineates three dimensions of the Pilgrimage: (1) commemorating the contributions of the Reformation; (2) addressing the injuries of injustices; and (3) recognising areas necessitating transformation or exhibiting potential for transformation towards universal justice.

In the same year, the DRC adopted its *Framework Document* for a missional ecclesiology and amended its church policy (*kerkorde*) by introducing a new Article 1, which states: ‘The Dutch Reformed Church is called to participate in the mission of God in the world. The church is built up by the Holy Spirit to serve the honor of God, and to proclaim the ministry of reconciliation and the salvation of Christ’ (NGKSA 2013:8). This revision clearly articulated that the DRC’s identity is fundamentally rooted in a missional ecclesiology – a missional understanding of what it means to be the church. The amendment marked the culmination of years of theological debate and discussion.

Within this new framework, the origin of diaconal work is traced back to the Trinity. Three primary attributes of the Triune God – love, community, and justice – are regarded as the foundation of the church’s diaconia. Wolterstorff aptly captures this by stating, ‘Justice is a constituent of love within the Trinity’ (2006:187). Justice can thus be viewed as a core aspect of diaconia. But even more, justice should be integrally part of the style of diaconal relations (*koinonia*) and practices. Therefore, the

practice of diaconal work involves more than welfare projects. It implies a relationship based on the community of perfect love, characteristic of the Triune God.

Now, just more than a decade after 2013, articles 53 and 54 of the latest DRC Church Order (NGKSA 2023a) reflect the changes effected by the new missional vision under the headings 'Being Sent' and 'Service of Compassion'. Under the first heading, "Being Sent (*missio Dei*)", the following is stated:

The mission of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is to give life and fullness to the world, and the church is at the service of God's mission. Through the Word and the Spirit, God gathers a congregation for Himself. Through *this* congregation: God lets his Word be proclaimed; God establishes the communion of saints from all nations; God lets the world in need be served; God lets his command to preserve creation and life be visibly expressed, and God's justice and reconciliation are proclaimed. This is how He makes his kingdom come.

Under the second heading, 'Service of Compassion', article 54 continues: 'From God's love and involvement in the world, the congregation fulfils its diaconal vocation in the community and the world through the prevention, relief and combating of social welfare distress, suffering and injustice'.

These above-mentioned changes to the latest DRC Church Order offer hopeful indications that the foundational theology guiding the DRC's diaconal efforts is moving in the right direction. Signs of constructive theological engagement between the DRC Framework Document and the current contextual challenges in South Africa are emerging within the framework of a theology of justice. Jaco Botha and Dion Forster (2017:2) engaged well with the core question: 'whether or not the Framework Document offers an accurate, theologically sound and contextually sensitive response to the changing landscape of South Africa'. Does the DRC prioritise maintaining its middle-class status over serving as a beacon of hope in a fractured world? What methods can the DRC employ to acknowledge the power disparity between itself and 'the other'? These are important questions to keep asking. Botha and Forster conclude (2017:8) that

the Framework Document does advocate for a missional Church which takes seriously issues of justice; however, this is inadvertently done from a position of the power and privilege of its social location. The DRC Church thus needs to pro-actively continue to develop its missional theology in solidarity with marginalized and suffering ‘others’ in South African society.

Botha and Forster (2017) employ Wolterstorff’s important principle of ‘justice from below’ to highlight the need for justice from the perspective of the marginalised. They advocate for the rights of those who are unable to ‘earn’ them, rather than relying on a detached moral ideal.

Naming diaconal work in the DRC: Why does it matter?

Willie van der Merwe’s (2023b) assertion that the formation of a church’s diaconal ministry is influenced by a specific frame of reference is a significant theme to explore in this chapter. Van der Merwe identifies historical realities, as well as the theology and/or tradition of the DRC, as the main influences on the conceptualisation of its diaconal ministry. He provides a convincing summary of why the DRC has thus far opted for the term ‘service of compassion’ but concludes that, although the church’s ecclesiological tenets have apparently shifted towards a missional theology, this is not yet reflected in the DRC’s conceptualisation of diaconal action. Therefore, Van der Merwe suggests that the church should consider the use of the notion *diaconia* to more actively participate in ecumenical discourse regarding the diaconate of the church.

I am in full agreement with his suggestion, at least for the following reasons. First, leading scholars have made clear the need for new vocabulary concerning *diaconia*, which reflects the current ecumenical conversation on this topic (Van der Merwe 2023a:16–24; Latvus 2017:76–84; Collins 1990:6–8; WCC 2022:43–51). Second, the notion of *diaconia* vividly echoes the core of Reformed theological convictions regarding diaconal work. WCC General Secretary Jerry Pillay (2022:11) argues that we ‘cannot deny that social justice and *diaconia* are an essential calling rooted in Reformed history, theology, spirituality, confessions, church polity and practical ministries’.

Thirdly, the term *diaconia* helps us to overcome the narrowed focus on services of compassion, which, theologically speaking, represent only one (albeit significant) dimension of the Church's total diaconal responsibility. By intentionally framing diaconal work as *diaconia*, we recognise its place within the global church and its connection to the Triune God's mission in this world (*Missio Dei/Missio Trinitatis*), which includes God's love, grace, compassion and justice (i.e., holistic *shalom*). Confessionally speaking, in one of the DRC's Three Forms of Unity, namely the *Nederlandse Geloofsbelydenis* (article 20), the close relationship between God's compassion and justice is duly highlighted. Consequently, such a theological starting point can help the Church to make the shift from a current fragmented approach towards integrated praxes (cf. Venter 2023; Cronshaw 2020).

Ecumenical Diaconia's strategic planning prioritises justice and its prophetic mandate. Diaconal agents view justice from both theological and socio-political perspectives. The biblical narrative of God's saving justice compels us to defend the dignity and rights of those who suffer under oppression, poverty, and inequality. Socio-political perspectives emphasise the need for human rights legislation and approaches that treat vulnerable individuals as rights-holders and those in positions of power as duty-bearers. The WCC's seminal document *Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diakonia* (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:111) affirms justice as a priority for churches, agencies, and ecumenical bodies. This challenges them to:

- Include advocacy and public witness in all diaconal action and activities,
- Build competence and share experiences related to working for justice; deepen interdisciplinary reflection on justice and prophetic diaconia,
- Strengthen coordinated efforts of advocacy and public witness; join forces in ecumenical campaigns related to justice issues,
- Accompany local churches in their efforts to strengthen public witness and advocacy competence.

The Framework Document (DRC 2013, par. 10) describes the Church's diaconate as follows: 'The diaconate of the church is multifaceted and different types of diaconate can be distinguished, like the ministry of God's mercy and care for people and creation, the ministry of God's reconciliation and peace, the ministry of God's justice' (translated from Afrikaans).

Now is the time to embody this formulation more boldly on the road to true transformative justice where the DRC needs to create courageous spaces to face the uncomfortable challenge at hand (cf. Thesnaar 2022:105–106).

Conclusion

Has its missional theology made a formative impact on DRC ministry practices in terms of proper diaconal actions? The answer to this question is ambiguous. On the one hand, a fundamental shift in orientation is evident. Since the early 1990s, the DRC has lost its privileged societal position of authority. Consequently, Christian leaders are learning to serve from below. On the other hand, the answer is ‘no’. Countless injustices and disparities continue to divide communities. Crucial gaps remain between the impact of the missional movement on DRC ecclesiology and the diaconal self-understanding of church members. Many Afrikaners’ colonial and ethnocentric self-conception remains strongly intact, upholding the one-dimensional approach that led DRC members to constrict *diaconia* to mere services of compassion, based on the untenable historic split between mission and diaconal action (as was indicated in this chapter).

It remains essential for the DRC to remember and re-appreciate the gifts of sound Reformed theology, albeit with critical appreciation as opposed to blind adoration. We – and here I intentionally include myself as an ordained DRC pastor (now working in Japan) – need to humble ourselves anew and listen to our critics as we learn from other ecumenical traditions and practices. Social innovation, the quest for equality, as well as justice and reconciliation, go together. Neither the DRC nor the South African government can bring this about on their own. Meaningful partnerships and shared resources are essential. A truly renewed diaconia encompasses more than mere services of compassion. I argue that one of the core challenges that remain for the DRC in its journey toward a transformed diaconia is to theologically address and more extensively implement prophetic diaconal practices concerning genuinely transformative justice and reconciliation issues. The words of Beyers Naudé (1991:226) are as timely and true as ever: ‘No healing is possible without reconciliation, and no reconciliation is possible without justice, and no justice is possible without some form of genuine restitution. All the Churches in South Africa must participate in such an expression of guilt’.

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Diaconia: A Challenge in the Afrikaans-Speaking Churches⁶

Johannes Knoetze

Introduction

Globally, the gap between rich and poor continues to widen. Prosperous countries in Europe and America often attempt to obscure this disparity by using various terms, such as ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries, ‘First World’ and ‘Third World’, or ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’. Within the African context, and more specifically within the South African context, the situation is not much different. The world we live in has changed significantly due to political shifts, globalisation, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), and so on, and this has exacerbated the gap. Particularly in South Africa, the distinction between rich and poor is still largely based on racial classifications, leading to even greater divisions in society. As white Afrikaans-speaking believers, we are acutely aware that we cannot simply be a church as we were in the past. This is especially true for us as Afrikaans-speaking South Africans since 1994, when we began to participate in a democratic political order. However, economics, racial classification, and similar factors are not the only divisive elements in society. The Church, the institution that should promote unity, reconciliation, and justice, is also divided, further contributing to societal fragmentation (Du Toit 2014), despite the positive contributions made by various churches.

From the earliest times, the Afrikaans-speaking churches in South Africa (which are the focus of this article) have addressed poverty both

6 This is a translation of: Knoetze, J.J., 2023, ‘Enkele teologiese uitdagings rakende diakonia in van die Afrikaanse Suid-Afrikaanse kerke’, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44(1), a2775. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v44i1.2775>

within their own ranks and in the broader South African community through their ministry of mercy. The diaconal ministry of the Afrikaans churches has been reduced to this ministry of mercy, as opposed to a more comprehensive diaconal ministry. Therefore, this chapter aims to describe and understand the diaconate within the broader ecumenical framework of the world church and the Trinity. When any ministry of the church is described theologically, it can only be done by answering questions of identity. Questions such as: Who are we? Where do we come from? And where are we going? These identity questions are vital, as the church represents God in and before the world, and it also represents the world to God (Moltmann 1977:1; Paas 2019:187). One of the key documents that serves as the foundation for this chapter is the DRC's Framework Document (2013), which addresses the missional nature and vocation of the church.

There are various approaches and theories through which the diaconate can be described. Some examples, without going into detail, include:

- Phenomenological approach: Describing the diaconate based on experience, rooted in the culture or context in which it occurs.
- Sociological approach: Exploring the diaconate within the sociological framework in which it operates.
- Historical approach: Examining the diaconate's development and transformation over time to gain historical insights.

The point is that the description of the diaconate can come from different sources. Therefore, when we talk about the diaconate or describe it, we must always answer the following questions: For whom and in whose interest are we writing? Who should and/or can benefit from this? This chapter about the theology of the diaconate is primarily directed towards the church of Christ (the church will be described in more detail later in the chapter) and mainly from the context of the Afrikaans churches in South Africa, for the benefit of society. However, it is important to note that over 80% of South Africans indicate that they are Christians and belong to a church. Meanwhile, Heyns (2024) reported that unemployment statistics in South Africa have risen to 33.5%, which equates to 8.4 million people. The implication of these facts within the South African context is that most of the poor people are members of a church. In this sense, the diaconate in the South African context is essentially an ecumenical ministry. Unfortunately, there are no real ecumenical efforts to address poverty in South Africa.

The theological foundation of the diaconate is important, as it is not

only a changing society and the needs of the world that call the church to service. The church is first and foremost called to service by the trinitarian God. It is God who makes the church uneasy and uncomfortable in this world through the resurrected Christ and the working of the Spirit. Christ was crucified and rose so that the world can be and function differently than it currently does. The Holy Spirit works particularly in and through the church to make the kingdom of God more and more a reality. Thus, the church does not change primarily because society changes; rather, the church changes because the love of Christ compels it, and the renewal of the Spirit directs and determines its participation in God's redemptive work in a changing society. It is the trinitarian God himself who calls, unsettles, and urges the church to change.

The church lives first in obedient responsibility towards God the Father, to whom creation belongs (Ps 24:1), driven by the love of Christ and empowered by the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12; Acts 1:8), and in responsibility towards the society of which the church is a part (Rom 1:14). The church bears witness in the world and has the privilege of participating in God's activities in this world. Therefore, there can be no distinction between its responsibility towards God and its responsibility towards the world (Matt 22:36–40). These are not two separate issues but one. Thus, Dietrich (2019a:15) quotes the Lutheran World Federation's (LWF) document *Diakonia in Context* (2009:29):

Diakonia is thus an intrinsic element of being Church and cannot be reduced to an activity by certain committed persons or made necessary by external social conditions. Diakonia is deeply related to what the Church celebrates in its liturgy and announces in its preaching. In the same way, liturgy and proclamation relate to diakonia.

Trinitarian foundation

The significant shift introduced by the missional understanding of the Trinity is the recognition of God as a missionary God (*missio Dei*). This concept of the *missio Dei* carries important implications for our understanding of the diaconate.

[M]issio Dei, a movement from God in which the church has its origin and arrives at its own movement, but goes beyond the church, finds its goal in the consummation of all creation in

God. ... The real point is not to spread the church but to spread the kingdom. The goal is not the glorification of the church but the glorification of the Father, through the Son in the Holy Spirit (Moltmann 1977:11).

Cilliers (2021:20) argues that the *missio Dei* helps us not only to understand God's mission soteriologically but also to see God's creation as *missio Dei*. Creation originates from the *missio Dei* and has it as its goal. Therefore, the *missio Dei* does not begin with the incarnation of Christ; it is not a crisis intervention by God after the fall. Instead, the *missio Dei* begins with creation when God creates through his 'Word'. Cilliers (2021:22) states this even more emphatically: 'God's mission is creation and creation is God's mission [*missio quad creaturae Dei*]'. This is why God's mission cannot be limited to the 'spiritual' or 'heavenly'; doing so would lead us to miss the essence of God's mission. God's sending of his Son is not inconsistent with God's creation; it actually confirms God's care for creation. The creative 'Word' in the creation events is also the sent 'Word' as *diakonos* to the world (Mk 10:45). Jesus' sending as deacon underscores and fulfils creation. As 'the church of Jesus Christ', the church is fundamentally dependent on Christ and on him alone. What the church is and the context in which it exists are bound to Christ, regardless of circumstances or culture. The *missio Dei* is more about 'being' and 'becoming' than about 'doing'. We are not human to become Christians; rather, we are Christians to become more human (Cilliers 2021:23). God's mission relates to the suffering and brokenness of ordinary people, and therefore, it also encompasses diaconate. Similarly, the sending of the Spirit confirms creation as *missio Dei*, as the Spirit is not poured out on the supernatural but on the natural, the flesh. The 'Spirit' here does not refer to a spiritual dimension outside of humanity and the world. God's Spirit dwells in people's bodies, sanctifying both body and life. It reminds us of the great deeds of God (Acts 2:11), which include our being created and re-created by the Father and the Son in God's image.

The *missio Dei* of the Father, Son, and Spirit is directed at the realities of this life. The new heaven and the new earth are not mutually exclusive. The earth is sanctified anew, humanity is created anew (recreated), and our bodies are raised anew (revived). This new earth, new humanity, and new life come through the merciful *dikaiosisune* of the Father, the diaconia of the Son, and the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit.

Purpose of diaconate

It is important to note that there are different understandings of the *missio Dei* that have both an indirect and direct influence on the understanding of the diaconate. First, when the *missio Dei* is understood to start with the incarnation rather than creation, it is directed at the world solely for the sake of the world. The implication is a focus on the individual and their needs; in other words, the individual or their need becomes the motivation for diaconal ministry. A second understanding of the *missio Dei* focuses on the world solely for the sake of the coming of the kingdom. This has the implication of spiritualising the diaconate, suggesting that it consists solely of prayers for the sick and those in need, without any physical involvement to alleviate their needs. The *missio Dei* must be directed to the world for both the sake of the world and the coming of the kingdom. Therefore, the motivation for the diaconate is not born from the needs of humanity or the world, but from the heart of God. In this case, the diaconate adopts a holistic approach: needs are alleviated so that God may be glorified. The primary goal of the diaconate is the glorification of God. The church's involvement is not motivated by guilt, but by obedience to the head of the church and a desire to honour God.

The purpose of the diaconate is, ultimately, the glorification of God. The purpose of humanity and all of creation, as part of the *missio Dei*, is the glorification of God. This becomes particularly clear from the *koinonia* within the Trinity. Mercy belongs to the essence of God (2 Cor 2:3). The diaconate is part of the essence of God as embodied in Christ (Mk 10:45). Christ lives in obedience to honour the Father, and the Spirit testifies and empowers to glorify the Son (Jn 16:14). Therefore, the criterion for any form of diaconate is that it must glorify God (Jn 12:26), for then God will also honour the servant. No diaconate takes place without doxology. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, *doxa* signifies divine power, strength, and glory; in other words, the divine revelation of splendour and beauty. God's power, strength, and glory are revealed where the church participates in the *missio Dei* through diaconal ministries. *Doxa* is the term used for both God the Father and God the Son. Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father (Rom 6:4). Jesus was taken up to the Father in glory (1 Tim 3:16). Christ ascended into heaven to the glory of the Lord (Phil 2:11). Thus, the Son glorifies the Father through his obedience, and the Father glorifies the Son through his resurrection and ascension.

The purpose of Christ's mission is reconciliation: reconciliation between God and humanity, between humanity and humanity, and

between humanity and creation. To effect this reconciliation, Christ acts as the great deacon, for the goal can only be achieved through self-sacrificing service. Reconciliation can only occur where justice is served. Where reconciliation is accepted and believed, God is glorified by people, and people participate in the church, which is also part of God's glorification. That is why Christ is called 'the hope of glory' (Col 1:27). The Spirit glorifies the Father and the Son by instilling faith in humanity, living in community/*koinonia* with people, and filling their lives with freedom and gratitude. Thus, with the Son and through the Son, the Spirit glorifies the Father; and with the Father and through the Father, the Spirit glorifies the Son. With the Son and the Spirit, and through the Son and the Spirit, the church glorifies the Father.

God does not desire glory without his glorification through man and creation in the Spirit. ... God does not desire to be united with himself without the uniting of all things with him. It is in this context that the vision in Revelation belongs in which 'Salvation' (*soteria*) come to (RSV 'belongs to') our God and to the Lamb (Rev 7:10; 12:10; 19:1). The 'salvation' which God receives in the end is offered to him through glorification, through thanksgiving and the pleasure of the new creation in redeemed existence (Moltmann 1977:63).

What is clear from the above quote is that glorification, salvation, and *koinonia* are interdependent and grounded in the Trinity. These three ministries are an essential part of the diaconate. There can be no diaconate without the glorification of God, the salvation of man, and communion with the Holy Spirit and the saints.

If the diaconate and *koinonia* are interdependent, then it is evident that the diaconate applies to both rich and poor people. For example, Bosch (2012:85–124) writes that the Gospel of Luke is aimed at the rich and the poor. But who are the poor and who are the rich? Poverty is multidimensional and must be understood holistically. It arises from economic, social, and physical poverty but also includes psychological, moral, and religious poverty. The poor are those who experience violence and injustice but are unable to defend themselves. They live on the border of physical and spiritual death, as they have nothing to live for and nothing to offer life. The poor exist at the mercy of others, with empty and open hands. Poverty, therefore, signifies dependence and openness.

Wealth is also multidimensional and often arises from economic

exploitation, social superiority, self-satisfaction, and the ignoring of the rights of others, as many wealthy individuals do not live with gratitude towards anything or anyone. Wealth is, therefore, an attitude built upon one's possessions. Many wealthy people live with closed hands, not in *koinonia* with others. Such individuals will only recognise their own need and poverty when they begin to live in *koinonia* with the poor (Moltmann 1977:79).

The diaconate, therefore, aims to address the needs of both rich and poor individuals by fostering community among them, with creation, and with God. The question now is: Who should carry out the diaconate? Or, how do we participate in the *missio Dei*?

If a grain of wheat does not fall into the ground and die, it remains just one single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it; but he who esteems his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. *If anyone wants to serve Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there my servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him* (Jn 12:24–26, emphasis added).

It is therefore clear that the followers of Christ, the church, are the deacon – not just some individuals or those who are called to the office of deacon, but every believer, everyone who is baptised. This brings us to the relationship between the diaconate, the church, and the kingdom.

Diaconate, church, and kingdom

In her theological understanding and teaching about the diaconate, the church exists in the following three dimensions: before God, before the world, and before the future. These dimensions shape the church's ministry, reflecting its identity as an 'open' church – open to God, to humanity, and to the future of God and humanity (Moltmann 1977:2). According to Reformed confessional writings, Christ is the church's foundation, strength, and hope – its beginning and end. Where Christ serves as the head of the church, ruling alone, the church lives in obedience to him, participating in God's mission in the world. In this way, the church experiences freedom from the world while bringing liberation within it, following Christ's example and empowered by the Holy Spirit, who establishes signs of the kingdom.

Confessing the lordship of Christ over the church means that the

church's diaconate must be grounded solely in the trinitarian God, as revealed through his 'Word and Spirit'. In other words, every aspect of the diaconate takes place under Christ's rule and in imitation of him. The theological understanding of Christ's rule over his church is therefore crucial to our understanding of the diaconate, as it requires the church to be recognised as inherently both a political and social entity (Moltmann 1977:5). This perspective significantly influences our understanding of the diaconate, which cannot be seen solely as a service of mercy. This also endows the diaconate with a political and social dimension that encompasses issues such as structural injustice, human dignity, and more. The deacon, therefore, embodies not only the form of a servant but also that of an envoy or representative of the king, and thus possesses authority in Christ (cf. Collins 1990).

Yet, in the post-Christian era in which we live, believers, especially Protestant Christians, are increasingly inclined to detach their Christian identity from participation in the local church, even while they may still believe in the Church. This is particularly reflected in the decline in membership numbers in mainline churches. Consequently, many individuals consider themselves Christians and make significant contributions to improving both individual and societal circumstances without belonging to an institutionalised church. Thus, being a member of the church is now often seen as an addition to one's Christian identity rather than an intrinsic part of what it means to be a Christian (Paas 2019:187).

In connection with the previous paragraph, this raises the question of the priesthood of all believers. During the Christian era, when society was viewed as predominantly Christian, it was challenging to recognise and develop the 'priesthood of all believers'; hence, it primarily grew 'upwards' in our relationship with God and 'inwards' in our relationships with fellow believers, but not outwardly – into the world. In the post-Christian era in which African churches currently find themselves, we now have the opportunity to build the priesthood 'outwards' to the world. Yet, we encounter a 'hyper-Protestantism' that uses the 'outward' priesthood of all believers to question the phenomenon of church. This leads to a detachment between the individual's relationship with God and the individual's relationship with the church as the body of Christ. The individualistic view posits that God first has a relationship with isolated individuals and builds his church through them. Paas (2019:191) argues against this perspective, stating that the latest biblical and church historical research indicates that the church precedes the individual and

that the individual finds his or her identity through participation in the church:

God has, first and foremost, a relationship with the Church, and through the Church, He builds relationships with individuals. To be a Christian means to belong to the Church, and thus to belong to God.

The implications of this understanding of the Church's role in the diaconate can be summarised as follows: the Church is the body of Christ, the great diakonos. Believers are baptised into the Church through their baptism (Adna 2019:62–64), as a diakonos (Jn 12:26). The diaconate therefore emerges and finds its identity in *koinonia* with the Triune God through participation in the *missio Dei*, as well as *koinonia* and participation in the congregation. Dietrich (2019b:83–96) writes an entire chapter on the perspectives from baptism on diaconal ecclesiology:

This is not only related to unity in faith and the need to work for growth in agreement on faith issues, but it also means unity in life; unity in the Christian Church's common effort to serve each other and the whole creation (p. 95).

Under the headship of Christ and through the operation of the Spirit, the church does not have a mission or a diaconate. It is not the church that administers Christ and the Spirit through preaching, sacraments, ministries, or traditions. No, Christ, as head, administers through his Spirit the church's proclamation and faith, sacraments and grace, ministries, and traditions (Moltmann 1977:64). The true church cannot therefore be limited to 'pure gospel preaching' and the 'administration of the sacraments'. The church is present where 'the revelation of the Spirit' occurs (1 Cor 12:7). Moltmann (1977:65) further states that the true church is where the thanksgiving songs of the redeemed are sung, the *koinonia* of love is experienced, and the sighing of the Spirit is heard. In the call for freedom, there is the church. The true church is the church 'under the cross'. Where the joy of God can be heard, there is the church. The true church is joy in the Spirit. Following Newbigin, who describes missions as the explosion of joy, I would describe diaconate as the explosion of gratitude.

Diaconate is Christian, ecclesiological, and spiritual in essence, and where it is understood in this way, it is clear that the church is the only agent that can practise diaconate. Not because it is the only organisation that does good deeds and alleviates need, but because it is the only organisation that is driven by the love of God and acts in obedience to

God for his glory. The church and her diaconate are therefore about a community of believers who belong to God and worship God (Paas 2019:190 ff.).

The church can live out its vocation, ministry, faith, and obedience in no other way than in, with, and through the congregation in this world. A missionary church, which always has a missionary and diaconal ministry practice, never becomes alienated from society and never finds itself in social isolation, but becomes a living hope, a figure of the kingdom in the midst of society where it found her (Moltmann 1977:xvi). This is currently one of the biggest challenges faced by Afrikaans congregations, which often live in social isolation from the multiracial society, especially when the community of believers gathers to worship God. Furthermore, the Afrikaans congregations also live in isolation from the social contexts where poverty is experienced at its worst. The wonderful diaconal work that Afrikaans congregations do, in most cases, does not lead to *koinonia* with the community of believers but is often a ministry alongside the community of believers, consisting of a few individuals or simply a professional service. It is therefore entirely correct to speak of the compassion ‘arm’ of the church, which indicates the distance between the church and her diaconal ministry.

In contrast to a “cultural ecclesiology” or “folk church”, a Christological ecclesiology – where Christ is the head of the church – challenges the diaconate of the church. It is precisely through the diaconal ministry of the church that the incarnation of Christ occurs in society. Every diaconal act and statement refers to Christ and is also a statement about his church. However, Christ is much more than just the church and cannot be confined to it. He is not only the head of the church; he is also the king of his kingdom, in which the church is merely a servant. Thus, where Christ, as head of the church, is confessed and followed, believers place their total lives under his rule (2 Cor 5:15) in his kingdom, and every believer is/becomes a deacon/servant (Jn 12:26). Where the honour of God is concerned and where Christ’s interests are served, diaconia must never lead to division in the church or in the wider society.

The unity of the Triune God is the goal of uniting humankind and creation with the Father and the Son in the Spirit. The history of the kingdom of God on earth is fundamentally the history of reuniting what is separated and restoring what is broken, all of which contributes to the glorification of God. If the unity of God were described in the doctrine of the Trinity by *koinonia* instead of by *una natura*, this idea would not seem so unusual (Moltmann 1977:62).

Where diaconate does not foster *koinonia* between the rich and the poor, God is not honoured, and no true diaconate has taken place. I found Moltmann's description on this matter both challenging and informative.

Moltmann (1977:126–130) discusses not only Christ in the church but also in society, specifically his presence among the least. He bases his arguments on Matthew 25:31–46, where Jesus, as the Son of God, serves as the judge of the world. Moltmann argues that the coming and/or designated judge is already present in the world, albeit 'hidden' in this age, within 'the least of the brothers': those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, or imprisoned. These 'least of the brothers' do not solely refer to church members; since the judgement in this passage is universal, the reference to the 'least of the brothers' is also universal. We see the 'least brother' most clearly in the One who is speaking on his way of suffering to Calvary, enduring hunger, thirst, nakedness, and imprisonment: the Son of Man from Nazareth.

Jesus' identification with both the judge and the 'least of the brothers' parallels Christ's identification with his church, the community of believers. Just as Christ is present in his church, so the judge is present in the 'least of the brothers'.

However, if the thesis '*ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*' is to be considered valid, then this story, with its promise of the presence of the Judge of the world, becomes part of the doctrine of the church and the place where she is to be found (Moltmann 1977:127).

There are also other passages in Scripture where an individual becomes 'a Christ-like Christ' to someone else. Typically, it is the overlooked person, the Lazarus at the rich man's door, who becomes like Christ – a saviour and a judge.

The diaconate, or Christian programmes of charity, works of mercy, care for the poor, and developmental work from the church often obscure this point. Within the church, we may believe we can help the hungry, thirsty, naked, and imprisoned Christ with a little effort. But it is not solely about love in the diaconate; it is also about faith – the faith that in the 'least of the brothers', Christ awaits the acts of love from the justified person. The 'least of the brothers' are not merely the objects of the diaconate; they are the latent presence of the saviour and the judge of the world, the point that determines salvation or judgement. Thus, the hidden presence of the returning Christ in the 'least of the brothers' belongs to ecclesiology. When Matthew 25 is read from the perspective of ecclesiology, it brings a tension within the church that finds its truth in the presence of Christ. For where is the true church? In the community of the faithful, where

the Word and the sacraments are shared, or in the latent brotherhood of the judge hidden in the ‘least of the brothers’? (Moltmann 1977:128). The apocalyptic Christ – the poor, hungry, forgotten judge – primarily stands outside the door of the church and the community.

But if the church, in appealing to the exalted Christ’s promises of authority, understands itself as his earthly presence, must it not also, and with equal emphasis, seek the presence of the world’s humiliated Judge? Evidently, there are two brotherhoods of Christ: the professed and professing brotherhood, which is the community of the exalted one, and the unknown and disowned brotherhood of the least of men with the humiliated Christ. If the church appeals to the crucified and risen Christ, must it not represent this double brotherhood of Christ within itself and be present with word and Spirit, sacrament, fellowship, and all creative powers among the poor, the hungry, and the captives? (Moltmann 1977:129)

In the apostolate and/or mission, we learn what the church is. In the ‘least brothers’, we learn where the church belongs. When the church recognises God outside the church, it is grateful for these signs that God is greater than the church and that his presence and saving acts extend beyond it. Consequently, the church becomes involved in the kingdom work of God (Moltmann 1977:65).

From the above, it is clear that we cannot simply talk about Christianity outside the church or the work of the Spirit outside the church. The question is not how people outside the church respond to the church and its ministries, but rather how the church responds to the presence of Christ in the least, in those outside the church. The intention is therefore not to bring Christians outside the church into the church – that is the work of the Spirit – but rather to make the church visible through the diaconate in Christ’s promised presence: *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*.

Diaconate and salvation

When the diaconate and the salvation are understood as trinitarian, salvation inherently carries sociological and political implications, as God’s salvation must be understood holistically. A diaconal church that lives under the lordship of Jesus Christ and cooperates in the coming of the kingdom of God cannot be apolitical in nature. Salvation is not merely about living and dying blissfully; it is a call to participate in the new community in Christ (the church) and in the redemptive ministry of Christ’s rule. In this sense, salvation is always revolutionary.

The redeemed are thus compelled to rebel against and testify against exploitation and oppression – of both people and nature. Revolutionary theology understands this revolution as the outworking of an inner conversion, rooted in *rooted in regeneration (rebirth), reformation (reformation), and renovatio mundi (renewal of the world)* (Moltmann 1977:16). Salvation, therefore, is not only participation in Christ's victory but also in his suffering, as Sunquist (2013) argues in *Understanding Christian Mission: Participating in Suffering and Glory*. Diaconate can and, where necessary, must also be understood as revolution in the church of The diaconate, then, can and, where necessary, must be understood as a revolutionary practice within the church of Christ, lived in the light of the Christian messianic tradition.

It is an observable reality that the poor, hungry, oppressed, and marginalised read and interpret the Bible differently from the wealthy and those in positions of power. This underscores the church's political responsibility, particularly in the current South African context, to seek *koinonia* (fellowship) with the marginalised. The ecclesiastical diaconate must actively work toward liberation from unjust and oppressive social structures – through people, with people, and for people. Thus, the diaconate and salvation pertain not only to the priestly vocation of the church but also to her prophetic and royal vocations.

Conclusion

The diaconate originates from the very essence of the trinitarian God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The diaconal vocation of the Church is both a privilege and a responsibility, inviting participation in God's acts of salvation and a commitment to stand against every form and consequence of injustice (Moltmann 1977:17; Belhar Confession 1986). As a Christian ministry, the diaconate seeks to enable all people and all creation to partake in the salvation and blessings of the Church (Acts 3:26). In doing so, the Church serves as the body of Christ and becomes a blessing to creation (Gen 12:3), ultimately bringing glory to God.

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CHAPTER 8

DIACONIA AS A PRACTICE OF HOSPITALITY?

Michael Biehl

The poor and vulnerable within the European tradition

When I was a minister in a parish in Northern Germany, the St Martin's Day procession was an annual event at the congregation's kindergarten. In the early evening of 11 November, there would be a procession of children who sang while walking and carried self-made lanterns. Although this was a Lutheran church, St Martin and St Nicholas are two saints whose days are celebrated in the church calendar. Both saints are associated with helping the poor. St Martin, a Christian soldier, is said to have cut his cloak in half with his sword so that a beggar could cover himself against the cold. According to some versions of the legend, the beggar was none other than Christ himself. St Nicholas, Bishop of Smyrna, is said to have secretly walked around at night, leaving some of the church's riches on doorsteps for those in need to find in the morning. On St Nicholas' Day, children would find a small gift in their shoes left outside the door.

We share these stories with the children, and powerful symbols such as saints remind even adults of the Christian virtues of *miser cordia*, compassion, and charity. If you walk through German cities today, you will find more and more people begging, some of them visibly disabled. People's willingness to give depends on a number of factors. Some argue that beggars are part of gangs who make a lot of money by exploiting those who display their handicaps. Others argue that no one should encourage begging because there are city and state provisions for those in need – they are looked after. Still others debate whether giving food is better than giving money, fearing that recipients might use the money to buy alcohol or other drugs. A more recent approach is the movement of the 'tables', shops where needy families can receive food and other everyday

necessities donated by supermarkets or bakeries.¹ Some are operated by church congregations, while many more are run by volunteers.

These remarks touch on some aspects of ongoing debates about charity and compassion in my German context. Will the reference to public provision relieve people of the uneasy feeling that they should give – out of compassion? But why are there so many suffering, and why do so many lack enough money for their daily food? Do recipients need to meet certain criteria to deserve such charitable gifts?² Should it matter what recipients do with what is given? And why is the question of begging so individualised, while the issue of why poverty exists in the midst of an affluent society is not really addressed?

The debate surrounding public versus private charity and welfare, and who deserves assistance, is an old one. I will begin by tracing it back to the time of the Reformation, as an interesting development emerged during that period. Sociologist and religious scholar Sigrun Kahl (2005) offers a detailed examination of how the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist traditions shaped the perception of the poor and their status in society. She argues that these historical patterns continue to influence the logic of modern welfare systems in Europe (Kahl 2005). The following summarises the ideal-typical picture she paints.

In the pre-Reformation era, the Roman Catholic Church accepted poverty as a given. The poor were always part of the community, had the right to beg, and were integrated into society. Roman Catholic doctrine emphasised ‘*caritas*’, or charity, promoting the idea that helping the poor was a religious duty. Avarice was considered one of the seven deadly sins, and almsgiving was encouraged with little discrimination between the deserving and undeserving poor. It was regarded as a meritorious act that could contribute to the giver’s salvation. The poor were seen as embodiments of Christ’s suffering, and according to Matthew 25, ‘what you have done to the least of these, you have done to me’ – thus, giving was considered a good deed. There are many narratives of figures such as St Martin and St Nicholas, whose saintly characters are exemplified by their generosity towards the poor.

With the Reformation, Lutheranism introduced a significant shift by reconceptualising the notion of work. Martin Luther’s teachings promoted

1 <https://www.tafel.de/english-information> (accessed 14 June 2024).

2 Smith and Nel (2020) provide an instructive example of encountering a beggar on the street. They describe giving him some money along with this encouragement: ‘After making him understand the fact that no one owes him the good life he yearns to live and that he needed to create it himself, his eyes beamed with hope and he seemed to have breathed an air of relief on discovering life anew’ (2020:2).

the idea that work was a 'calling' and that any form of work was a service to God. Consequently, work was viewed not merely as a necessity but as a source of dignity for all, regardless of their station in life. The belief was that everyone who worked sincerely would receive an income. From this new perspective on work, poverty came to be seen as a test from God, with a tendency to attribute it to individual laziness or immorality.

Calvinism, particularly in its Reformed Protestant variant, elevated the notion of work as a calling to an even higher level. It emphasised disciplined, rational, and relentless labour as a sign of one's election by God. Poverty was thus perceived as an indication of being unchosen by God and as a punishment for sin. This belief led to a system in which the poor were held responsible for their own plight.

Kahl began her research after becoming aware of the significant differences between the modern welfare systems in European countries. She discovered that the religiously rooted attitudes towards poverty and poor relief have had a long-lasting impact on these systems. The Roman Catholic approach resulted in decentralised, church-led relief systems that focused on individual acts of charity rather than on state-organised welfare programmes. In Catholic countries such as Italy, Spain, and France, the state assumed responsibility for poor relief much later, and even today, public assistance is often fragmented and less generous.

In contrast, Lutheran countries such as Denmark, Sweden, and Germany developed comprehensive welfare states early on, with uniform social assistance programmes. These systems were financed through taxes and aimed to provide uniform relief to all poor individuals, with an emphasis on encouraging or even forcing the able-bodied poor to work.

In countries influenced by Calvinism, relief efforts were often institutionalised through workhouses. These institutions sought to reform the behaviour of the able-bodied poor, utilising their labour while providing only minimal aid. Although private charity continued to play an important role, there was little doubt about who the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor were. In contemporary times, nations such as the United Kingdom and the United States have adopted work-first policies that prioritise individual responsibility. These policies often provide limited social assistance, relying heavily on private sector initiatives to fill the gaps.

Work and social welfare

It is enlightening to observe how religious worldviews and attitudes toward poverty and work have shaped the conceptualisation of charity, as these influences are evident in the foundations of modern welfare systems. This is particularly notable in the evolution of the concept of ‘diaconia’ in Germany, where the term gained prominence in the 19th century. This period coincided with the First Industrial Revolution and rapid urbanisation, which plunged large sectors of society into abominable conditions.³

In this context, Germany’s *Sozialgesetzgebung* (social policy) focused on protecting factory workers. Initial legislation addressed workplace accidents, followed by the introduction of health insurance and later retirement funds. These state-organised measures, aimed at assisting the working poor, were also intended to counteract the rising influence of socialism and workers’ unions.

For those without work, as well as vulnerable groups like women and children, separate policies known as *Sozialfürsorge* (social care) were developed. These policies sought to address behaviours deemed deviant or immoral, which were believed to threaten the *Volkskörper* – the body of the people – through issues like prostitution or widespread cholera epidemics, exacerbated by the unhygienic conditions in overcrowded cities (Rosenhaft 2004). Emerging disciplines such as public health and public order played a crucial role in investigating these issues.⁴ A significant proportion of poverty was attributed to social and moral deficiencies. In response, voluntary organisations took on the responsibility of caring for impoverished individuals, with particular attention to women – especially mothers – and children (Rosenhaft 2004).

The language of diaconia

One of the consequences of the differing religious roots and the associated perspectives on work and poverty in various social systems is that the term ‘diaconia’ was not the most commonly used to reflect upon and discuss these issues. The terminology employed to describe

3 Clark (2003) describes how the abominable social conditions in the 19th century gave rise to social sciences and public intervention.

4 See Foucault (2006), who extensively studied this aspect.

these complex constellations was as diverse as the situations themselves. In Germany, state offices discussed social policies, while volunteer organisations, often religious, focused on acts of love (*Liebestätigkeit*), saving work (*Rettungsarbeit*), or inner mission. ‘Diaconia’ was then introduced by German volunteer organisations comprised of like-minded pious individuals who founded associations and institutions, such as orphanages.⁵ These organisations were inter-denominational, and some were critical of the established churches, which they claimed were not looking after the poor, despite being Christian.⁶

Poverty and poor social conditions can be observed across the globe, underscoring the urgent need for the transformation of contemporary societies, marked worldwide by such social conditions. This necessity is a central theme of the 2022 ecumenical document *Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diakonia*.⁷ A key motivation behind drafting the document was to address the tension between large Christian agencies (primarily ACT Alliance members) and churches (mainly WCC members) regarding how to act and frame theological reflection on their actions. Many of these agencies administer state funds, particularly from Scandinavian countries and Germany, where the Lutheran tradition is influential. These funds come with stipulations. As a result, Christian faith-based agencies often prefer to use terms like ‘social’ or ‘development work’, arguing that diaconia ‘does not communicate well in the secular world, or that it would signal a “churchy” move away from professional working methods’ (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:15). Those working with large intergovernmental organisations, such as the United Nations (UN), or within interfaith contexts, may also find overtly Christian language a barrier to building trust and fostering engagement. Conversely, churches in Africa have

5 ‘It must be recognized that it was the modern diaconal movement that emerged in Germany in the 1830s that paved the way for understanding diakonia as the social ministry of the church’ (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022).

6 Cf. Christian and Hermelink (2024) for the instructive survey on how this is reflected in the debate about the place of diaconia in the theological disciplines.

7 *Called to Transformation* uses ‘diakonia’, which is used whenever the document is quoted, otherwise ‘diaconia’.

expressed concerns that such agencies frequently sideline them, choosing instead to collaborate locally with NGOs.⁸

The authors of the ecumenical document observe that the term *diaconia* is not universally recognised or used across Christian churches. Its usage is more common in certain denominational traditions and regions than in others. To bridge this gap, the document seeks to introduce and define *ecumenical diaconia* by addressing three key issues: 1) Definition and mission: Establishing a clear definition of diaconia and articulating its relationship to the overall mission of the Church; 2) The agent: Identifying the primary agents of diaconia. Should the emphasis lie with congregations, churches, or specialised organisations?; and 3) Scope of services: Clarifying the types of services offered under the banner of diaconia and the roles played by various actors in the field.

The answer to the first problem is pursued throughout the document, as follows:

To reflect on diakonia is therefore an invitation to give new expression to the vocation to be part of God's mission to the world, and to understand this call (*vocatio*) as advocacy (*advocatio*) and if necessary provocation (*pro-vocatio*); the first affirming the situation and the wellbeing of the other as fundamental for how discipleship is performed, the other acknowledging that this way of doing diakonia will provoke resistance and contradiction, however always convinced that it will be transformative, calling into being (which is the original meaning of provoke) new ways of seeing, judging and acting (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:15).

8 'Some church leaders, especially in Africa, have expressed their perception of ACT Alliance in the first place as an alliance of agencies based in the global North, and that in their activities they would rather work with secular NGOs than with local churches. This gave churches and their leaders a feeling of being bypassed, and of having their diaconal competence and work ignored. They therefore raised the question if ACT Alliance in its practice was an expression of the ecumenical movement and of all churches belonging to it. The specialized agencies on their side claim that their mandate is wider than the churches; their target group is the poor and marginalized, independent of religious affiliation. They also refer to the professional standards that they are obliged to follow when implementing projects, responding to requirements of governmental back-donors. Local churches will often lack the needed institutional capacity, they claim. For such reasons, agencies often prefer professional local NGOs as partners' (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:82).

One can easily discern mission language here, particularly the closeness to *missio Dei*.

The answer to the second problem is that diaconia is both what the church is and what it should *do*. On initial examination, this appears to allow for different mandates under the heading of diaconia. There are two distinct categories of entities within the Christian community: those who are the church and those who act on its behalf. The document proposes that the shared language of diaconia can serve to bridge the gap by enabling development organisations to communicate their inherent Christian character within the context of the Christian family.

The third answer is that diaconia is defined as being both faith-based and rights-based.

To be rights-based refers on the one hand to the biblical concept of justice and the prophetic heritage of unmasking systemic injustice and defending the rights of the poor. On the other hand, it refers to human rights and their central role in the formation of a just society. The commitment to human rights has convinced actors of ecumenical diakonia to include advocacy in their work with the task of bringing duty-bearers to account. This also helps us to see how diakonia is different from benevolent action, and that it does not aim to replace responsibilities of other stakeholders, including governments (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:16).

Being rights-based changes the objectives of diaconia from granting benevolence to asserting rights. This highlights the reality of poverty as a consequence of denied rights and exclusion by a particular economic system, and it situates the responsibility to act with the public. It also fosters cooperation with other stakeholders. Human rights and faith are thus interconnected.

Faith is biblical, and its interpretation or application in terms of protection of human rights is defined by agape. Faith gives both depth and passion to human rights. The depth and the passion find its expression in theological integrity, in spiritual depth, and in moral force, that purely secular approaches may lack. Faith communities believe that all people are created in the image of God. Faith communities will never stop affirming the dignity of all people. Human rights sharpen the eyes of

faith, so that the structural scope of the needs of the world are seen. Human rights help to frame diaconal work that achieves lasting change for the better. It draws our attention to the universal scale; beyond our own borders to the regional and global scale. It prevents us from falling prey to particularism or sectarianism. Therefore, faith-based and rights-based actions affirm each other. Affirming the dignity of all people means acknowledging that every single person is a rightsholder (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:70).

Diaconia in the African context

It will be interesting to trace the religious and ecclesiological roots of approaches in South Africa that could be termed diaconal. The South African context differs significantly from that of continental Europe, with its strong Reformed traditions. South Africa's religious landscape is characterized by a multitude of denominations, a multi-religious society, the historical legacy of apartheid, and the absence of a state church. Perhaps the most notable factor is that an estimated 80% of Christians in South Africa belong to black or coloured independent, charismatic, or Pentecostal churches (cf. eds. Ross, Asamoah-Gyadu & Johnson 2020).⁹ *Called to Transformation* includes a section addressing the African Instituted Churches' perspective on ecumenical diaconia. These churches are described as communities whose members seek 'Christ the Liberator who did not agree with the forms of Christianity that was being propagated'. The document suggests that the fellowship within these churches often engaged in activities aligning with the principles of diaconia, even though they did not explicitly use the term (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:95). The section on the African context in *Called to Transformation* highlights the rich heritage of the older churches of (mission) schools and hospitals and more recent co-operation in addressing issues of migration, extractivism, ethnic violence, fighting corruption, food security and much more (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:101-103).

Following the observation in *Called to Transformation* that the language of diaconia is not used in all regions and denominations, it is reasonable to assume that many churches conceptualise most of the corresponding activities under the term 'mission'. To explore this further, I reviewed several papers by African scholars who explicitly incorporate

9 See the section titled "A Profile" by Maluleke (2020:53-54).

diaconia in their reflections. In the comprehensive *International Handbook of Diakonia*, a Lutheran theologian from Tanzania defines poverty eradication as the primary objective of the church's diaconia, grounding this perspective in the biblical witness.

It is therefore important for the church to know that poverty eradication is one of its major responsibilities through the ministry of diakonia. This is to say that it is the responsibility of the church, the body of Christ, to care passionately and genuinely for the poor. The church must step up its responsibility and be the first line in addressing poverty, knowing that the struggle to end poverty should start with the community of believers by addressing the real needs of an individual or a group (Mbilu 2021:101–103).¹⁰

Knoetze's contribution on *diaconia* in the South African context suggests an understanding that aligns closely with the approaches of government and development agencies. However, Knoetze argues that while these entities primarily focus on addressing issues, diaconia places an emphasis on the people afflicted by poverty. Although the church actively participates in combating poverty, diaconia is understood 'as the calling of each local church within the community in which they are living is to make God known through deeds of mercy' (Knoetze 2019:159). According to Knoetze (2019:159), *diaconia* is one ministry of the church, inherently interconnected with others such as *kerygma* (proclamation) and *koinonia* (fellowship). This perspective appears to frame *diaconia* as a form of mission, rooted in the church's participation in the *missio Dei* – what God is doing in the world. Knoetze asserts that this participation calls the church to embody the actions of Jesus: living by grace and forgiveness to build his kingdom (Knoetze 2019:157). Knoetze (2019:149-150) asserts, drawing on a reading of Luke's Gospel, that *diaconia* is a deeply biblical concept. He emphasises its value in distinguishing the characteristics of the church's actions from those of other agents, such as NGOs or government.

Terrey and Nel (2020) explore *diaconia* through the lens of Spiritual Leadership Capital (SLC), situating it within the context of poverty, exclusion, and the legacy of apartheid. Their paper highlights the

10 See the section on 'Ecumenical Diakonia in an African context' in *Called to Transformation* (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:101-103).

transformative potential of leaders and congregations, emphasising the role of SLC in triggering change. This approach, rooted in pastoral care, focuses on empowering individuals to cope with their struggles and facilitating personal and communal transformation (Smith & Nel 2020).

Beukes and Beukes (2023) take a different approach, discussing various theories of social justice and holding church *diaconia* accountable for addressing systemic issues and transforming the lives of marginalised individuals. The authors examine different secular theories of social justice and adopt a systemic approach, emphasising the social and political role of the church in advocating for a more just redistribution of resources, the recognition of different groups, and their opportunity for representation.

These brief examples illustrate that issues of justice, such as poverty and exclusion, are high on the agenda of those South African mission theologians who utilise diaconal language to address the church's role while also considering this as part of the church's mission. I do not see these approaches as contradictory or as alternatives. The merit of the *Ecumenical Diakonia* document is that it attempts to hold together the different levels of intervention in forms of diaconia, both through the assertion that diaconia is what the church *is* and *does*, and by defining diaconia as faith-based and rights-based. One insight of the document can be found in the inherent question of which 'body' of the church is best suited to tackle the different tasks of diaconia.

Called to transformation

Those familiar with the documents of the WCC family will easily recognise the continuity between the WCC mission document *Together Towards Life* (TTL), the transformative discipleship emphasised at the Arusha World Missionary Conference, and its resonance in the *Ecumenical Diakonia* document.¹¹ Before concluding, I would like to make two observations along these lines. First, the parallel between the diaconia debate and the mission debate, and second, on the parallel difficulties to place diaconia within the theological disciplines.

Ecumenical diaconia encompasses proclamation as prophetic witness, denouncing injustice.¹² Conversely, diaconia, as the nature and practice

11 For example, the section 'Diakonia as discipleship' (World Council of Churches & ACT Alliance 2022:48–50).

12 'Diakonia and proclamation' (World Council of Churches & ACT Alliance 2022:50).

of the church, can be related to all four traditional signs of the church: proclamation/witness (martyria), community (koinonia), celebration (leiturgia), and service (diaconia). *Ecumenical Diakonia* speaks of diaconia as what the church *is* and what the church *does*. ‘Reflection on ecumenical diakonia requires understanding both dimensions: the churches’ being and their joint action as a worldwide communion of Christians and institutions’ (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:10). In another passage, we read that diaconia is an integral dimension of the church’s nature and mission (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:47–48, 110–111), and its ecumenical character links it with questions of unity. I interpret this dual perspective of diaconia as relating to what it means to be the church and to diaconia as the service the church owes the world, analogous to Bosch’s (1991) observation that mission is an *intentional practice* of the church (evangelism) and a *dimension* of the church’s being, joining in God’s mission.¹³ The debates on mission and diaconia are converging, and in many passages of the WCC document, diaconia could well be replaced by mission. One could argue that ecumenical mission is diaconal and ecumenical diaconia is missional. As an intentional practice, ecumenical diaconia follows God’s preferential option for the poor, expressed in biblical laws designed to safeguard the lives of the marginalised, which the church seeks to implement today in the form of human rights advocacy and social justice. *Called to Transformation* even includes a section on diaconia from the margins, paralleling it to the mission from the margins section in TTL (ed. Keum 2013).¹⁴

The other point I wanted to briefly make is that, for this reason, diaconia seems to encounter similar difficulties in finding its appropriate place within the theological disciplines. As a reflection on service and activity, it can be situated within practical theology, alongside mission, and the reflection and articulation of activities related to pastoral care (Smith & Nel 2020) or the care of congregations for those suffering in or around them. However, where does it find its place if we follow the line that diaconia is what the church *is* and that diaconia encompasses all expressions of what the church *does* in relation to individuals and society, including public theology? At least in continental Europe, particularly in the German context, we can observe a distinct and much stronger reflection on diaconal practices outside of practical theology (Albrecht & Hermelink 2024). This is related to the unique organisational character of

13 This is actually taken from the German missiologist Hans-Werner Gensichen.

14 ‘Diakonia from the margins’ (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:38–40).

diaconal institutions, which rely on state subsidies and fulfil tasks of the state in a spirit of subsidiarity. This reflection pertains to public theology and access to public goods for all. (This brings us back to the question of the extent to which theological traditions inform not only the churches' approach to diaconia but also the approach of social welfare systems in different European states).

Transforming hospitality?

It is this iridescence and ambiguity in the use of diaconia that leads me to state that the discussion of ecumenical diaconia begins to replace the discussion of mission (ed. Nordstokke 2009; ed. Messenger 2004).¹⁵ An earlier and instructive example of the closeness of mission and diaconia language is found in two documents by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). It published *Mission in Context* in 2004 and *Diakonia in Context* in 2009, both featuring the same qualifying terms – transformation, reconciliation, empowerment – in their subtitles. The WCC document of 2022 repeatedly states that diaconia is part of the mission of the church (see discussion above)¹⁶ – it includes the ministries of the earlier missionary movement under diaconia, appropriates mission from the margins, and discusses the relationship between the services of the church and proclamation. It explains, citing the ACT Alliance code of conduct, that those who follow it would not confuse diaconia with an invitation to join the church. It addresses diapraxis in multi-religious contexts and presents the WCC's pilgrimage for justice and peace as a model for working together for the common good within the international framework of

15 '... diakonia is a theological concept that points to the very identity and mission of the Church. Another is its practical implication in the sense that diakonia is a call to action, as a response to challenges of human suffering, injustice and care for creation' (ed. Nordstokke 2009:8).

16 'It should be noted that the document from the Cape Town meeting does not apply the diakonia-terminology; it talks about 'service' without qualifying this term theologically. However, this is also the case of the document *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes that the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME)* prepared for the WCC Busan assembly. Admittedly, it mentions the term diakonia on two occasions, but only superficially and without reflecting on the theological significance of this term. It seems clear that a further dialogue would benefit from a more conscious application of the diakonia-terminology and the advantages it represents when addressing the social ministry of the church' (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:37–38).

the SDGs. All of this can be found in TTL. It seems that the churches in the North and the large agencies, which until recently did not even use the term diaconia, have found it a less worrisome and problematic term, especially with less colonial baggage.

Therefore, looking at ecumenical diaconia from the perspective of the missional dimension of the church, and bearing in mind TTL's preference for the local congregation as the primary agent of mission, I propose to test the metaphor of transforming hospitality for the diaconal dimension of the church. The concluding vision of TTL offers an inclusive vision of the feast of abundance for all. 'Mission—as a common witness to Christ—is an invitation to the “feast in the kingdom of God” (Luke 14:15)' (ed. Keum 2013:101). Luke presents God as the true host who invites everyone to his table, promising to feed and to share abundance. Luke's parable does not say anything similar to an expected conversion of those who attend, although it should be noted that it has the infamous phrase 'compel them to enter', which had been used in colonial mission to legitimise forceful conversions (Lk 14: 23). TTL expands the vision because the Triune God invites the whole creation to this Feast of Life (ed. Keum 2013:112).

My point is that this broad vision, which includes creation, changes our role and presence as Christians at God's table. We are messengers, as TTL states, but as part of creation, we are also participants. This introduces an argument that reminds us not to see ourselves as the sole agents of mission. The metaphor of hospitality reinforces the idea of sharing the gifts we have received. God's hospitality transforms us; we can view ourselves as guests at God's feast, rather than as hosts. This shift in perspective can help us focus on the Spirit as the true agent. This de-centring is a message from the mission discussions that could be heard in the diaconia discussions. The whole diaconia document is very strong on human agency in servicing, whereas TTL invites us to join God's mission in the Spirit.¹⁷

There is an interesting line in the diaconia document that can strengthen this perspective. In one section, it seems to relate to an older concept I first came across in a foundational document on health and

17 There is a section on the Triune God, even saying that Luke demonstrates how the Spirit leads the church to the widows and the marginalised (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:47). The dominant perspective on diaconia is, however, the one of human agency.

healing (cf. eds. Bartmann et al. 2008).¹⁸ *Ecumenical Diakonia* proposes to analyse the assets for diaconia as tangible and intangible resources (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:73–75). The churches provide tangible resources such as schools, hospitals, and diaconal services, but they also possess intangible resources, including liturgy, prayer, and healing rituals. The older concept addresses the immaterial consequences that intangible resources yield, such as the time given for attending to and visiting others, patience, compassion, love, a long-term perspective, and resilience, among others.¹⁹ The important point is that precisely these immaterial resources are a gift to us from the Holy Spirit.

This distinction between different kinds of resources can help reorient us towards the agent in mission, the Spirit, and away from the temptation to justify ourselves by our actions. The asset approach, with its emphasis on immaterial consequences, teaches us that it is not just about what we do, but how others access what we have been given. This could even be understood as a decolonising approach, as it can dissolve the distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’, a binary that is strongly entrenched in traditional mission paradigms and in diaconia understood as charity. We tend to put ourselves at the centre, pretending to share what we have, rather than inviting others to what we have been given. This reorientation would also align with a rights-based approach, which starts from the conviction that all people have rights that cannot be taken away – yet some individuals need the opportunity to exercise their rights. The faith that others accept will change us, and in that transformation, we will recognise God’s reign as real in the lives of all people and throughout all of his creation.

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CHAPTER 9

DIACONIA AS RESILIENCE IN LIGHT OF PAUL'S MISSION JOURNEYS

Annette Potgieter

Introduction

In Acts 20:24, Paul proclaims that he does not hold his life dear to himself, but he does attach meaning to the ministry he received from the Lord Jesus (καὶ τὴν διακονίαν ἣν ἔλαβον παρὰ τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ). The verb διακονέω is translated as 'ministry'. In its basic sense, διακονέω means to 'wait on tables', and in a broader sense, it refers to 'caring for one's livelihood or serving in general' (eds. Balz & Schneider 1978:302). However, διακονέω/ διακονία has often been interpreted solely as service at a table, which is regarded as a lowly task suited for women and slaves, as well as service in a more general context (Hentschel 2018:103). This interpretation has also been limited to welfare services, as seen in Acts 6 and John 13 (Smit 2019:12). Consequently, the narrow interpretation of διακονία has led to a neglect of research on the topic.¹

1 Koet et al. (2018:5) mention that the neglect is in part due to the incorrect assumption that διακονία is merely service towards the poor.

However, the seminal work of John Collins,² as well as Anni Hentschel,³ concerning διακονέω and its cognates has been instrumental in shifting the paradigm through new lexicographical research and explorations of its use in the Greco-Roman world (Smit 2019:12). At its core, διακονία describes an intermediary role initiated by a superior agent, involving the fulfilment of a duty or service bestowed on a beneficiary (Voitila 2019:274). Accordingly, within this framework, διάκονος describes someone who is 'executing a task on behalf of someone else, having been sent by this person', which is key (Smit 2019:18). The context of διάκονος and διακονία must always be considered, as these words are often connected to an honourable and high-level authorisation for mission (Latvus 2008:149).

This is pivotal as Paul understands himself as being sent. He refers to himself as an ἀπόστολος ("apostle") (Rom 1:1; Gal 1:1, etc); as a θεοῦ διάκονοι ("servant of God") (2 Cor 6:4) and a διάκονοι Χριστοῦ ("servant of Christ") (2 Cor 11:23). Paul understands both ἀπόστολος and its cognates, as well as διακονία and its cognates, as gifts from the risen Christ (Ellis 1974:128). In the New Testament, the greatest number of occurrences of the word διακονία ("service, office") is found in Pauline literature, namely 22 times (eds. Balz & Schneider 1990:302). Part of the misunderstanding of διακονέω and its cognates arises from approaching the text with modern notions of

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- 2 Collins (1990) argues that the German context has especially influenced the understanding of diaconia. He sets out to eradicate the modern context that has been read into the ancient texts, aiming to restore their original meaning. A corollary of his interpretation of diakonos as a 'sent person' is that the stereotypical social-caritative identification with diakonos is a misinterpretation. Hentschel (2007) argues that diaconia must always be read in context, as there are variations in the meaning of the word depending on the connection. Breed (2017:349) points out that Collins' supposition that διακονία is 'never done out of love or compassion' is problematic. Breed builds his work especially on Matthew 25:31–46, a text considered one of the central Magna Carta texts of diaconia. However, the context of Matthew 25:31–46 does not refer to the needy poor, but to relations with other Christians who were called brothers (Latvus 2008:145). Understanding diakonos as 'being sent' does not negate the notion that early believers served in love; it is because of the God who sends that believers act, functioning from their place in Christ. Ryökäs (2015:61–74) asserts that the focus should not be merely on the deacons as caregivers, but on what all members of the community were doing. In some cases, deacons and deaconesses helped those in need and acted in a caritative manner, while in other cases, it was not the deacons who took care of the sick (e.g., in Hippolytus's Egypt).
 - 3 Anni Hentschel (2007) in her *Diakonia im Neuen Testament* provides a detailed investigation into διακονέω and its cognates, rendering results in line with Collins, confirming that diaconia should not be understood as humble service.

the offices.⁴ In the first century, the offices and church hierarchy were not yet fully developed and should be approached cautiously to avoid anachronism.⁵

Paul barely mentions the organisation and leadership of believing groups. There are vague references in Philippians 1:1 (ἐπισκόποις καὶ διακόνους) and 1 Thessalonians 5:12 (τοὺς κοπιῶντας ἐν ὑμῖν καὶ προϊσταμένους ὑμῶν ἐν κυρίῳ καὶ νοουθετοῦντας ὑμᾶς) that do not provide any clear designation of the duties, duration of the offices, or the process of determining these leaders (Kloppenborg 2013:184). It seems that there was some form of resident leadership within the earliest Christian communities, but the principal authoritative leadership emanated from the travelling missionaries who journeyed between the churches (Horrell 1997:327).⁶

The focus of this chapter will not be on whether διακονία is an office or not, but on what we can surmise about Paul's actions. In particular, Paul's use of family metaphors functions not only as a way to persuade Gentiles into a new family but also lends itself to being viewed through the lens of resilience. Accordingly, this chapter explores the importance of διακονία through the lens of resilience in light of Paul as a missionary. I will argue that it is the core of Paul's engagement with co-workers, διακονία, and his identity in Christ as being sent that makes him successful in his missions.

Resilience and Paul

Resilience is a modern concept that has become increasingly popular. It is difficult to define, as it is applied in diverse fields. The term is based on a concept from physics that describes the ability of certain materials

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- 4 Paul Philippi (1981:621) points out that the German work 'diakonie' means 'taking care of each other with love'. This is exactly what Collins (1990) tries to avoid with a focus shift to the texts.
 - 5 The problem is not constricted to the first century. Kari Latvus (2011:208) examines the textbooks of Hammann 2003, Barnett 1995, and Olson 2003, which have consensus that there was an office of the deacon in the Ryökäs (2015:72) avers the need to re-examine the source texts 'with a Collins/Hentschel-aware' to investigate what the deacons were doing. For example, in Polycarp Fil 6:1 it is not the role of the deacons to be helping those in need, whereas in Hippolytus' Egypt, the deacons were tasked with taking care of the sick. Accordingly, the distinction is necessary otherwise the discussion on diaconal work has a different meaning compared to its sources (Ryökäs 2015:72).
 - 6 Among others, for example, Phoebe is described as a *diakonos* of the Cencreae church who travels to Rome (Rom 16:1-2) with messages or material support for Paul in light of Philippians 2:25 and 1 Corinthians 16:17.

to return to their original form under stress, rather than breaking (Lewit 2023:205). The roots of resilience theory lie in adversity and the ways in which adverse life experiences negatively impact individuals (Van Breda 2018:54). Resilience concerns why some people who face the same challenges thrive in the face of adversity while others do not. It may be understood as the ability to continue functioning and maintain basic structures during hardship and stress (Joelsson 2024:11). A distinction must be made between chronic and acute adversity (Bonanno & Diminich 2013:380). The former refers to adversity that persists over a period and may have a pervasive impact on a person's life, while the latter relates to adversity with a relatively brief duration and limited impact. In the context of acute adversity, resilience is often understood as 'bouncing back'; in response to chronic adversity, however, 'emergent resilience' describes the process of functioning and recovering over an extended period in the face of hardship (Van Breda 2018:5). Van Breda (2018:5) defines resilience as better-than-expected outcomes in the face of adversity.

Paul also faces significant adversity. Initially, he appears to be an unlikely candidate for a pivotal role in Christianity, given his early actions as a persecutor of believers. However, according to the account in Acts, Paul experiences a transformative 'Damascus moment' that redefines his purpose. He views himself as an apostle and a missionary, chosen by God to bring the good news to the nations.⁷ His mission involves calling people to turn from idols and serve the living and true God, in whose Son, Jesus Christ, salvation is both promised and fulfilled (1 Thess 1:9–10) (Horrell 2022:488). However, Paul operates within an apocalyptic worldview. He proclaims an apocalyptic message about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the expectation that He will come again from heaven to rescue His people from the wrath of God's last judgement (Hays 1997:22). Paul acknowledges the 'sufferings of the present time' and views redemption as a future hope (Rom 8:24–25). In light of the imminent end of the world, one might assume that the need to care for others and live ethically would yield to moral quietism or morally fanatical tendencies. However, this is not the case with Paul.

For example, in the Thessalonian community, where eschatological expectation holds significant importance, Paul expresses gratitude in the opening section of his letter (1 Thess 1:2–10). He commends the

7 One should be careful to think of Paul as a "convert" in the sense of leaving one religion for another. Rather, Paul contrived his call to God within Judaism and not opposing it (cf. Fredriksen 2022:31-43).

community for their reception of the gospel and their powerful witness, highlighting how they ‘turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus who rescues us from the wrath that is coming’ (Hays 1997:22). The role the community is to play in the interim is not only to ‘wait for his son from heaven’ (ἀναμένειν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν) (1 Thess 1:10) but also ‘to serve God’ (δουλεύειν θεῷ) (1 Thess 1:9). The notion of serving or service is fundamental to Paul’s actions, distinguishing early believers; moreover, this is community-driven and functions within networks.

Debunking Pauline perceptions in the light of diaconia and resilience

Probably one of the greatest dangers in interpreting Paul is assuming that he is one of us. In the plethora of Pauline studies, the tradition of interpreting Paul often stems from the vantage point of what one wants him to be.⁸ Paul is often portrayed as the actual founder of Christianity. This statement is highly problematic and can easily distance us from the real Paul, as it implies that he intentionally set out to write a theology for the use of a church. Paul wrote letters to specific communities (and one individual, in the case of Philemon) to address particular problems or occasions. Moreover, we risk approaching Paul through our modern perceptions of what church is and how the roles people play in church structures should be. However, this is not the case, as Paul did not embark on his missions with the intent to start a new religion.⁹ Eve-Marie Becker (see 2022:69–86) more accurately identifies Paul as the founder of Christian literature. However, this statement might lead to the incorrect assumption that Paul acted alone. We often overlook the fact that some

8 The interpretation of Paul is fundamental to our understanding of Christianity, as Paul’s literary remains are the only securely dated remnants of the first half-century (White 2022:39–40). However, the reading of Pauline literature has been significantly influenced – and arguably skewed – by the Reformation, which elevated Romans as the primary lens through which all other Pauline letters were to be interpreted. For a detailed examination of the resulting misreadings of Paul, see Matthew Novenson’s (2022) *Paul Then and Now*.

9 The term “religion” is anachronistic when applied to the ancient world, as the ancients did not separate economics, politics, and religion as distinct spheres in the way modern societies do. The concept of religion as a private or personal matter would also have been entirely foreign in the first century CE. The modern use of the term ‘religion’ reflects 18th century European culture (cf. Nongbri 2013:65, 109).

of Paul's letters include the names of Silvanus, Sosthenes, and Timothy as co-writers. Central to Paul's missions is his understanding that he is sent.

Another problem with viewing Paul as the founder of Christianity is that it obscures the fact that he never travelled alone on his missionary journeys. Paul traversed many kilometres within the Roman Empire, encountering various cities with different practices and customs.¹⁰ We read about his exploits in his letters. We trace the dangers of his journeys (cf. 2 Cor 11:25), plot the places he may have visited, and attempt to reconstruct his missionary journeys.¹¹ But we often forget to trace the importance of the networks and how they function in Paul's letters. He always had a co-worker with him, and if not, made a friend to travel with; for example, Timothy joins Paul in Derbe. When Paul cannot visit a church, he sends one of his co-workers; for example, Timothy is sent to Corinth.

It is also a misconception that Paul is the founder of all the churches. Paul was one of many missionaries who spread the gospel and understood himself as a servant of God. His letters are addressed to specific communities in particular places. However, this does not mean that these communities comprised "Pauline" Christians who related to, or primarily believed and behaved as, Paul wished them to (Horrell 2022:493). Paul maintained ongoing communication with the Christian communities he engaged with, though we only have access to his side of the correspondence. While he undoubtedly founded several communities, such as those addressed in Galatians, 1-2 Corinthians, and 1 Thessalonians, it is evident that these communities were also shaped by the teachings of other leaders and missionaries who visited them (1 Cor 1:12; 2 Cor 11:4-23; Gal 1:6-9; 3:1; 5:2-8).

It is interesting that Paul uses diaconia as a defence against these other teachers and missionaries. In 1 Corinthians 3:5, during the dispute with the so-called super-apostles, he mentions factions and the name Apollos, positioning himself as one of the 'ministers through whom you believed' (διάκονοι δι' ὧν ἐπιστεύσατε). A similar argument is made in 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:6, where Paul asserts that they are competent ministers because of the Spirit. The term diaconia and its cognates are used significantly by Paul to uphold the authority and authenticity of his status as an apostle (Hentschel 2018:103).

10 The Roman Empire might have had a blueprint for what was expected within cities concerning architecture and similarities, but it would be an error to think of the Roman Empire as homogenous.

11 We reconstruct Paul's missions predominantly from Acts, although Acts is not a reliable source as it belongs to a later period and the author writes with the purpose of normalising believers within the Roman Empire.

Of course, we do not have access to how these communities truly responded to Paul's message. There were no "Pauline" communities in that sense; rather, there were diverse early Christian communities, some of which were founded by Paul, and many others where Paul sought to exert his influence and authority with varying degrees of success (Horrell 2022:493).

Paul often mentions the fact that he and his co-workers work and are not dependent on receiving money from churches.¹² Six of the occurrences of *diaconia* related to Paul are in connection with the collection for Jerusalem. Paul understands faith in Christ to be something that is also communicated through working together. Approximately 50 names of people who worked with Paul are mentioned. He notoriously endures immense difficulties during his missions; we know that he is flogged and chased away. He is imprisoned, which in the first-century context meant that he would not receive daily meals or have a bed to sleep on (Krentz 2000:269). Yet, it can be said that he remarkably manages to bounce back and perform better than expected despite all the setbacks.

Outside of a Jewish apocalyptic context, no evident urgency was attached to missions. Jews did not spend their time pondering what God would do with the vast majority of pagans. It is the idea that the end time loomed that radically problematised paganism (Frederiksen 2017:77). Paul would have conducted his missions in a world where the effects of Hellenisation were more obvious in certain places than in others, as some towns attracted more immigrants and foreign guests due to business opportunities. The Roman presence varied, but this did not undermine the fact that natives, Greeks, Romans, and peoples from other lands lived and worked together daily in virtually all the towns and cities where Paul conducted his missions (Stanley 2011:118).

Resilience and *diaconia*

Christianity may appear anti-family, as Jesus calls the disciples to leave everything behind and follow him. Paul continues this trend, and his views on marriage and celibacy can be perplexing. However, Paul's use of family metaphors can be understood through the lenses of resilience

12 Although it does seem that Paul has an economic venture with the Philippian congregations investing in Paul spreading the gospel. See Jennifer Quigley (2021) for more on this.

and diaconia. In terms of resilience, early believers often felt alienated and faced adverse circumstances, including persecution under the reign of Nero. Diaconia reflects the idea that each believer is sent by God and plays an important role in the body of Christ.

Family: Adoption

As mentioned, Paul is trying to exert influence in communities with the purpose of convincing them to believe and behave as he does. Whether these communities were convinced is unknown. However, Paul employs metaphors, in particular, to persuade. George Lakoff and Elisabeth Wehling (2012) assert that human cognition involves mental constructs that require effort to build, and even more to change. When faced with an unfamiliar word used in a peculiar or foreign manner, the initial response is to attempt to interpret it within existing mental constructs rather than to build new ones (Joelsson 2024:3). Accordingly, metaphors are immensely effective in persuasion or in helping someone understand what you want them to comprehend. Furthermore, Paul is a product of his time, and the images he uses would have been immediately familiar to his intended audiences.

An important metaphor Paul employs is that of adoption, which draws on the source domain of the household. Ancient households consisted of a network of people who were not necessarily related, such as slaves, who were subject to the *paterfamilias*. In broader society and in climbing the ranks in Rome, a person's ability to manage and oversee a household was equated with their ability to govern a city (Thate 2014:222). Households formed the fabric of society, and Paul uses an image with the adoption metaphor that would have been exceptionally familiar in the Greco-Roman world.

A person's birth did not automatically ensure their participation in the *oikos* or household. The *paterfamilias* had to decide whether a newborn was accepted or not. If not, the baby would be discarded. The virtuous characteristics of the founding ancestor were passed down through one son in each generation. Moreover, ancient people were born into relationships with their gods and were subject to the protocols for maintaining and safeguarding their gods' goodwill (Fredriksen 2017:35). Living in the first century meant residing in cities permeated with gods. Religious practices and beliefs were deeply embedded and widely dispersed across all facets of daily life. The notion of not participating in the worship of the gods was beyond comprehension, as the modern idea of 'secular' plainly did not exist (Eyl 2019:13). Life revolved around these gods, as public and private

spaces alike were venues for festivals and celebrations in their honour (Fredriksen 2017:33). Consequently, not participating in the household meant that a person opened the door to disasters and failed to be a good citizen.

Through the adoption metaphor illustrated in Romans 8:14-17, Paul maps believers into a new household, implying a turning away from other gods.

Moreover, Paul wants believers to turn away from the ancestral gods of their households. For Paul, the adoption metaphor signifies a status change, as the believer's association with Christ becomes more important than any other association (cf. Potgieter 2024). In Romans 8:29, we read about conforming to the likeness of Christ, which underscores a way of life. Paul is not merely inviting people to have faith in Jesus Christ; it would be reductionistic to think of him in this way. Rather, he is offering a way of living – one that denounces prior family obligations to gods that were prominent in the household. This change would cause discomfort for the family of the new believer, who is no longer living as they once did. It would mean that believers experience adversity as they no longer belong to their families in the same way and do not adhere to the expectations of the Roman Empire.

The metaphor of adoption is a fruitful approach for actively including the stranger, regardless of whether their otherness derives from gender, ethnicity, social class, or something else (Joelsson 2024:172). Paul particularly invites Gentiles to become part of the household of God through the adoption metaphor.

This metaphor plays a significant role in identity formation. Paul addresses assemblies that regard themselves as 'in Christ'. Becoming part of the household of God means breaking away from the normal structures to live with the intent to act according to someone anchored in Jesus Christ. This entails actively presenting oneself to God. It is a continual orientation for Paul, as he encourages believers to orient themselves towards God, as seen, for example, in Romans 6:13, 'present yourselves', or 'in Christ' in Romans 6:23. Believers are to turn away from other gods and become part of a new family – that is, the 'family of God' (Potgieter 2024:6).

Family: brothers and sisters

Paul often employs the familial metaphor ἀδελφοί ("brothers [and sisters]") in his letters to describe believing communities. Colleagues in mission also frequently used the term ἀδελφοί to indicate teachers, preachers, and workers who should be esteemed and financially aided

(Ellis 1974:128). Again, the metaphor draws on the source domain of the family, probably the most pervasive source domain in the ancient world. Everyone has family in some form. Slaves would have been considered part of the household. Anyone who heard this metaphor would immediately associate it with the hierarchy of the family and the *paterfamilias*. A person's status and success were determined by their family. The family played an instrumental role in securing networks with patrons (McKnight 2019:3–4). Paul maps a new concept onto the target domain, namely that believers form part of a new family, with a different *paterfamilias* at the helm. This is important to keep in mind as the communities that received Paul's letters consisted of house churches. Whether one wanted to or not, if one's house served as the house church, everyone in the house would have been involved.¹³

Summary

It is easy to forget that believing communities in the first century were small gatherings and were not unique or recognisable within the scope of all the associations and clubs in the Roman Empire. Paul explained to believers that they had undergone a status change in Christ. Being in Christ meant that believers were part of the family of God and, as God's sons and daughters, they shared a new identity. This identity made believers reluctant to associate with the typical Roman associations or partake in the day-to-day expectations of a citizen in the Roman Empire. Rather, the fact that believers took care of one another and others began to gain attention.

It is remarkable that what initially excluded believers from others in the Roman Empire is what inevitably caused the rise and expansion of Christianity. What set Christianity apart from other religious factions within the Roman Empire? The idea of family, brotherhood, and sisterhood, for that matter. Paul uses imagery deliberately, and the family imagery is particularly effective as it lends itself to cultivating both resilience and diaconia. It is tricky to speak of communities, but what clearly set early Christianity apart was the use of networks. Christians were known for their willingness to help not only their own but also those whom they did not know (Latvus 2008:146). Believers initially took care of their own brothers and sisters out of love for God and an understanding

13 In 1 Corinthians 16:15–18, Paul instructs the Corinthians to acknowledge and submit to the household of Stephanus, as they were the first converts in Achaia.

of what being part of a household entailed. Networks played a vital role, as they became the vehicles through which information was distributed. We see how the early church fathers wrote to one another, offering advice and discussing theology. When Polycarp took office as a church leader, he received a letter from Ignatius explaining what to expect. Apollinaris's Christology becomes problematic, and Basil of Caesarea writes to him, mentioning, 'I disagree, but I'm still your friend'.

Community competence is a central building block of resilience, as the ability to share knowledge is vital (Lewit 2023:210). The discernment of believers as children of God, living in the world but not being of the world, is crucial in encouraging and supporting believers to live by another value system. We see in the Letter of Diognetus, dating from around the second century, for example, some of the misconceptions concerning believers that existed in the Roman Empire. It is this vast network of living differently that set Christians apart from others and made their way of life attractive to those who would also like to join the family of God.

Early believers understood themselves to belong to the body of Christ, sent to act on behalf of the God who commissioned them. This contributed to the flourishing of Christianity. Of course, other factors were also at play. For example, the rise of Christianity was partly due to the efforts of wealthy or elite women caring for the poor, which was not the norm, as well as Christians burying those who were not their own kin. During times of plague and disease, Christians did not flee; instead, they helped those who were suffering by caring for the sick and providing water and food, which, in many cases, saved lives (Latvus 2008:146). Believers were involved with the sick and poor based on their call as Christians, rather than due to a special ministry (Latvus 2008:149). Diaconia forms the backbone of believers working together. All of this contributed to Christianity becoming a leading religion.

Resilience suggests that change, disruption, and vulnerability can be beneficial conditions in a chaotic world where such circumstances are inevitable. Paul would not have reached all the places he travelled to nor survived all the prisons he was incarcerated in without a network of fellow believers. In the area south of the Province of Galatia, from the end of the second century until the fourth century, hundreds of funerary inscriptions attest to the continuing influence of Paul. The high occurrence of the Latin cognomen *παῦλος* among Christians appears over 50 times, twice as often as the most frequent name, Alexander (Breytenbach 2018:837). Iconographical evidence indicates that the name Paul became popular when the apostle Paul exerted influence in the first century (Breytenbach

2018:827). Notably, the names that are more frequently used in Christian inscriptions from Lycaonia were also those of Paul's co-workers. This evidence attests to the networks that existed and continued after the lives of Paul and his co-workers.

Conclusion

Διακονέω and its cognates predominantly describe the fulfilment of an action assigned by someone superior to a beneficiary. It becomes synonymous with Christian conduct oriented towards Christ. Paul fundamentally understands himself to be sent by God and operates within a framework that anticipates the imminent return of Jesus. Rather than being indifferent as the end of the world approaches, Paul actively engages with strong networks that provide mutual support. Diaconia serves as a foundational principle for how to treat one's brothers and sisters, as well as those outside the family. It is through the collaborative efforts of these coworkers and communities that one could characterise Paul's work as fostering resilience and teaching people how to recover and conform to the image of the Son (cf. Rom 8:29).

These Christian movements were minuscule in comparison to the other cults that existed in the Roman Empire. Yet, they expanded in such a way that Christianity became the dominant religion. It could be said that Christianity, at its core, is resilient, as its survival and expansion illustrate better-than-expected outcomes. For Paul, as an apostle, the "success" of his missionary work – i.e., the establishment of new communities of believers – results from the power of God, and the church that emerges as a result does not belong to the missionary (Schnabel 2022:57).

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CHAPTER 10

THE CHURCH'S PROPHETIC DIACONIA IN MALAWI

Jones Hamburu Mawerenga

Introduction

This chapter explores the church's prophetic diaconia in Malawi, focusing on evaluating its engagement in this area. It employs qualitative research methods, including a literature review and historiographical analysis. The chapter asserts that the church's prophetic diaconia is deeply rooted in the all-encompassing mission of God (*missio Dei*).

Louw and Nida (1989:541) translate the word '*diaconia*' as 'to have responsibility to help others'. Hence, the theological conception of diaconia points to the very identity and mission of the church. Nordstokke (ed. 2009:5) defines diaconia by emphasising its practical implications, stating that 'diakonia comprises of the church's call to action in response to the challenges of human suffering, injustice and care for creation'. Klaasen (2020:120) observes that

Diakonia should be conceptualised as both who the church community is and what the members do. In other words, being and doing goes hand in hand as a continuum and not as binary opposites. Being and doing is also referred to as persons created in the image of God and their calling is to bring the whole of creation in communion with God. Another perspective of diakonia was the promotion and organisation of practical action for the alleviation of both systemic and personal injustices. This is the concrete and practical activity of churches to confront the suffering and poverty of the marginalised. This is also referred to as faith-based diakonia and rights-based diakonia.

Nordstokke (2011:49) argues that for a church to exercise prophetic diaconia, it implies two things. Firstly, a God-given mandate to participate in the *missio Dei* to the world. Secondly, there is a call for the church's incarnated presence and action, which entails a fundamental option for the poor and marginalised in society, following the footsteps of the Old Testament prophets and Jesus, who ministered to the poor and served as a voice for the voiceless in their respective societies.

Fretheim (2013:68) asserts that the church's prophetic diaconia is rooted in prophetic theology, which can be characterised in three ways. Firstly, prophets are visionaries because they announce a future that is distinct from present circumstances and depict an image of what the new and transformed society ought to look like. This can be achieved through the employment of religious discourses crafted in utopian language, symbols, and metaphors. In other words, they challenge their audiences to be liberated from present shackles and to visualise how the future reign of God might appear in contemporary society (Koopman 2009:117). Secondly, prophets are critics because they denounce everything that hinders the actualisation of God's vision for human society, as reflected in all relationships, including spiritual, socio-economic, political, and cultural, while maintaining a preferential option for the poor (Samuel 2002:243). Thirdly, prophets are change agents who influence both character and spiritual formation, which shape the identity and ethos of the ecclesial community and its members (Koopman 2009:117). Finally, prophetic diaconal activities include dismantling injustice and promoting justice in society (Nordstokke 2011:49).

Consequently, the church's prophetic diaconia in Malawi needs further explanation. Herein lies the knowledge gap that this chapter seeks to address. This existing knowledge gap can be represented by the following four sections: (1) diaconia as mission; (2) John Chilembwe's prophetic diaconia; (3) the church in Malawi and the sacralisation of politics; and (4) the 1992 Roman Catholic Lenten pastoral letter.

Diaconia as mission

Niyonsaba (2018:458) explains that diaconia is central to the meaning of the church because it constitutes a core component of the gospel mainly through the socio-humanitarian aspect of God's holistic mission. Boettcher (2006:82) states that 'Diaconal ministry is basically all about testifying to the Triune God's unconditional love for the broken world. It is an effective way of bearing witness to God's grace and mercy in Christ as

to proclaim the gospel and administer the sacraments'. Bassham (1979:184) argues that the church's missional mandate comprises the commission to announce the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, as well as to actively participate in human society, including advancing humanity's well-being and ensuring a just and peaceful society. Therefore, the church participates in the *missio Dei* through the proclamation of the gospel (*kerygma*) and service to humanity (*koinonia*) (Niyonsaba 2018:458).

Myers (1999:4) contends that the church's prophetic diaconia comprises of an intersectionality of evangelism and social concern as a means of accomplishing God's holistic mission. The Lausanne Covenant explains the relationship between the evangelistic and the socio-humanitarian aspects of the Christian mission in paragraph 5:

We affirm that God is both the Creator and Judge of all men. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men from every kind of oppression. Because mankind is made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he should be respected and served, not exploited. Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty (Padilla 2000:44).

Knoetze (2019:153) explains the concept of the '*diaconia Trinitatis Dei*' by arguing that the church's prophetic diaconia 'is compatible with the understanding of the *missio Dei*: the Father sending the Son, the Father and the Son sending the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit sending the church'. Mashau (2012:3) argues that 'the Triune God is a missionary God. The three persons in the Trinity are all actively involved in history as a missionary God, the only true God who is Lord of the entire creation and all of humanity'.

Myers (1999:6) contends that the church's diaconia ensures the implementation of God's holistic mission because it does not separate Christian witness from social concern. In other words, it counteracts modernity's separation of the physical and spiritual realms which has

subsequently led to the development of church's the faulty dichotomous view of God's mission. Firstly, the church believes that God's redemptive work only concerns the spiritual realm. Secondly, the church believes that the world is the domain of secular agencies and should not be engaged with the gospel. Nevertheless, the church's diaconia ensures the church's participation in God's holistic mission without polarising evangelism and social concern (eds. Dempster, Klaus & Petersen 1991:10). Costas (1979:75) critiques such polarised thinking, stating that

[I]t consistently leads to the preaching of an abridged gospel and should be replaced with a biblically-based understanding of God's wholistic mission. For the true test of mission is not whether we proclaim, make disciples or engage in social, economic, and political liberation, but whether we are able to integrate all three in a comprehensive, dynamic and consistent witness. Thus, the church's diakonia strives for wholeness and integrity of mission.

Lee (2019:97) argues that the church's diaconia, as God's holistic mission, was confirmed in the Manila Manifesto (Lausanne II) of 1989. The eighth, ninth, fifteenth, and sixteenth affirmations of the Manila Manifesto explicitly connect the church's diaconia to God's mission and are stated as follows: (1) We affirm that we must demonstrate God's love visibly by caring for those who are deprived of justice, dignity, food, and shelter; (2) We affirm that the proclamation of God's kingdom of justice and peace demands the denunciation of all injustice and oppression, both personal and structural; we will not shrink from this prophetic witness; (3) We affirm that we who proclaim the gospel must exemplify it in a life of holiness and love; otherwise, our testimony loses its credibility; and (4) We affirm that every Christian congregation must turn itself outward to its local community in evangelistic witness and compassionate service (Lee 2019:98).

Birdsall and Brown (2011) argue that the church's diaconia as God's holistic mission was confirmed in the Cape Town Commitment (Lausanne III) 2010. For instance, Part I, Article Seven, 'We love God's world', calls for Christians to 'love the world's poor and suffering' and to 'love our neighbours as ourselves'. The concept of loving the poor demands that we 'not only love mercy and deeds of compassion but also that we do justice'. Thus, the Cape Town Commitment called on Christians to participate in 'the integral and dynamic exercise of all dimensions of mission'

(Stott 1997:3). Lee (2019:100) observes that the Lausanne Congress in Cape Town demonstrated a shift in priority within the Lausanne camp from evangelism to holistic missions. This paradigmatic missional shift was evidenced by the increasing strength of voices from groups within the Lausanne camp that emphasised the church's diaconia or social responsibility.

Dietrich (2019:23) advances an understanding of diaconia within missional ecclesiology, which is comprehended

[A]s the ecclesial community grapples with the tensions existing between understanding the church as Christ's, oriented toward its ultimate truth, together with its subsistence in a specific context within the reality of people's lives. In these ever-changing contexts, the church engages diakonia through its practical ministry, proclamation of the gospel, prophetic witness, and discipleship... In this regard, the church is dynamic in its participation in the *missio Dei*, empowered by *God's living Spirit to transform the world*.

Dietrich (2019:3) opines that diaconia is an integral part of the church's mission and cannot be separated from either the proclamation and teaching of God's word or from advocacy and public witness. However, the church needs to strike a balance between two extremes regarding its engagement in diaconia. York (2001:21) presents two views that describe the attitude of evangelical missions towards socio-humanitarian ministry. The first, *exclusion*, regards compassion ministries as detrimental to the gospel. The second, *absorption*, completely neglects the proclamation of the gospel. Dempster (1999:47) conveys that, on one hand, *exclusion* raises the concern that a ministry emphasis aimed at redressing social injustice and meeting human physical and psycho-social needs undermines the church's evangelistic mandate. On the other hand, *absorption* raises the concern that the church may be tempted to use its socio-humanitarian programmes as a means of manipulating the poor, hungry, and needy into making a public decision for salvation in Christ.

John Chilembwe's prophetic diaconia

This section discusses John Chilembwe's prophetic diaconia as a precursor to the development of public theology in Malawi, considering the growing interest in theology and public life in Malawi (Ross 2020) and

across Africa (Agang, Forster & Hendricks 2020). Chilembwe's prophetic diaconia bridged his Christian faith and the practical challenges facing society, thereby highlighting the public relevance of Christianity (Crane 2011:1).

Makondesa (2006:21) states that John Chilembwe established the Providence Industrial Mission (PIM) on 1 February 1900, on the eastern side of the Mbombwe River in the Chiradzulu district, after obtaining theological education at Lynchburg Theological Seminary in the USA. Tangri (1971:306–307) demonstrates that Chilembwe's prophetic diaconia was reflected in his preaching, which imparted the values of hard work, self-respect, self-help, and human dignity to his congregation. He preached against social injustice in Nyasaland, which was characterised by multiple oppressions such as African land rights, labour tenancy, thangata, hut tax, and the conscription of African soldiers (*askaris*) to fight in the First World War.

Chilembwe's prophetic diaconia was carried out through the PIM ministry, patterned after American Negro churches that used their churches as hubs for liberational mobilisation and agency (Harris 1994:43). Thus, the PIM became an engine for spiritual, socio-economic, and political transformation. Moreover, the intersectionality of labour provided by the PIM members in European plantations, along with the gross human rights violations they experienced, created a platform for prophetic diaconal engagement. Chilembwe employed various prophetic diaconia interventions to end the plight of indigenous Africans in light of the prevailing colonial domination and the subsequent ill-treatment in the European plantations (Ross 2020:188).

Chilembwe's prophetic diaconia exemplifies the role of public theology, as Resane (2019:4) explains that public theology is a contextual theology that makes practical proposals as a way of resolving social ills identified in a particular society.

John Chilembwe and women empowerment

Makondesa (2006:40–42) argues that Chilembwe implemented a feminist vision for the uplifting of women as early as 1900, a concept that was rare and inconceivable for Africans at the time. He aimed to establish an egalitarian community in which both men and women were equal and had opportunities to advance in life. Consequently, Chilembwe can be regarded as a precursor to feminist public theological discourses.

Makondesa (2006:41–42) provides a six-fold summary of Chilembwe's feminist vision and ministry:

1. He prioritised the training and development of women, which he considered a special assignment that must be urgently executed. He strived for the inclusion and participation of women in God's mission.
2. He considered women's empowerment as a foundation for the future of the African race.
3. He lamented the gender inequality and inequity gap existing between African men and women as far as development was concerned. He had observed that men were developing faster than women, and in his view, this created an unbalanced and unhealthy progress for society.
4. He gave a fourfold description of heathen African women, i.e., ignorant, uninteresting, unlovable, and lacking ambition, and denounced this debased status. However, he believed that the gospel of Christ had the power to change the African women's unfortunate status in society.
5. Chilembwe and his wife, Idah, led a girls' empowerment initiative in which they discouraged early marriages and championed girl-child education and vocational skills development, such as sewing.
6. Mrs Ida Chilembwe¹ served as a model of an empowered woman who was not only a good housewife but also a professional, since she worked as a teacher at the PIM school and a trainer in the women's sewing classes.

Chilembwe and his wife embody egalitarian principles of gender equality and equity in their life and ministry. Thus, their employment of prophetic diaconia played an early role in shaping modern discourses of gender equality and women's empowerment, which is not only a fundamental human right but is also regarded as the foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world (ed. Leach 2016:4).

The contributions of Chilembwe's prophetic diaconia concerning gender equality and women's empowerment are threefold. Firstly, it provides resources for deconstructing patriarchal religio-cultural practices. Secondly, it offers empowerment to confront structures that cause women's vulnerability and perpetuate their subjugation and oppression in

1 Mrs Ida Chilembwe was very instrumental in giving a practical touch to the women's side of the schools, with her classes in sewing and deportment. Hence, the mission possessed a number of sewing machines demonstrating a high capital base in Nyasaland at that time (Shepperson & Price 2000:171).

society. Thirdly, it prefigured an early form of African women's public theology that not only identified areas of injustice for women but also engaged the church and society by empowering women to be active participants in shaping their own destinies, bringing transformation to society, advocating for gender justice, and promoting women's equality in order to enhance their well-being and realise their full potential in life (Mwaura 2015:10).

John Chilembwe's protest against the conscription of African soldiers

Shepperson and Price (2000:143) write that Chilembwe protested against the loss of over 150 Nyasaland askaris in the Somaliland military campaigns against the 'Mad Mullah'. Similarly, Chilembwe lamented the fate of the families of the askaris who had died in the war. For instance, there was a heart-breaking incident involving an old woman who went to Zomba in 1904 to welcome back her sons, who had been conscripted as soldiers to fight in Somaliland:

An old woman had come eighty miles to welcome back her six sons. Standing amid the cheering crowds she saw the troops march past and enquired after her boys. She then learnt for the first time that all of them had been killed ... War has its price of sorrow even for the untutored African who takes his share unwittingly in the burden of the Empire. And there still remains the question to be answered: "Is it right?" (Shepperson & Price 2000:143).

Makondesa (2006:125-126) explains that Chilembwe protested against the enlistment of African soldiers (*askaris*) to fight in the First World War. He lamented the hardships endured by Nyasaland's *askaris*, *tenga-tenga* (non-combatant porters), their families, and the broader communities affected by the war. Ultimately, the First World War served as the backdrop for Chilembwe's 1915 armed uprising against colonial domination.

Ross (2020:246) opines that Chilembwe was deeply concerned about the plight of the Nyasaland askaris, their families, and the broader African communities affected by the First World War. He felt duty-bound to challenge the involvement of his countrymen in the conflict. Chilembwe critically engaged with the prevailing socio-political issues in the public domain from a theological perspective (Kusmierz & Cochrane 2013:50). As a minister of the gospel, he aimed to be a voice for the voiceless, the primary focus of public theology (Resane 2019:5). Therefore, Chilembwe's

prophetic diaconia exemplifies an African public theology that is prophetic in nature and characterised by ‘resisting, warning, and opposing what is already happening in public life ... and this constitutes the role of the church and the task of theology’ (Smit 2013:84).

The church in Malawi and the sacralisation of politics

This section discusses the church in Malawi and the sacralisation of politics, set against the backdrop of the church’s failure to exercise its prophetic diaconia in the country.

According to Williams (2018:23), the intersection of religion and politics in Africa causes some African politicians to employ radical religious and political ideologies to advance their own interests. This, unfortunately, leads to the ‘sacralisation of politics’.

The sacralisation of politics means the formation of a religious dimension in politics that is distinct from, and autonomous of, traditional religious institutions. The sacralisation of politics takes place when politics is conceived, lived and represented through myths, rituals and symbols that demand faith in the sacralised secular entity, dedication among the community of believers, enthusiasm for action, a warlike spirit and sacrifice in order to secure its defense and its triumph. In such cases, it is possible to speak of religions of politics in that politics itself assumes religious characteristics (Gentile & Mallett 2000:19).

The sacralisation of politics in Malawi was exemplified by the interplay between religion and politics under Ngwazi Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the country’s first president, who ruled for 30 years (1964–1994) (Chirambo 2005:4). As a member and elder of the Church of Scotland, affiliated with the Church of Central African Presbyterian (CCAP) in Malawi, Banda exploited his religiosity and spirituality to advance his political agenda. For instance, he propagated a religio-political narrative claiming that God had ordained him as Malawi’s president, thereby granting him divine legitimacy.

Banda employed religio-political rhetoric by adopting titles such as *Mpulumutsi* (Saviour), *Wamuyaya* (the eternal one), and Messiah – titled traditionally reserved for God in the Christian context (Shawa 2012:46-47). This deification fostered a personality cult that entrenched itself in Malawi, effectively silencing the church and undermining its ability to carry out its prophetic diaconia.

Chirambo (2005:3) states that Banda's sacralisation of politics was characterised by a religio-political mobilisation of popular support aimed at consolidating his political power and rule. Consequently, the regime deployed various ideas, beliefs, myths, and values that legitimised his leadership. Moreover, traditional songs and dances performed at Banda's political rallies and state functions were used as a means to advance political hegemony in Malawi. Chirwa (2001:9–10) provides an example of a song sung by the Women's League (*mbumba za Kamuzu*) from Nkhata-Bay district, which illustrates Banda's deification. The song also serves as a stern warning to rebels (*zigawenga zowukira boma*), cautioning that they will burn because they are playing with fire. The lyrics are as follows:

<i>Afyengi wija, afyengi wija</i>	They will burn, they will burn
<i>Akulimbana ndi moto, Ngwazi!</i>	Those who play with Ngwazi, the fire!
<i>A Ngwazi mbachatonda</i>	The Ngwazi is a hero/champion
<i>Ndi muomboli mu Malawi</i>	He is a Saviour in Malawi.

Thus, the songs played a crucial role in the sacralisation of Malawi's politics in four ways. First, they propagated a religio-political ideology of divine approval for Banda's leadership. Second, they designated Banda as the father and founder of the Malawi nation, who was subsequently hero-worshipped as the Saviour (*Mpulumutsi*) from colonialism and was likened to Moses in the Bible, who delivered the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Third, the songs were employed to denigrate political dissenters, who were vilified as rebels (*Zigawenga*). Fourth, the songs justified the perpetration of gross human rights atrocities, such as violent extremism, torture, assassination, long-term detention without trial, horrible conditions of detention, mysterious disappearances, exile of opponents, and confiscation of property. In other words, the songs, which were couched in the religio-political milieu, were employed to preserve Banda's autocratic rule (Chirambo 2005:6).

The interplay between church and politics in Malawi led many church leaders to frequently refer to Dr Kamuzu Banda as a God-given leader for the nation, thereby reinforcing his fusion of religious and political authority (Mbewe 2018:5). However, the Presbyterian movement, of which Dr Banda was both a member and an elder, eventually acknowledged its failure to exercise prophetic diaconia, even towards one of its own members. This is exemplified by a confession made by the Blantyre Synod of the CCAP in January 1993:

If we look at our own history as the CCAP during the time of the struggle for independence, we will see that Blantyre Synod was very much in support of the Nyasaland African Congress (later called the Malawi Congress Party, MCP). Because of our socio-political stance in favour of the MCP, after independence, the CCAP was aligned closely with the government and became so assimilated with the government's activities that the Synod was often invited to pray and participate as a Church at various government functions. However, because of this assimilation and alignment with the MCP, the Church gradually lost its ability to admonish or speak pastorally to the government. We do not want to make the same mistake at this time in order to ensure that the Church retains its prophetic voice throughout the coming years of our country's history (Ross 2018:19).

The religio-political interplay during the reign of Dr Kamuzu Banda in Malawi compromised the church's prophetic diaconia due to its failure to raise a prophetic voice against the socio-economic injustices and human rights abuses that were prevalent in the country at that time (Ross 2018:20). Therefore, the sacralisation of politics in Malawi negatively contributed to the church's failure in exercising prophetic diaconia, which could have ensured liberation, the promotion of human rights, well-being, justice, peace, and the consolidation of democracy and good governance.

The 1992 Roman Catholic Lantern Pastoral Letter

Mijoga (1997:55) explains that the church's prophetic diaconia in Malawi is characterised by the issuance of various pastoral letters. Jere and Magezi (2018:4) submit that pastoral letters have occupied a special place in Malawi's ecclesiological engagement with the public sphere throughout the periods of pre-colonialism, colonialism, the one-party state, and democracy. The pastoral letters can be categorised into two types: individual constructive and institutional liberative pastoral letters. On one hand, the individual constructive pastoral letter constitutes pastoral communication by individual clergy to either fellow clergy or church members, aimed at addressing internal matters of faith, church growth, discipline, leadership, and more. On the other hand, the institutional liberative pastoral letter comprises pastoral communication from the institutional church responding to issues of governance and other ethical concerns in Malawian society, such as poverty, corruption, human rights,

same-sex marriages, abortion, hunger, underdevelopment, and elections. The pastoral letter further offers alternative solutions to the various problems affecting Malawian society.

Malawi's socio-political context before the 1992 pastoral letter

Ross (2018:10) argues that the socio-political context before the 1992 Lenten pastoral letter was marked by the one-party dictatorial rule of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), with Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda serving as both the party leader and the Life President of the Republic of Malawi. A description of Malawi's socio-political context at that time includes the following: Firstly, public discourse was shaped by MCP propaganda, and political correctness was construed as an unquestioning personal loyalty to Dr Kamuzu Banda as the Life President of Malawi. Secondly, there was no tolerance for criticism or any alternative views apart from those expressed by Kamuzu and the MCP. Those who dared to offer constructive criticism to the government faced cruel and inhumane treatment, such as death sentences, life imprisonment, detention without trial, mysterious disappearances, exile, and confiscation of property. Thirdly, although freedom of worship was granted to the ecclesiastical fraternity, Jehovah's Witnesses were banned and persecuted in the 1960s and 1970s. Fourthly, the churches were required to provide moral and spiritual legitimacy to the one-party system of government and to restrict their ministry solely to the spiritual sphere, refraining from engaging in political issues. Consequently, this prevented the church from participating in transformative interventions concerning governance and human rights. Finally, the government established a culture of deceit and unaccountability (Mijoga 1997:55).

Kaiya (2013:37) argues that the intersection of church and politics in Malawi drastically changed, resulting in violent religious repression against the Jehovah's Witnesses for three reasons. Firstly, they refused to buy the MCP membership card because, as members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, they had pledged their loyalty to Jehovah alone and not to a political party. Secondly, the Jehovah's Witnesses refused to vote. Thirdly, they were apolitical and declined to engage in various political and developmental activities.

Kaiya (2013:37) explains that Banda's violent reaction against the Jehovah's Witnesses ultimately led to their banning in Malawi in October 1972, with their property confiscated and their crops destroyed. Tengtenga (2006:113) writes that by November 1973, approximately 21,000 Jehovah's Witnesses had fled into exile in Zambia. Carver (1990:64)

notes that the persecution, which involved both economic and physical violence, intensified after a September 1972 MCP meeting in Zomba, which declared that ‘all Jehovah’s Witnesses should be dismissed from their employment; any firm that failed to comply would have its license cancelled’.

What prompted the Catholic bishops to write the pastoral letter?

It is imperative to elucidate what prompted the Catholic bishops to write the 1992 Lenten pastoral letter. Newell (1995:247) identifies five reasons for the bishops’ issuance of the pastoral letter. Firstly, government primary school teachers from the northern region of Malawi, who were working in the southern and central regions, were forcibly ordered in 1989 to be transferred to their home districts. Consequently, this led to an outcry of nepotism, tribalism, and regionalism. Secondly, during Pope John Paul II’s visit to Malawi in 1989, he alluded to the fact that human rights were integral to the gospel and admonished the church to uphold the human dignity and rights of all Malawians. Thirdly, a conference held by the Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa (ATISCA) at St. Peter’s Major Seminary in Zomba in 1991 featured a speaker, Bishop Augustine Patrick Kalilombe, who challenged participants to develop a political theology that guarantees freedom, dignity, participation, and co-responsibility. He further argued that the construction of a socio-political theology was necessary for the church to exercise a prophetic ministry in word and lifestyle as a means of promoting social justice. Fourthly, in the absence of active opposition parties, it was obligatory for the church to be the voice of the voiceless, given its historic solidarity with the poor, the exploited, the dispossessed, and the marginalised. Fifthly, one of the bishops who participated in writing the pastoral letter stated, ‘I did not write the letter, but it was written in the hearts of our people long ago’. This implied that the letter captured the aspirations of Malawians that the government had neglected for a long time (Mijoga 1997:57).

Newell (1995:249) states that the pastoral letter criticised the government for ‘a growing gap between the rich and the poor with regard to expectations, living standards and development. A grossly overcrowded, understaffed and underfunded education system, an inadequate health service, and the denial of freedom of expression and association’. Jere and Magezi (2018:4) argue that the 1992 Roman Catholic pastoral letter played a crucial role in ending a three-decade dictatorship of Banda and ushered in a new political dispensation of multi-party democracy.

Ross (2018:22) articulates a six-fold significance of the 1992 Roman

Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter in Malawi. Firstly, it introduced accountability to Malawian public life by specifically calling upon the Malawian government and former president, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, to be accountable to the people. Secondly, it promoted citizen political participation and activism. For instance, students from Chancellor College, the University of Malawi, marched in support of the Catholic bishops on 15 March 1992. Moreover, the students' march precipitated an unprecedented wave of strikes both in the public and private sectors, demanding salary hikes and better working conditions. Thus, the pastoral letter provided a shift from passive and unquestioning submission to socio-political activism in Malawi's public sphere.

Thirdly, Chakufwa Chihana, a pioneering activist for democracy in Malawi and the founding leader of the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD), stated that the 1992 Roman Catholic pastoral letter was a catalyst for Malawi's political transformation. Fourthly, the pastoral letter led to the formation of the Public Affairs Committee (PAC), a religious body that promotes democracy, good governance, human rights, and socio-economic and political justice in Malawi. Fifthly, the manifesto of the United Democratic Front (UDF) argued that the pastoral letter was the basis for Malawi's socio-political transformation. Sixthly, Bakili Muluzi, Malawi's first democratic president, invited the religious community to exercise its prophetic mandate by providing checks and balances to government operations (Newell 1992:246). Finally, it paved the way for the national referendum held on 14 June 1993 to determine whether the system of government should remain a single-party system or revert to a multi-party system. The results of the referendum indicated that about 67% voted in favour of multi-party democracy, while 33% voted for the continuation of the one-party system of governance (Dzimbiri 1994:229). Later, the pastoral letter paved the way for the general elections held on 17 May 1994, in which Dr Banda lost, and Bakili Muluzi of the UDF was elected as president in Malawi's new democratic dispensation.

Thus, the 1992 pastoral letter is credited for initiating the socio-political transformation of Malawian society and is definitive as far as church and state relations are concerned in Malawi. It further highlights the church's prophetic diaconia in Malawi.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the chapter has presented a discussion on ‘the church’s prophetic diaconia in Malawi’ by engaging with the following issues (1) diaconia as mission; (2) John Chilembwe’s religio-political engagement; (3) the Church in Malawi and the sacralisation of politics; and (4) the 1992 Roman Catholic Lenten pastoral letter.

Four implications arise from the church’s prophetic diaconia in Malawi. Firstly, the church’s prophetic diaconia tends to focus on one aspect of political life, primarily that influenced by politicians. However, a holistic diaconal ministry is expected to address grassroots issues that affect the masses of the poor, thereby serving as the voice of the voiceless. Secondly, the church in Malawi needs to find its public identity in a democratic society to influence the structures and mechanisms of politics and civil society. Thirdly, the church must be introspective and offer self-critique in order to be effective in engaging with the socio-political sphere. Fourthly, the church should not only focus on criticising the government while neglecting to critique the opposition parties in the country, as this ensures the consolidation of a strong democracy.

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SECTION C

DIACONIA:
AN INDICATIVE

CHAPTER 11

DIACONIA: THE TABLE WHERE JESUS, THE MAIN COURSE, IS SERVED IN AN URBAN AFRICAN CONTEXT¹

Marinda van Niekerk

Introduction

For the past three decades and more, an organisation called Participate Envision Navigate (PEN) has been working originally in the inner city of Pretoria but has recently expanded nationally, focusing on three areas, one of which is early childhood development (ECD). The remainder of its work (with youth and adults) continues to centre on the inner city of Pretoria. For the purpose of this chapter, the focus will be on PEN's work with adults experiencing homelessness and striving to break free from the cycle of poverty.

Over more than thirty years of experience, the PEN team has discovered that the most effective way to help individuals break the cycle of poverty is by fostering genuine, deep-rooted connections within a supportive community. This community is comprised of individuals who share experiences of overcoming poverty and have discovered the inner motivation to care for themselves, their families, and their broader communities.

In this context, I will share strategies and outcomes that have shaped my understanding of how diaconia serves as a table where community – and ultimately the love of Jesus – is offered and profoundly experienced. It has become a form of communion, where the body of Christ is broken to bring healing and restoration to vulnerable individuals.

1 Acknowledgements: The content of this chapter is based on the work done by the people working for PEN. It is made possible by the different communities that allow PEN into their lives to become part of their life journey.

Together, we will explore the deep connection between building healing communities and employing diaconia as a means to achieve this. The discussion will examine the relationships between diaconia, evangelism, and the essence of being the church. Finally, I will investigate the role of justice within diaconia as a strategy for community development.

Overview of PEN

PEN is an NGO rooted in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) that has evolved over the years into a faith-based community, operating from a Christian understanding of its vision: PEN is an inclusive faith-based organisation that assists individuals in breaking the cycle of poverty to construct a South Africa where everyone belongs and flourishes.

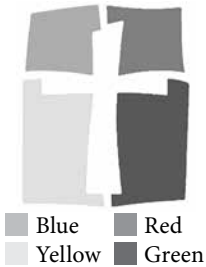
PEN views itself as part of the church's outreach, operating in areas where traditional churches may not always be adequately equipped to function effectively. Over the last three decades, PEN has developed into an organisation that operates within the broader church while innovating the concept of church itself. This involves accessing resources that may not be readily available to local or traditional churches, mobilising skilled individuals, and creating opportunities for creative community development. Strategies and models are being developed to address the current needs of communities. The focus is not on building churches but on fostering healthy faith-based communities that may occasionally form churches or small groups bonded by shared faith principles. These are not necessarily denominational groups but rather people who share culture, context, and community. This may eventually evolve into expressions of church.

PEN is driven by the mission to help individuals break free from the poverty cycle, which was deeply entrenched during apartheid and has trapped families in generational cycles of deprivation. Arvanitakis and Hornsby (2023), in their description of the poverty cycle in South Africa, highlight the compounding effects of poor healthcare, inadequate education, and low economic growth. They state:

For South Africa, poverty indicators are categorised into four dimensions; health, education, standards of living and economic activity. Addressing redistribution under these four dimensions has been restricted by systemic and historical inequities, particularly in the area of education and health.

Many black parents were prevented from attaining a good education, which resulted in them not earning enough income to sustain their families. This led to children being born into poverty, where they did not have access to opportunities such as quality education. To this day, this has resulted in a perpetuation of poverty, with families remaining trapped in the cycle. PEN aims to address the injustices that prevent individuals from breaking this cycle. The gap between the rich and the poor is ever-growing, exacerbating the current crisis of poverty.

PEN's understanding of evangelism (and diaconia) closely aligns with the notion of doing good for all and, in the process, helping people to follow a path of discipleship. In the description of their logo and the philosophy reflected in the logo,² PEN describes the imprinting of the cross and the logo as follows:



The four colours of PEN now together form the cross. One can say that the cross only becomes visible in our holistic approach to ministry. It is in the empty space in between our daily work that the living Christ becomes visible for all to witness, reminding us of how we can live our own lives – a philosophy of life.

← FIGURE 1: PEN Logo³

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- 2 Four-colour philosophy of PEN (formulated by PF Smit on the PEN website): The yellow reminds us of the gold of royalty. As a faith-based organisation, we look to God as the Alpha and Omega of everything we think and do. The Greek word associated with this is *kerygma* or 'proclamation'. We proclaim that the answer to our problems of injustice and servitude to our own and corporate sins lies in the Way of Jesus Christ. The blue reminds us of water. Water is the primary source of health and healing. When we are in shock, someone gives us water. When we injure ourselves, we first wash our wounds with water. When we are thirsty, we ask for water. The Greek word *diaconia* means 'serving'. We proclaim the Way of Jesus, but we also serve in the style of our Lord. The red reminds us of love, or even blood. We are not blue-blood people, but "red-blood people". This reminds us that we are in community with everyone in our society, regardless of age, sex, colour, or class. The Greek word *koinonia* means 'community'. We believe that our well-being as individuals is intimately connected to being part of a healthy, supportive community. The green reminds us of money and our beautiful green earth. The Greek word *oikoumenos* means 'manager' or 'steward'. We are God's stewards, called to look after the earth and all its resources, including people, especially those whom God has entrusted to us. Together, these four colours create a cross, reminding us why we do what we do, for whom we do it, and how we are supposed to do it. Jesus Christ and His Kingdom are the centre of our faith, the reason for our existence, and the example we choose to follow.
- 3 <https://www.pen.org.za/four-colour-philosophy/>

Diaconia defined

In its original form, *diaconia* means service. Rather than unpacking the history and development of the term, this section focuses on its recent meanings and applications. The discussion begins with the concept of ecumenical diaconia, introduced by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in the 1960s, as a foundation for exploring its contemporary relevance. The WCC played a significant role in developing the meaning and application of diaconia, helping to bring it into the ecumenical space of understanding and re-expressing its significance. In the 1980s, the understanding of diaconia broadened to encompass engagement with the world in many more sectors than traditionally recognised. The consultation held in Larnaca, Cyprus, in 1986 was a turning point. Diaconia was applied in areas such as philanthropy, justice, human rights, human dignity, peace, church unity, and interreligious involvement in justice and peace (Robra 1994).

The institutionalised church has often become overly focused on worship and inward ministry, neglecting its vital role in bringing care and justice to the broader world. This inward focus overlooks the church's true purpose, which is inherently tied to the *missio Dei*. Dr Nioma Venter, quoted in the *Kerkbode* (Van der Merwe 2022), asserts that diaconia involves seeing the entirety of creation through God's eyes and responding accordingly. She further emphasises that diaconia is deeply rooted in the very nature of the Trinity.

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) describes diaconia as: 'Diaconia in context: *Transformation, reconciliation, empowerment*'. They further define it as 'a call to action, as a response to challenges of human suffering, injustice and care for creation' (LWF 2009:8). The work carried out by PEN reflects this understanding in practice. Building on this, the WCC introduced further developments by discussing the role of faith-based organisations and presenting the concepts of faith-based diaconia and rights-based diaconia (WCC 2017:9).

Knoetze initiated a discussion on diaconal ecclesiology, which examines the relationship between the church and diaconia. He argues that diaconia is still merely a function of the church (2019:160). However, what resonates is the notion that the church exists where its members are, which supports the growing understanding that the essence of the church and being church is deeply rooted in the character of diaconia. Diaconia is not just a function of the church; it is intrinsically linked to her identity.

In 2 Corinthians 8:4 and elsewhere, Paul establishes a connection between *diaconia* and *koinonia*, highlighting the early church's

understanding that its identity is fundamentally rooted in serving others. Klaasen (2020) explores the role of building unity through diaconal ecclesiology, stating that ‘a hermeneutic of catholicity or wholemaking uses diversity as its principle for healing and restoration. The diaconal ecclesiology as service presupposes ‘universal’ in abstract terms, but wholemaking is about “qualitatively-wholeness”’. This idea – that unity brings about qualitative wholeness – resonates deeply in the context of urban diaconal work. Traditionally, diaconia has not been explicitly associated with fostering *koinonia* or achieving qualitative wholeness through the intentional embrace of diversity.

The next thought to include in this discussion about diaconia is articulated by Mrad (2019:80–81), who emphasises the importance of centring the inner-city experience. His insights highlight the interconnectedness of *diaconia*, *ecclesia*, *koinonia*, and ultimately, *leiturgia*. ‘Through this, the church is invited to understand the glory of God from the perspective of the Cross and to walk on the same path’. Luke calls this path diaconia. He puts the ‘breaking of bread’ at the centre of the church’s life.

The final concept to add to this discussion is the deep connection between *diaconia* and *kerygma*. Our experience in the city demonstrates that *diaconia* serves as a table where the true meaning of following Jesus – in both life and faith – is embodied and shared. This can be interpreted as a form of evangelism. Eurich (2020) discusses the connection between evangelism and diaconia: ‘A disconnect has developed in the last few decades between Diaconia and Evangelism. A watered-down understanding of Diaconia has caused the church to lose its core mission, to care for the vulnerable and the poor. The focus of being church became inwardly directed’.

By bringing these different areas of ministry into interaction with each other, we arrive at a much richer understanding of what diaconia can and should be. It challenges us to think more deeply and broadly about the impact of diaconia in ministry.

In conclusion, diaconia should embody the act of communion, where the body of Christ is broken and served to the poor and marginalised individuals living in urban areas. This results in the establishment of deep-felt *koinonia*, and within the process of bringing this reality to the world, people are overwhelmed by the love of Jesus for them. They continue their journey of discipleship in this created ‘womb of care and love’, where they can grow into flourishing and contributing individuals.

Diaconia as understood in an urban, African context

Diaconia is much more than a function of the church. If a contemporary description that is practical for an urban African context is to be given, diaconia becomes the way the church reveals her heart to the world. It is the face the church presents to reflect the heart of Jesus and serves as a builder of unity by promoting qualitative wholeness and celebrating diversity, particularly in an urban African context.

Connecting diaconia to the core elements of being the church is not new; however, in practice, it has often been minimised to the acts of deacons collecting money and distributing bread and wine. On the contrary, diaconia belongs at the heart of being the church. Understanding diaconia as an expression of liturgy, koinonia, ecclesia, and kerugma may help us perceive it in a new light.

To contextually understand *diaconia*, one must recognise that its meaning cannot be grasped in isolation. It is intrinsically linked to concepts such as:

- Interdisciplinary ministry
- Social services
- Justice
- Community care
- Community development

Traditional churches have often struggled to bridge the gap between these interconnected aspects. However, NGOs and other civil organisations are increasingly contributing to a renewed understanding of *diaconia*.

The relationship between church and organisation

Eurich (2020) highlights the theme of collaboration – or the lack thereof – between traditional churches and civil society, including organisations that address the realities of caring for a broken society. As he aptly notes, this conversation is longstanding and remains unresolved. Observations suggest that the church often struggles to accept that other institutions can effectively carry out what it perceives as ‘church functions’, particularly when this involves mobilising funds, human resources, and the capacity to address societal needs. My experience reflects a recurring tension between the work of churches and NGOs. There is an underlying, often unspoken, message that churches are not doing enough, leaving NGOs to take on the hard work. This critique is frequently met with resistance by many local churches. However, as Eurich notes, NGOs

are often better equipped to handle fundraising, meet complex donor reporting requirements, and operate professionally within the constraints of intricate laws and social expectations. Rather than viewing these capabilities as a threat, there is a pressing need for churches to embrace collaboration and support.

In his article, Eurich (2020) explains it best:

Churches, as well as diaconal organisations, operate on a specific Christian value base. Even though the specific needs of a given social space are decisive for social-space engagement (and not their religious interests), it is necessary that their religious outlook be visible and inform their actions. Otherwise, the church or diaconal organisation is in danger of becoming a mere social service agency. Therefore, specific activities have to be offered to equip professionals and lead people to communicate religious affiliations and develop a Christian organisational culture. The balance between a particular value orientation and promoting the common good must be sought continuously.

How faith-based communities, built through organisations or churches, reveal the face of Jesus to the marginalised through a deep understanding of diaconia

The discussion on diaconia enhances understanding of the work carried out by a faith-based organisation like PEN. Diaconia is not merely “the” face of the church but one of its most important aspects. Through acts of care, a genuine and profound sense of belonging is fostered, leading to the development of a faith-based community characterised by qualitative wholeness: a diverse group of people caring for one another and their environment.

The following section relays some stories of the impact PEN is making through small acts of kindness and community-building in the lives of people living in the inner city of Pretoria. These stories highlight individuals engaging in the ordinary and the mundane, where injustice is challenged and the cycle of poverty is broken. Often, the outcomes of these actions can be experienced as *manumit* – freedom from the bondage of restricted mindsets.

One of PEN’s focus areas is to provide access to educational support for school-going youth. A significant issue in inner-city schools is access to the

internet. Projects, extra support, and basic access to information should be recognised as fundamental rights for children expected to perform in an internet-based educational environment. This requires equipment and internet access – tools that many youths living in challenging city conditions do not possess. The context for many of these children involves sharing a small apartment with numerous other people, leaving little physical space to study (adding to the challenge of lacking electricity, resulting in no power and no lights; this spells disaster). Through church partners, PEN secured a company willing to extend its business of bringing fibre to the city and to the educational support centre that PEN operates. Once finalised, the entire Sunnyside area will have access to better-quality internet, and the youth at PEN will benefit from reliable internet access. This includes in-person tutoring, limited online assistance, and constrained online educational support programmes. This care fosters a safe space for gathering; lunch is provided, and a holistic care programme is offered. Youth are supported to grow into hopeful individuals who feel that they belong and thrive.

Another area of focus for PEN is adults who become vulnerable by living on the streets. They face challenges such as extreme hunger, exposure to the elements, sexual exploitation, substance dependence, mental health issues, and more. Through the holistic care that PEN provides, dignity is restored to many individuals. Sometimes, PEN's impact does not yield positive outcomes, but they continue to put forth their best efforts. To illustrate this, here is a description of a *PEN* programme (*Lekgotla*) and three individual stories.

Individual stories

PEN Lekgotla

A need was identified for the men in the programme to assist those who live on the streets by creating a space to share their stories, form bonds of friendship, and grow together. A *lekgotla* is, according to the Collins English Dictionary (2020), a Sotho and Tswana word used for a village meeting of leaders. It is associated with a council or strategic planning space. Men living on the streets often feel detached from others. They lack positive role models or individuals to talk to who understand their challenges. PEN responded to this need by calling a weekly *lekgotla* that fulfils this purpose. This has also developed into a space where contextual

Bible⁴ reading takes place. During these sessions, everyone can listen to a Bible story and relate it to their own context. The lekgotla has become a space for deep communion and healing: a church in a beautiful, raw form.

Individual stories that help to understand the broad approach needed to influence one person's life. These stories represent the difficulty of making an impact. Not all stories end in new beginnings. Sometimes, all the effort ends in sadness and failure, which is a true reflection of real life and the effort it takes to change the world, even one person at a time.

The first story was documented by one of PEN's caregivers (Susan van der Walt):

Jennie (not her real name) became part of the PEN family in 2012 when she and her brother were placed in Foster Care at our Orphan and Vulnerable Children Program. She was eight years old when the journey started with her. The events leading up to their placement with us were very traumatic, which included gross negligence and rejection from their biological mother. Their biological father was not in the picture since the mother was in a rehabilitation center for drug addicts.

The adjustment period for Jennie and her brother went well, and they soon found their place in the home. The staff in the home was dedicated and worked hard to give all the children in the house individual care and attention. It was noticed that Jennie was struggling to follow the rules and instructions. Interventions were implemented to address these issues. Looking back, this behaviour was the beginning of a pattern that developed. It would go better for a while: she would express that she wanted

4 Contextual Bible Study (CBS) (as explained by the Ujamaa Center 2015) is a form of the See-Judge-Act method. First, CBS is always situated within the social analysis and needs of particular communities of the poor, the working-class, and marginalised. It is their perspective on reality that shapes the whole Bible study. Second, the CBS provides a way of doing theological analysis, 'reading the signs of the times'. The Bible is read carefully and closely in order to hear its distinct voice within its own literary and socio-historical context, thereby providing a theological resource from such to reflect on and engage with our social analysis. And third, CBS always ends with theological resources provided by the Bible study to plan for social transformation.

to do better, and for weeks, even months after (especially in the beginning of the pattern), it indeed went better, but eventually, she struggled again with following rules and adhering to instructions. Interventions such as therapy, behavioural adjustments, bearing of consequences for not adhering to rules, etc., were implemented to support and give guidance to Jennie.

As Jennie aged and went to High School, the behavioural challenges became more frequent. A vast negative trigger occurred when she finally managed to meet her biological parents. It has been a desire for her for quite some time to meet them and to get to know them. Arrangements were made with the Social Worker, and after two or three meetings, the parents disappeared. This episode was one of Jennie's biggest disappointments. The House Parents, Social Worker, & Mentors in Jennie's life were very aware of this, and she was consistently made aware of all the support and love for her.

It was during the same period that she started to experiment with alcohol/weed and finally admitted in the last year of her stay with us that she was addicted. She began to skip school and came home late, sometimes staying out for two/three days without the House Parents' permission or letting someone know where she was. A turning point in our journey with Jennie was when she received her Smart ID card when she turned 18. She decided that she did not want to finish school and moved out of our care. Numerous conversations were held with her to try to influence her decisions since one could see that she was heading for a tumultuous future. It unfortunately didn't bear any fruit.

Within one month of moving out from our care, she showed up at our Women's Shelter in need of support. She lost all her belongings, was dirty, hungry, and also no longer taking her chronic medication. The team received her with open arms, knowing the background, and started with interventions to assist her. At first, she cooperated very well. The team made sure that she saw health professionals to get her chronic medication sorted, received accommodation, attended various group sessions, had counselling sessions and developed a formal IDP (Individual Development Plan) with our Social Workers. Unfortunately,

old patterns were serviced again and she exited from the accommodation and started to avoid attending sessions. In April this year, Jennie's Mom passed away, and we managed to assist with family reunification after she expressed the desire to go to her family. Within six weeks, Jennie was back in Pretoria, once again on the street and unwilling to fully commit to getting the needed support to become a self-sustainable adult.

Jennie is part of our Drop-in Centre and attends now and again. She is frustrated with sleeping on the street but is unwilling to use our accommodation because she then needs to follow rules that do not work for her.

The second story is about Lisa (pseudonym). She helped to write this story in a way that reflects her experience.

My name is Lisa. I lived in Cape Town and worked as a receptionist for a vehicle maintenance company. I was doing crystal meth (drug) at the time, and when the company did a random drug test, I got caught and was fired. I lost everything (things like accommodation and a company vehicle). I just gave up on my life that day. I sold all my belongings, took whatever money I had left, and decided to disappear (running away from my mother and my kids). I moved to Durban, where I met up with my ex-boyfriend, who was doing Heroin & I started doing Heroin as well. We moved to Rustenburg to be with his mother. His father died. It brought new stress, and we broke up. I ended up in Pretoria all alone,,doing Crystal Meth & Heroin while living on the street. I had no-one to turn to for help or shelter. That was my rock bottom that made me realise that I needed to make a change. I bumped into a lady from COSUP⁵ that motivated me and helped me to join the programme for Methadone⁶. I took that first step to a better life and to become a better me again. The next step was to find accommodation. I was having a hard time to find a shelter that would assist me being on Methadone. One

5 COSUP is a programme run by the Department of Family Medicine of the University of Pretoria. (Community Orientated Substance Use Programme).

6 Methadone is a drug administered under supervision to help someone overcome addiction.

day I was sitting at Church Square just feeling very down and hopeless. (I did not want to be on the street anymore, and it did not look like I was going to find accommodation).

Three ladies from PEN approached me and told me about their services. They restored HOPE in me. I shared my story with them so that they could help me with a hot shower, food, counselling and accommodation. I told them what I needed, but they gave so much more (I was not judged). I was given a Referral Letter to visit their centre. The next week, I walked to PEN. Coming to Mohlodi wa Tsepo [PEN's home for destitute women], I was very nervous, shy and scared. Yet they made me feel at ease and very welcome as I attended their group sessions. They allowed me to take a hot shower and gave me a plate of food every day. They even helped me with clothes and shoes. It continued for about a week when I was asked to stay longer, and became part of the short-term housing program. I really felt at home. I started to get the counselling that I needed. Mohlodi wa Tshepo has not just giving me a shower, clothes, food and a roof over my head, but was also giving me hope, purpose and a new family. Without Mohlodi wa Tshepo⁷, I would never have gotten this far on my journey of sobriety and becoming a new, better version of myself.

Lee Ann shared her story with us. We documented it with her help:

Lee Ann Shepherd is a Mozambican citizen who came to South Africa in 1999 when she was 15 years old. She was groomed by a human trafficking ring and brought to South Africa as a sex worker. She ran away from her traffickers in Cape town to Port Elizabeth where she was staying in different parks. One day, whilst sitting in the park, she met a man by the name of John Shepherd whom she dated. Mr John, after seeing that Lee Ann is always in trouble with the police, because she had lost her Mozambican documentation, decided to change her name to "Lee Ann Shepherd". She then moved to Johannesburg when John's family did not approve of their relationship ;she stayed under bridges and in parks whilst doing her job as a Sex worker.

7 The house for destitute women, run by PEN.

Lee Ann never had a safe space to lay her head. She then moved to Pretoria where she became part of the Women Arise⁸ group sessions presented by PEN, in 2018. She became an active member, though high on drugs all the time. She was suspended many times for her behavioural problems in the centre but kept on coming back to apologise. Due to the nature of her job, Lee Ann was in and out of prison and often nearly beaten to death by her clients. In June 2023, East hood hotspot people were evicted from where Lee Ann was staying, and Lee Ann ran to the social workers at PEN and told them that she wanted to go home. She was brought to Woman Arise, where she was accommodated to start saving for the journey to go home. Later, she moved out of PEN's accommodation, but she was still regularly attending the Drop-In Centre, and she is still continuing to save to go home.

Holistic services rendered to support Lee Ann:

An appointment was scheduled at Mozambican Embassy where the Social Worker and Lee Ann visited the Consulate to find ways to help her regain her documentation. She was interviewed by the High Commissioner to verify her identity, and she passed the interviews.

The embassy confirmed that Lee Ann has a Mozambican ID but will need to re-apply for a new one when she is at home.

The High Commissioner confirmed that they will issue a document allowing Lee Ann to cross all the borders when she is ready to go home.

She was taught a basic skill to help her get a job to raise funds to go home.

Lee Ann will receive ongoing counselling with the designated Social Worker until she exits.

The Social Worker is helping Lee Ann regain her true identity and accept herself.

Lee Ann is on a journey to get clean from drugs. She is helped with access to medical care when needed.

Lee Ann is slowly opening up to share about her family and her past. All her years in South Africa, she used an affidavit to identify. She cannot wait to have legal documentation again.

8 Women Arise is the program run by PEN for vulnerable and destitute women.

Lee Ann is pleased and looking forward to reuniting with her family in Mozambique.

The purpose of sharing these stories is to illustrate the concept of holistic care and how it fosters healing communities. They demonstrate how a shared faith and a collective commitment to taking ownership of oneself, one's family, and one's community can bring about profound change. The nourishment provided to community members may appear to be simple pap, but it is enriched with vitamins through the community's shared knowledge and care.

The role of partnerships and an ecumenical approach

These acts of love and holistic care are made possible through ecumenical partnerships and the establishment of networks with individuals and the business community. As a community and faith-based organisation, PEN cannot stand alone. The broader church plays a significant role in leveraging influence and fostering support. Many individuals contribute to our work because of their connection to and involvement with their local church. Additionally, PEN relies on businesses and the government to facilitate the essential work we do.

Conclusion

It is important to bring the shared stories into the context of a holistic approach as we grow and deepen our understanding of diaconia. In the harsh environment of generational poverty, trying to break this cycle by addressing the injustices experienced, diaconia becomes the table on which Jesus is served in an urban African context.

Understanding that diaconia can never stand on its own, but is deeply connected to our approach to Evangelism, community engagement, and the serving of the Eucharist – or simply being the church – is illustrated in the real-life stories of individuals. It is further highlighted by the realisation that we are deeply connected to our context, our history, and the way we understand the Kingdom principles through which we seek to serve the world. We bring Jesus to the world, shaped by our understanding and expression of *diaconia*, *koinonia*, *kerugma*, *leiturgia*, and *oikoumene*. The Jesus needed in this day and age is authentic and real. The message feels like the loving touch of a person and tastes like vitamin-enriched pap.

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A PRAXIS OF GRACE, DESIRE AND RESISTANCE: METHODOLOGY FOR A EUCHARISTIC DIACONIA

Erica Meijers

Introduction

Diaconia can be understood as a practice of breaking and sharing (Meijers 2022). This is a profoundly relational practice, connecting people, communities, and the church to its diverse contexts time and again (Collins 1990). This contribution aims to bridge the practical gap between diaconia and the Table of the Lord.¹ Theologically, the connection between the two has often been underscored (see references). The ongoing movement between diaconia and the Table of the Lord is evident in the roles of deacons as described by Calvin and Bucer. The deacons are responsible for the collection of gifts, the preparation of the Lord's Supper, and the administration and distribution of the collected gifts to those in need (Bucer 1577:463). For Calvin, a church that does not share what it receives with those in need can no longer be considered a church. As he puts it: a sacrament is only truly a sacrament if the promise of the ceremony is visible. The Eucharist is incomplete unless it is poured into the world, empowered by the presence of the Spirit, the remembrance of the Passion of Christ, and the promise of eternal life (Calvin, *Institutio* IV, 19:33; Meijers 2019.)

In diaconal and ecclesial practices, however, this connection is often neglected. In this chapter, I explore the connection between diaconia and the Eucharist by examining the cyclic movement between them. What

1 I will use 'Table or Supper of the Lord' and 'Eucharist' as synonyms, according to ecumenical use.

theological connections between the Eucharist and diaconia can support the daily ministry of the church? Based on these theological connections, what steps can help us understand, renew, and maintain this relationship?

Since I understand diaconia as a relational and contextual practice, these questions cannot be answered in general terms. I will therefore develop a Eucharistic-diaconal methodology by closely examining the relationship between diaconia and the Eucharist as practised in a Reformed congregation in the Netherlands, situating this relationship in a Western urban context characterised by diversity, secularisation, and gentrification. I live in this neighbourhood myself and I am a member of this congregation, having fulfilled several functions and roles over the years. To clarify that my account is based on research within my own community, I will use the term 'we' when referring to the congregation.

First, I will briefly describe the context in which I situate this research. Second, I will explore a diaconal understanding of the Eucharist, relating to the following aspects of a Reformed celebration of the Eucharist: *epiclesis*, *anamnesis*, *eschaton*, and *koinonia*. Based on these reflections, I will develop a Eucharistic-diaconal methodology in several steps (commit, expose, relate, engage, reflect, celebrate) to specify the flow of the Eucharistic-diaconal circle.

Context

Every month, the congregation of the Nassau Church in Amsterdam forms a large circle to pray, sing, and share bread and wine around the Table of the Lord. Everyone is welcome; even those who do not wish to take bread and wine are invited to join the circle. There are no conditions for participation, as we believe it is Christ himself who is the host. This is not merely a theoretical issue, as we are a community of confirmed, baptised, and non-church members. Not everyone considers themselves a believer. People have found their way to our community through the church's engagement with the neighbourhood, which has been a defining characteristic of the congregation for many years.

In the 1980s, the area was known for its accumulation of social problems. During that time, Amsterdam was viewed as being in a deplorable state by economists and sociologists. Due to the end of the industrial era and globalisation, unemployment and housing shortages were high, and many highly educated individuals and families left the city (Milikowski 2018:28–29). It was during this period that the congregation, which had recently merged with another reformed church in the neighbourhood that had been

closed due to de-churching, chose to open itself to the community. The congregation committed to the ecumenical tradition of urban mission: a church cannot be the Church when it isolates itself from the increasingly non-Christian community it is part of (Schippers 1984:21). One of the ministers articulated this engagement as follows: ‘God’s Spirit and mercy are present in the neighbourhood and go ahead of us. (...) As a church, we try to follow God’s special attention for the broken and vulnerable people in our relationship with the neighbourhood’ (Irik 1995:116).²

The Nassau church has built a practice of solidarity with squatters and initiated various activities with other organisations, including a small restaurant under the Persian name “Filah” (well-being), a second-hand shop, and a walk-in centre for those seeking a moment of peace or looking for counselling and support. In Amsterdam, these activities were brought together under the foundation *Kerk & Buurt* (*Church & Neighbourhood*), which has since expanded to include many more initiatives. Today, the foundation has numerous volunteers with no ties to the church or the Christian tradition. Its goal is to enhance the quality of life and social cohesion in the neighbourhood, with a keen eye for the uniqueness of all participants and volunteers.

Since the 1990s, the neighbourhood has begun to change. A more service- and capital-oriented economy has attracted a new group of wealthy inhabitants to Amsterdam, followed by tourists and foreign investors. The process of gentrification, which has brought affluent residents to our traditionally poor neighbourhood, has led to higher house prices, the emergence of different types of shops and cafés, and has impacted the social fabric of the community, causing segregation between successful newcomers and long-time residents who do not benefit from the new economy. Since the turn of the century, the congregation of the Nassau Church has been trying to navigate this situation. It is losing members, partly because some are moving to better or cheaper areas, but also because the congregation is aging. There are very few new church members; most children leave the congregation when they grow up.

While many people are still connected to *Church & Neighbourhood*, the ties to the church have weakened, and volunteers and participants in the foundation often have less active engagement with the congregation. The church no longer has enough official members to afford a full-time or even part-time minister and is struggling to find theological

2 All citations from Dutch publications are translated by E.M.

professionals to support the congregation for even a few days a week. The future of the congregation and its mission to contribute to well-being in the neighbourhood also hinges on whether the (expensive) monumental church building can be used as a genuine community space, inviting others to utilise the building and contribute to its maintenance costs. The connection to the neighbourhood has become vital for the congregation itself (Meijers 2023a).

How can this process of relating to the neighbourhood be connected to the rituals at the heart of the congregation? The celebration of the Eucharist lies at the core of our community; it is the place where we renew our faith and commit to each other once again. At the same time, the ritual of the Eucharist seems to be distant from our activities with other inhabitants of the neighbourhood. Thus, it appears to be an appropriate starting point for reflecting on diaconia, understood as the commitment to justice and reconciliation, the healing of brokenness, and the fullness of life. Fortunately, we do not need to start from scratch; we can rely on a rich Reformed and ecumenical theological tradition. I will now present a diaconal understanding of the Eucharist, relating to the following aspects: *epiclesis, anamnesis, eschaton, and koinonia*.

Diaconal reflections on the Eucharist

In some neo-Calvinistic traditions, the Supper of the Lord is practiced as an unchangeable ritual of individual salvation. Another approach is adopted here, one that interprets the Eucharist as a living practice deeply rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus. As a symbolic and ritual compaction of spiritual and material experiences from everyday life, the sacrament of the Eucharist has been able to carry witness to the ministry of Jesus through the ages. Every generation must unpack this witness anew and bring it to life in the individual, political, and socio-economic experiences of its community. Without a connection to daily life, the Eucharist is reduced to a cult meal for insiders and loses its salvific power for the world. In my view of the Eucharist, I align with Karl Barth, who emphasised in the turmoil just after the Great War of 1914–1918 that the Church must be a church for the world, or it will miss the promise of our daily lives: it is this life on earth that will become the reign of God (Barth 1919:15).

Schottroff and Bieler (2007:72) formulated this many years later: there is no hierarchy between the sacraments and daily, material life, but the sacraments embody the expectancy of how God's reign will befall our reality and how we will participate in it. The bread of the Eucharist and the

bread of the world are intrinsically connected; they can mutually clarify each other. Schottroff and Bieler (2007:17) refer to this as sacramental permeability.

In the liturgical space of a church service, we take a distance from daily life to understand and experience God's Word for our world. The tension between our daily context and God's promise and presence becomes tangible when we enter the sacramental space of the Eucharist. In the Nassau church, this moment is marked by a change in the space: we move from the pews to stand in a circle, facing one another.

Epiclesis: A cry to the Spirit

Before we receive and share bread and wine, we call out to the Spirit from our world. This prayer for the Holy Spirit to come prepares us in three ways: first, we signal that the Eucharist is not a regular daily meal (although it can be celebrated every day); second, we admit that without the grace of the Spirit, we cannot commit to others; and third, we express our desire to find God.

By starting our meal with a prayer to the Holy Spirit, we enter a different reality, to which we are all invited, but which nobody controls. The simplicity of the sacrament (we share and eat bread and wine) reveals a truth about our humanity that we do not easily access. We need to take some distance from our daily lives to understand its meaning. This meal is offered to us from heaven, from a hidden place where God dwells. This meal is a mystery to us, and we are at the receiving end of it. This creates a tension, as the meaning of the bread and wine in the Eucharist shows: the earthly elements of bread and wine during the Eucharist represent a relationship to food that is opposite to the consumerism prevailing in our society. Industrial food production in the liberal market economy presents bread (and other food) as a commodity for consumption only, thus hiding the violence, exploitation during the production process, and disrespect towards animals and plants that become our food. The Eucharist, on the other hand, is a meal in which relationships are central. By eating it, we say thanks, as the word Eucharist indicates. We thank God for our earthly bodies and the resources that make it possible to live and connect (Wirzba 2019).³ Through bread and wine, we participate in Christ.

3 Even though Wirzba proposes a Roman Catholic sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist, by which I am not convinced (see Meijers 2021), his writing did help to sharpen my thoughts.

This is only possible thanks to the intimate presence of the Spirit. The prayer to renew ourselves, our human relationships, and the whole of creation expresses the foundation of our commitment to one another, which is rooted in the Spirit's faithful commitment to us. Calvin repeatedly emphasises that it is through God's Spirit of peace and life (Rom 8:7) that we can participate in Christ (Calvin 1961:12). The gracious presence of the Spirit is a powerful theological statement because it resonates with the human experience of loss, despair, and suffering. The prayer to the Spirit echoes Jonah's outcry in the whale, the cry for justice from the enslaved people of Israel, and the repetition of this cry by today's refugees, homeless migrants, and those who have lost all hope for a better life amid the violence of urban living. We call out to God's Spirit, who has heard and responded to these cries for deliverance from life's hardships (Boer 2023:57–58). We can commit to each other and to others because she is with us whenever we cry out; she dwells on earth with the sighing and mourning creation, crying out eagerly to the God of Israel: *veni creator spiritus!*

Anamnesis

After the confirmation of the epiclesis that the Eucharist is a meal of grace and desire, we turn to the remembrance of the suffering of Christ, or, in theological terms, the *anamnesis*. I would like to make three comments from a diaconal perspective on anamnesis that I consider relevant for the diaconal hermeneutical circle.

First, the suffering of Christ in the Eucharist is always regarded from the perspective of the Resurrection: after all, it is the community of the Resurrected that remembers. Without the Resurrection, we would succumb to the despair of the cross or to an adoration of it. The fact that we remember Jesus' death from the perspective of his being resurrected by God transforms the Eucharist into a sacrament: we do not control it; we can only surrender in faith.

Second, remembering is a material and bodily practice. Calvin stated that we use what we know to describe or experience what we cannot grasp: bread and wine are the signs that point to the secret of our unification with Christ (Calvin 1961:1–3). Through the physical act of eating and drinking, we connect with the tortured and resurrected body of Christ (Schottroff & Bieler 2007:184). God's incarnation did not occur in an abstract human being but in a body that experienced exclusion and suffering, executed as a slave (Phil 2:5–11). This is especially meaningful for abused and violated bodies. Eating and drinking during the Eucharist constitutes an intimacy

between our bodies and the broken body of Christ, thus connecting us physically and spiritually to all suffering bodies in this world (Schottroff & Bieler 2007:186–187). At the same time, where hunger is related to fear and exclusion, food represents security and comfort, as it has done from the beginning of our vulnerable lives. As we break and share the bread, we reconfirm our dignity, which is both spiritual (received from God) and material (De Gruchy 2015).

Third, remembering the suffering of Christ is an act of resistance against all human suffering and evil. During the celebration of the Eucharist, we do not simply recall Jesus' suffering as a historical event; in our act of remembering – manifested through the Spirit – Jesus is present among us. As he looks at us from the cross, he sees and acknowledges our own yearning for deliverance from hardship. This act of remembering interrupts history, which typically only commemorates the powerful. Walter Benjamin, in his philosophical-historical theses, speaks of the messianic power that lies hidden in the longing of past generations. History appears to move forward towards a future that devastates the hope of the marginalised. Here, at the cross, it momentarily halts, taking note of human suffering long forgotten by history (Benjamin 1977:251–255, thesis II, V and VII).

Benjamin states that the Messiah comes not only as the redeemer but also as the conqueror of the Antichrist. It is only possible to ignite the spark of hope in the past if we are fully aware that those who rule also govern the past and the dead (Benjamin 1977, thesis VI). The anamnestic act of breaking the bread transforms Jesus' death from a forgotten event (his name is practically absent from official historical documents) into a central event in history. Every time the Eucharist is celebrated, the Christian community resists the erasure of the cruel act of crucifixion and the forces of oblivion that deny Jesus' life and ministry. The early Christian celebration of the Eucharist, by placing a crucified man at the centre of their common meal, explicitly named the violence as injustice and, in doing so, denied its power. Only in this way can we redeem both victim and perpetrator: by naming injustice. Jesus' death gave the imperial oppression by Rome a name that exposed it as an unjust state: it does not bring a Pax Romana, but death (Schottroff & Bieler 2007:89–90). Our breaking and sharing transform the pain and shame of victims and perpetrators of our times into a healing connection with the Resurrected against torture and death. The anamnesis is thus a prophetic gesture against the invisibility of suffering.

If we see Jesus' death and resurrection as an isolated event, this aspect

of the Eucharist evaporates and, in the end, his killing by an imperial power is legitimised (Schottroff & Bieler 2007:99). The proclamation of the Lord's death represents a choice for life over death and serves as an indictment against all executions and violations of human rights.⁴ This necessitates anamnestic practices in our everyday lives.

Eschaton

The anamnesis liberates our suffering bodies by making that suffering visible and by understanding it through the lens of the Resurrection. In the eschaton, the coming of God's Kingdom in our midst is imminent. This is reflected in every detail of the Eucharist. This is the meal of God's Kingdom. Our desire for deliverance in our outcry to the Spirit is fulfilled during the Meal. Our remembrance of the Cross and the proclamation of the death of Christ 'until He comes' is also a proclamation of God's Kingdom. The eschatological reality of the Eucharist interrupts both our expectations and our fears: it creates a time and space in which life is experienced in its fullness, and our existence is fundamentally transformed. The Eucharist is, in other words, the space of God.

This space is characterised by the promise of dignity, justice, and peace, in biblical terms: *shalom*. The desire for the fulfilment of this promise itself becomes a window into another possible reality, the banquet of God, with bread and wine as signs of abundance. The law of scarcity does not prevail here, for abundance springs from the breaking and sharing itself. No one can leave the Lord's Table hungry or feel abandoned, as the feeding of the five thousand has taught us. Thanks to the liturgical distance from everyday life, the table companions of today can join those gathered on the hills of Galilee. In the act of breaking and sharing, the power of suffering, evil, and death is momentarily overcome. Herein lies the eschatological power of the ritual nature of the sacrament.

At the same time, the abundance of the Table of the Lord is too great for the ritual alone; it must spill over into everyday life in the form of a longing for *shalom*. The deeper the gap between the Lord's Table and a world where everything revolves around scarcity, benefiting an ever-shrinking group, the more pressing the desire for a life of abundance in our society becomes. The condensed time and space we experience during the Eucharist teach the diners how close the Messiah always is, wherever we are.

4 For a concrete example in our postcolonial world, see Nel (2011:157–170).

Koinonia

The participants at the Lord's Table are a community of imperfect people, sometimes broken, weary, and damaged. The space of the Eucharist, where only Christ is host, reveals our own wounds. In our bodies, we carry the traces of lust and suffering, of shame, joy, and hardship. The individual and social struggles we experience are written in our skin, our faces, and our movements. All our senses participate in the Eucharist. In the Nassau Church in Amsterdam, just before the breaking and sharing of bread and wine, we often go around shaking hands or embracing each other while singing, 'May peace be with you'. This is a precious moment in which we recognise each other and look at one another with eucharistic eyes, coloured by the Spirit of God's Kingdom, full of mercy and love. This is the moment during which we reconnect as a community of faith. At the Table of the Lord, we cannot remember the suffering of the Lord or partake in the abundance of the Kingdom without deeply engaging ourselves. Our own fears, failures, and hopes are seen and recognised.

Because dominant markers for success in our society do not count at the Lord's Table, there is space to examine ourselves and others without judging who is the most powerful, the richest, and the most privileged, or who is at the bottom of our society economically or mentally. However, that doesn't mean these differences become invisible or disappear: the community, in all its diversity (or lack of it), is at stake. In the sacrament, even the bread and wine themselves appear as a network of relationships: between the people around the table, between those who produce the bread and wine and those who consume them, and between the eaters and what is eaten (in this case, processed plants). In God's ecology, they all matter. During the Eucharist, the difficulty of doing justice to all these relationships is placed in the light of God's Kingdom. New breath is given, which helps to strengthen relationships, bridge gaps, and continue in the daily struggles of our world.

Summary

To summarise the foregoing: from our world full of contradictions and complexities, we cry out to the Spirit and thus enter the space of God's grace (*epiklesis*), where our aching desire and pain are seen and recognised in the *anamnesis*. This sacred act disrupts the dominant narrative of history and stands in resistance to suffering, offering a glimpse of abundant life (*eschaton*) through the Eucharistic sharing of a damaged and struggling community (*koinonia*).

The sacramental permeability of the Table of the Lord positions it as the

focal point of a continuous movement marked by grace (acknowledging that we are not in control), resistance to the erasure of Christ's suffering (and the suffering of those who share in similar experiences), and a longing for the fullness of God's abundant Kingdom. Because of its liturgical nature, we cannot remain at the Eucharistic Table; instead, we are sent out into the world. The breaking and sharing must extend into all the places where our lives are shaped and exposed.

In the next section, I will outline seven concrete steps that guide the *koinonia from the Table into the city and back again to the Table*.

A Eucharistic diaconal flow

What methodological steps can we discern if we want to concretise the diaconal flow that connects the Eucharist to the city? In the following, I unpack the movement from the Table of the Lord into everyday life through the following steps: commit, expose, relate, engage, reflect, and celebrate. These steps might not be so different from methods known in community development and practical theological approaches directed at local actors and collaborative processes: it starts with learning and listening to the community to discern needs and issues, followed by a process of analysing and interpreting, obtaining feedback from the community, engaging resources and people, and finally acting together (Henderson 2008; Yoms & Bowers-Du Toit 2017; Addy 2022). In the Nassau Church, this is how we have worked since we started to engage with the neighbourhood. This chapter reflects on this work and therefore inscribes itself in the hermeneutical circle: diaconal experiences in community development have sharpened our understanding of the Eucharist, and the experiences at the Table of the Lord influence our understanding of our presence in the neighbourhood.

Commit

In our cry to the Spirit at the Eucharistic Table, we express the desire and pain we experience in daily city life: the struggle with inequality, the joy, and the difficulties we encounter in the diversity of cultures, outlooks on life, age, class, sexuality, etc. As a Christian congregation, our commitment to the city is rooted in the belief that the Spirit dwells among us and offers us life. We move through the chaos and opacity of urban life with a cry on our lips: where are you, God? (Meijers 2023b) We observe young people who must leave the neighbourhood that was once their home because they cannot afford the housing prices, the gap between new wealthy inhabitants

and older impoverished residents, the disappearance of familiar shops that were important for the social cohesion of the neighbourhood, and the freshly renovated houses. In all this: can we see signs of shalom? Can we meet the Risen One?

In the same way that the epiclesis opens the sacramental space within the liturgy, it also creates space in the streets for others to take ownership. An epicletic diaconal attitude involves openness to people who may not be like us; without their unique experiences and knowledge, we cannot fully discern the ways of the Spirit in the city. Practical theologian Frederick Kakwata (2018), in developing a pneumatological approach to transformational development, highlights the spiritual fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The Spirit provides knowledge and understanding beyond what one could achieve alone, renewing relationships both within the community and with others.

From our prayers to the Spirit, we learn to adopt an attitude of receptivity and openness toward the city. We are called to embrace a grounded and patient approach, one that allows room for failure, improvisation, and fresh starts. Our own biographies, fears, and longings are reflected in what we do, both as individuals and as members of the institutional church. Our commitment to the city is nourished by the grace of the Spirit's presence. All we can hope for is to meet her.

Expose

Our desire to find the Spirit of the Resurrected in urban life urges us to expose ourselves to the streets, where our own imperfect bodies engage with all their senses. I smell the scent of alcohol and poverty from the clothes of the man sitting on a park bench, contrasting with the aroma of well-being emanating from a cup of freshly brewed morning coffee held by a well-dressed young woman on the tram. Memories awaken in my body through what I see: a name on a bridge evokes a little girl who died violently, while the abandoned building of a hundred-year-old Roman Catholic school brings back the painful process of its closure due to demographic changes and the preferences of wealthier, more highly educated parents, yet also evokes images of noisy children of many colours in the playground. I am touched by a brief conversation with an elderly man in a grey coat and cap, who has time on his hands and lost his shop due to rising rents. I am amazed by the creative survival tactics of a woman ensnared in the bureaucracy of debt, whose paintings now adorn the wall of a local organisation's breakfast café, where she hands

out sandwiches to homeless people, occasionally having one herself. Our presence on the streets, in parks, shops, and cafés provides insight and helps us connect to the neighbourhood on a deeper level. It teaches us not to look away from the wounds in the body of Jesus, to be aware that his suffering has not ended. He gazes from the cross at all those suffering in urban life today, recognising them. We learn to look where he is looking, as the city receives us as Christ does at his Table.

The anamnesis, as we practice it during the Eucharist, needs to be enacted where we live and suffer, longing to be delivered. The anamnesis, to fill our lives, requires a contextual practice that views the world from the perspective of the crucified and risen Christ, bringing what is noticed back to the Table of the Lord to better understand what it means that Christ is alive. This involves a shock, as Herman IJzerman has pointed out, having roamed the old city neighbourhoods for years. We are confronted with our fears and empty hands in the face of people surviving in situations of exclusion and inequity. This shock reminds us of Walter Benjamin's interruption of the dominant history, in which capitalist and lingering colonial values judge everyone. If you are of no or little use to either production or consumption, you are excluded, marginalised, or worse – simply overlooked, erased from the dominant history and structures of society. According to Benjamin, this shock, provoked by the confrontation with the other, opens a space in which another reality can enter, allowing for another understanding of time, in which it becomes possible to resist the pressure of the myths of progress, success, and limitless growth (IJzerman 2002). Benjamin calls this *Jetztzeit*, and it reminds us of a New Testament concept: *Kairos*. It is a decisive and compressed moment that changes our perception of *chronos*, the time of our daily world. This shock, or 'empty moment', as it is often called in diaconal studies (Schlatmann & Van Waarde 2014:75–95), demands a decision: coming from the Eucharist, which position do we choose in our city and neighbourhood, whose side are we on? The messianic power of this interruption of time connects us to the desires of suffering others throughout history, who have been and continue to wait for the Messiah to come. Their desire and resistance make His coming possible. It is through the small opening of the empty moment that the Messiah might enter (Benjamin 1977, thesis XI, XIV and Appendix B).

Relate and engage

By exposing ourselves to our cities and the suffering and desire we can find in them, we develop new attitudes and perspectives, which leads to new relationships. Churches, in their missionary passion, are often

eager to design and develop activities. However, from the breaking and sharing in the community of the Eucharistic Tables, we can learn that we must build relationships first. Only then can we engage in activities together with those we have come to know during the slow and repetitive processes of exposure described above. It takes time to build trust and to understand the ways of those we have met in the city, who may rely on different traditions and habits than our own. If we truly want to leave our bubbles (in my case: a white middle-class Protestant one), hoping to encounter the Spirit, it is crucial to take the time to relate. We need to understand the fears and desires of others, to become acquainted with their networks, traditions, and languages. In a secular, gentrifying, and highly diverse neighbourhood, we cannot rely on old church habits.

This can be a difficult process during which we are confronted with the past of the diaconal practices of the church – stories of humiliating arrogance, which demanded surrender to the ways and conditions of the dominant Christian culture before helping people in need; the assumption that the power of whoever controls the money must always be obeyed – still being handed down from one generation to the next. We are also confronted with our own images of the other – as inferior, threatening, helpless, or any other perception that we have encountered in the dominant structures of our society. What language can we use to relate to one another? Is there enough space for initiatives and ownership from all partners? This process of relating to one another is a fragile and sometimes frightening endeavour but engaging in activities together that strengthen the social fabric of the neighbourhood can be a positive way forward.⁵

This engagement involves resistance to structures in the city that (re) produce inequity and exclusion, to the silencing of the excluded, and to the oblivion of earlier experiences and cultures of resistance, which can serve as rich sources for engagement today. By creating places and moments of commemoration for those who have suffered and have been overlooked, and for those who are still pushed out of sight in our societies, we resist the repetition of the powers that crucified Jesus. We could display the names of those who disappeared while trying to reach our wealthy cities on our church buildings; we could make space in our liturgies and buildings for the creativity and wisdom of today's survivors of violence, sexual abuse, and the indebting power of state bureaucracy. In our liturgies, we can

5 An example is described at length in Meijers (2023a).

create space for their stories. We could, of course, also invite them to join us around the Table of the Lord, recognising the intimacy between their bodies and the body of Christ, which they help us to value. By doing so, we create a flow from the city to the Eucharist, ensuring that the hermeneutical circle of grace, desire, and resistance continues to enrich us.

Celebrate and reflect

The liturgical space of the Eucharist is a joyful space, where we feel seen and welcome; a space to enter the abundant life that God offers us. We can relax and simply be who we are, with all our shortcomings and wounds. Tradition has handed down to us the wisdom of many, and it is our turn to bring this richness to life in our times. Celebrating who we can be in the eyes of God is an important aspect of the Eucharist, as sharing bread and wine has the power to connect people. The banquet of the Lord welcomes everyone; it is a feast for the thirsty and the hungry, who will be fed both materially and spiritually. The abundant joy of the Eucharist is often overlooked in the Reformed tradition, but it forms an essential part, as the celebration of life is an indispensable moment in the struggle against death and injustice. In our diaconal practices and community work, we also need to celebrate from time to time to keep going. We remember those we have lost and find new rituals that help us affirm the community. We let go of our practical and solution-oriented attitudes, making it possible to view those we work with in a different light, to relativise our worries, and let go of our fears. We make space for grace to rain upon us, turning hierarchies upside down and discovering unseen talents in one another. We let go in redemptive laughter and remember that life has been given to us. The discrepancy between life as it is and how it ought to be becomes visible in our laughter, as we commit to the hope that Resurrection will be stronger than the forces of death (Douglas 2021:197–198).

Then, in the calmness that follows these moments of sharing food and stories, dancing and singing, laughing and sometimes mourning, we can find the courage to reflect on our experiences (as I am attempting to do in this chapter), and ask ourselves critical questions, such as: who profits from what is happening and from what we do? Who owns the spaces we use, and where should we change our ways? From there, we can start over again, whether from the beginning or somewhere in the middle, by bringing our urban lives to the Table of the Lord and receiving the bread and wine that overflow into our cities.

Conclusion

This contribution explored the diaconal flow between the Table of the Lord and the city to identify key moments that can concretise and characterise this ongoing movement between the Eucharist and daily life within the context of a Reformed congregation connecting to a gentrifying neighbourhood in Amsterdam.

I related four aspects of the Table of the Lord (*epiclesis*, *anamnesis*, *eschaton*, and *koinonia*) to seven steps (commit, expose, relate, engage, reflect, celebrate, repeat) within Western European urban life.

The *epiclesis*, in which we pray for the Spirit to come, helps us find a commitment to the city characterised by desire rather than control. The *anamnesis*, during which we are exposed to the suffering of Christ and participate in his pain while knowing that it has been overcome in the Resurrection, opens us to the suffering in our own context and engages us in resistance with the help of the experiences and knowledge of what and who is not respected and not heard in our urban life. We know from the Eucharist that remembering has the power to uplift the downtrodden and restore justice. The *eschaton* reminds us that life is about grace and joy and that no one should suffer from hunger or thirst in any material or spiritual way. It gives us the space to celebrate amid hard times and to not take the structures and rules of our societies too seriously, including our own ways and habits. It allows us to invent new rituals and connections in gratitude for each other's gifts. It also helps us to critically reflect on our world as it is, how it is opposed to how the world ought to be in the eyes of God, and how we contribute to this. *Koinonia* helps us to accept ourselves as imperfect and wounded as we are, and to embrace others who are like us. It makes us feel that we are not outsiders but part of what is happening, since God's creation is a network of relations between humans and other creatures, and these relations strive towards shalom.

In this way, we can connect the Eucharist to our diaconal practices in the city, bringing our experiences to the Table and receiving new knowledge and courage at this Table, thereby creating a movement of grace, desire, and resistance.

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CHAPTER 13

THE INTEGRATION OF THE OFFICES OF ELDER AND DEACON AT THE EUCHARIST IN THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH AS A PATH TO DIACONAL RENEWAL

Dieter de Bruin

Introduction

In its position paper (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 2023a) on the distinctive nature of the missional diaconate in pursuance of the kingdom of God, the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) envisions the nature of the missional diaconate as follows:

- Word and service go together: Where the need is addressed, the gospel is also brought. The Dutch Reformed Church's work with people and communities is not based on a subservient relationship. Instead, it promotes a sense of friendship and mutual respect, where everyone is considered equal, fostering a community where each individual is valued and integral.
- Diaconal work is not undertaken from a position of power. Instead, we work together as equals with a profound sense of respect and reciprocity, valuing each individual's unique contribution.
- We give ourselves as Jesus gave himself - we give not only money and resources, but we give ourselves
- We do not work in a haphazard, hit-and-run manner; we are in communities for the long haul. Diaconal work requires practical wisdom, a testament to the competence and capability of those

involved, in determining how to be intermediaries between God and people in need.

- We develop learning communities where we seek solutions rather than the approach that experts prescribe to people (my translation).

This chapter argues that to realise these lofty diaconate ideals, at least two transformations in the DRC should occur. For one, no formal impediment is in place, but for the other, some more radical changes in polity would be needed.

I am referring, on the one hand, to the restoration of the Eucharist to the essence of the worship service and, on the other, to the abolition of the office of the “ruling elder” as we know it in the DRC. Alternatively, to frame it more positively, we could reimagine all the offices, including the diaconate, as essentially related to the Eucharist. The reasons for these transformations will hopefully become apparent through the course of the argument, but the (negative) thesis could be stated from the outset: the separation of Word and sacrament, on the one hand, and the separate offices of the ruling elder and deacon, works against the stated integrative ideals.

We will endeavour to make this case from the perspective of liturgical theology. Liturgical theology is a relatively new sub-discipline within the theological curriculum (Johnson 2012:43). Among other aspects, liturgical theology takes the concrete worshipping assembly as the starting point for theologising (Lathrop 1998). To put it another way – contrary to a report to the General Synod of the DRC (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 2023a) – it is not the theology of the diaconate that should inform the nature and function of the office of deacon, but rather the nature and function of the office of deacon that should shape the theology of the diaconate.

This argument represents a classic case of *lex orandi, lex credendi* (Rienstra 2019). However, rather than being a simple one-way movement from *orandi* to *credendi*, it reflects a dynamic and creative interaction. This relationship is mutually informative, involving a dialogue between (idealised) practice and ‘theory’.

Our primary theological interlocutor will be the Scottish theological aristocrat Thomas F. Torrance, with a particular focus on his theology of ordination. There are two key reasons for bringing Torrance into this discussion. First, he is one of the few Reformed theologians (to my knowledge) who has engaged in a sustained monographic reflection on ordained ministry as such (Torrance 1993). Second, Torrance is a

theologian who has taken the ecumenical reception and contribution of the Reformed tradition seriously (Radcliff 2015).

Alongside Torrance's theology, the reflections of the DRC on the nature of the diaconate and the office of the deacon will also play an important role in this discussion. Consistent with our liturgical theological approach, the formularies used in the confirmation (bevestiging) of elders and deacons will be consulted to deepen our exploration.

The plan of action is as follows: We will begin by exploring T.F. Torrance's understanding of ordination, focusing primarily on the office of the presbyter and its relation to the Eucharist. Thereafter, having demonstrated the inextricable connection between ecclesial offices and the Eucharist, we will briefly outline a theology of the Eucharist, particularly as it relates to the church's diaconal ministry. Building on the nexus between the office and the sacrament of the Eucharist, the chapter will critically examine the office of the deacon in relation to the presbyter, with implications for the incorporation of the ruling elder into this framework. Finally, we will identify practical theological benefits of this reconfigured understanding of ecclesial offices, considering its potential impact on the DRC and, through her, the broader ecumenical church.

The nature of the office from the perspective of liturgical theology

Perhaps controversially, Torrance (1993:174) would argue that there is, strictly speaking, only one order of ministry, namely that of the presbyter, and that the other offices function to support this one office. What, then, would be the role of this "one" office? Torrance provides the following answer:

It is mainly at the celebration of the Eucharist, as well as in the ministry of the Word, that the true nature of the ordination to the priesthood and its Christlike functioning in the Church become apparent, for, as St Thomas Aquinas rightly used to point out 'ordination is in order to the Eucharist'.

Alternatively, for a fuller explanation, Lathrop (1998) provides a particularly insightful perspective:

Then, we are at the central point: the leadership of the Liturgy is part of the Liturgy. Ordination is intended to include persons in the schedule and pattern whereby the Christian assembly enacts the meaning of the Christian faith. Indeed, the order to which one is ordained is simply a list of persons who take their place and turn in the leadership of the structure of the Ordo. But the order of leaders is thoroughly subordinated to the Ordo of the meeting. Ordination incorporates persons as leaders in the structure of the Ordo.

To emphasise the point further: People are ordained to preside over the *Ordo* (the worship service), or what is commonly referred to as the 'worship service'. To put it even more strongly and concretely:

Out of this there arises very properly a theology of ordination in which the climax, so to speak, of the rite of ordination is reached, not in the laying of hands, nor in the devolution of the commission, but in the actual celebration of the Eucharist. It is as Christ fills the hands of the Presbyter with the bread and wine that his [sic] ordination is properly realised and validated (Torrance 1993:81).

For Torrance, it is exceedingly important to take note of the bidirectional nature of liturgical ministry. He views the ministry of the Word and Sacrament as consisting of both the minister of the Word and the response to that ministry. Furthermore, in his perspective, ministers are ordained to provide the Word and sacraments to the people; however, the function of elders – and, importantly, deacons – is to '... help the people in their reception of the Word and in their participation in the Sacraments, and to seek the fruit of the Gospel in the faith and life of the community' (Torrance 1984).

In summary, for Torrance, only one office is invested with the authority to dispense, in his terminology, the Word and Sacrament, or, in the language of Lathrop, to 'preside' at the celebration of the Liturgy. Conversely, on the 'receiving end' and in response to this ministry, the whole assembly participates in what he calls 'the deaconing of love' (*verwysing*).

It belongs to the essential bodily nature of the Church that each is ministered to by another. That membering rises out of the ordering of the eucharistic fellowship and it has its supreme expression at the Lord's Table where each receives the bread and wine at the hands of another in the Name of Christ in a communion where one without the other is not perfected in love. *Spiritually and theologically, every one is a deacon at the Lord's Table* (emphasis is added).

Within this general 'deaconhood' of all believers (my gloss – not his), some are specifically called and gifted (charismata) to lead and guide the congregation's response, both in worship and, significantly, in life (Torrance 1993:02).

The nature of the Ordo to which the offices are ordered

It is crucial to realise that the nature of the Ordo is inherently sacramental. In other words, the Word and sacrament cannot be separated. This fact is acknowledged by theologians across the Reformed theological spectrum (Barth 1964:74; Van Ruler 1970:84; Wolterstorff 1998:295) but also by the DRC in its official reflection on the nature of the worship service (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 2023b:237).

To sum this position up, one could again reference liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop (1995:40–41):

[A] participating community together with its ministers gathered in song and prayer around the scriptures read and preached, around the baptismal washing, enacted or remembered, and around the holy supper. The Ordo is these things done together, side by side.

In addition to emphasising the Assembly's *Ordo*, it is important to remember that this *Ordo* is not self-enclosed; rather, it extends outward, flowing into what is often referred to as the 'liturgy after the liturgy' (Duba 2005:10).

The nature of the worship service and the nature of the Eucharist as an integral part of the worship service

Understanding the nature of the worship service and the life that flows from and returns to it is essential, as the office of the deacon has historically been deeply intertwined with the church's liturgical life and service. This chapter seeks to heed the admonition of Reformed scholar Jean-Jacques von Allmen (2002:44), who states:

... elements of ecclesiastical structure and organisation which normally have no Eucharistic function or reference are unrelated to the essential nature of the Church and therefore irrelevant for ecclesiology, if not suspect.

Nevertheless, on a more positive note, I believe clarifying the nature of liturgy will enrich the discussion on the role of the deacon and the diaconal church. It is to that task that we now turn.

The diaconal Eucharist

Reforming the liturgy of the DRC will significantly aid in the rediscovery of the deacon's role and the diaconal nature of the church. By reforming the liturgy, I specifically mean making it fundamentally sacramental – more concretely, ensuring that the Eucharist is an integral part of the liturgy. We will first explore the meanings that could be evoked and engendered within the DRC, and then reflect on the implications of reforming the diaconate within this context.

The integration of body and soul in the sacramental worship service

The first aspect to consider is that in a fully sacramental worship service, the whole person is addressed. Not only do the cognitive and emotional dimensions receive attention through the ear and eye, but the senses of touch, taste, and smell are also engaged as the congregation receives the Word of God.

Closely related to this point is the fact that celebrating the sacraments, along with reading and preaching Scripture, as the Word of God, as an integrated whole emphasises that spiritual and physical needs cannot be separated.

The Eucharist is a feast of abundance and not only an amelioration of lack
As the Belgic Confession states:

This banquet is a spiritual table at which Christ communicates himself to us with all his benefits. At that table he makes us enjoy himself as much as the merits of his suffering and death, as he nourishes, strengthens, and comforts our poor, desolate souls.¹

The shorter Westminster Confession of Faith echoes the language of enjoyment when it comes to fulfilling our chief end in life: ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever’.

What is striking about the formulation in the Belgic Confession is the juxtaposition of the language of ‘enjoyment’ at a banquet and the language of ‘comfort’ for ‘poor miserable souls’. It should be clear that the communication of Christ and all his benefits cannot *merely* be offered as a remedy for our lack; rather, Christ is offered in fullness as the fullness of life ‘to be enjoyed’ forever.

Relating to our previous section about integrating our spiritual and corporeal nature, it would be a mistake to separate our need for Christ and his benefits to comfort and strengthen us in our desolation from the privilege of enjoying Christ and all his benefits for all eternity. As we come to the Eucharistic table, we are indeed analogous to our status as *Simul justus et peccator*, both famished and feasting.

Contrary to what could be perceived as a dualism in the Belgic Confession between the spiritual and corporeal nature and the alimentary succour that one receives in the Eucharist, it must be stressed that the nature of the Eucharist is – and should be – understood as inherently integrative; there can be no tidy and clinical separation between spiritual and bodily nourishment.

I mention these two dualities because they are crucial to some of the reforms that the Dutch Reformed report addresses.

1 Ce banquet est une table spirituelle en laquelle Christ se communique à nous avec tous ses biens, et nous fait jouir en elle, tant de lui-même que du mérite de sa mort et passion (Von Allmen 2002:44) nourrissant, fortifiant et consolant notre pauvre âme désolée ...

The relatedness of the offices

Having reflected on the restoration of the ministry of Word and sacrament in the DRC, we now turn to this chapter's more controversial suggestion: the collation of the offices of elder and deacon. Before we can begin making the case for their integration, it is important to consider how the DRC differentiates between these offices.

Elders

The office of elder is focused on spiritual discernment and leadership, care, management, and oversight. These functions entail:

- The equipping of congregants with a view to their service
- Governing the congregation
- Home visits
- The ministry of oversight and discipline
- Oversight of the purity of doctrine
- Co-responsible for the catechetical formation
- The calling to lead others to Christ
- Leading worship services where permission thereto is granted by the circuit
- Discipleship
- Other tasks as delegated.²

Deacons

The office or ministry of the deacon is centred on practical service. It originates in the worship service and extends outward, flowing into the life of the congregation and the broader world in which the congregants live. The responsibilities of the office of deacon include:

- Equipping members for service.
- Uplifting, comforting, and supporting those in need – providing care and assistance to anyone requiring compassionate service.

2 16.1 Die amp of bediening van die ouderling is gerig op geestelike onderskeiding en leiding, versorging, bestuur en toesig, en omvat: 16.1.1 die toerusting van lidmate vir hulle dienswerk; 16.1.2 die regering van die gemeente; 16.1.3 die doen van huisbesoek 16.1.4 die uitoefening van opsig en tug; 16.1.5 waaksaamheid oor die suiwerheid van die leer; 16.1.6 medeverantwoordelikheid vir die kategetiese onderwys; 16.1.7 die roeping om ander na Christus te lei; 16.1.8 die lei van eredienste waar die kerkraad en die ring daartoe vergunning gegee het 16.1.9; 13 dissipelskap en 16.1.10 ander opdragte wat deur die kerkraad bepaal word in die lig van artikel 16.1.

- Managing diaconal resources – overseeing the collection and appropriate allocation of funds and resources necessary for diaconal ministry.
- Providing organisational leadership – coordinating and leading the congregation's service of compassion effectively.
- Leading worship services – conducting worship services when permission is granted by the circuit.
- Carrying out delegated tasks – undertaking additional responsibilities assigned by the church council, aligned with the deacon's primary role.³

In the induction formularies of the official *Worship Book* of the DRC, it is emphasised that when deacons are engaged in 'addressing need, the gospel must also be proclaimed'. Similarly, as Clasen (ed. 2012:132–135) notes, 'when gifts are brought, the Word of God should also be given'.⁴

In the juxtaposition of these two roles, it should be clear that while there is an attempt to integrate Word and deed (with deeds being the priority, but the Word of the gospel should not be neglected), there is no such concomitant attempt to integrate Word and deed in the office of the elder. No admonition is given for elders to bring deeds of love together with the spiritual need of the gospel, for example. How justifiable is it to have a role division that assumes that spiritual and physical needs are to be separated?

Although one might sense a latent division between insiders and outsiders – elders being primarily concerned with the teaching and formation of baptised members and deacons being concerned with generalised people in need, or the 'underprivileged' – the real and perhaps

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- 3 Artikel 17.1 17 Die amp of bediening van die diaken is gerig op praktiese dienswerk. Dit begin in die erediens, en gaan vandaar uit na die gemeente en die wêreld waarin die lidmate leef. Die diakenamp omvat: 17.1.1 die toerusting van lidmate vir hulle dienswerk; 17.1.2 die opheffing, vertroosting en ondersteuning van almal wat in een of ander opsig barmhartigheidsdiens benodig; 17.1.3 die insameling en besteding van middele wat vir die diakonale werk nodig is; 17.1.4 die organisering en leiding van die barmhartigheidsbediening van die gemeente; 17.1.5 die lei van erediens waar die kerkraad en die ring daartoe vergunning gegee het 17.1.6 ;14 ander opdragte wat deur die kerkraad bepaal word in die lig van artikel 17.2 .17.1 Die kerkraad bepaal met inagneming van artikel 17.1.1 tot 17.1.6 van die Kerkorde die bedienings-verantwoordelikheid van elke diaken.
- 4 'Waar hulp verleen word, moet ook die evangelie gebring word; Waar die gawes gegee word, moet die Woord van God ook gebring word'.

related division is between those who are in need and those who are not. If one could use community development language (Wells 2019), elders are concerned with an asset-based approach to people, while deacons focus on the amelioration of deficit. The question, related to the concern raised around the theology of the Eucharist, is how justifiable it is to separate people theologically as ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ – as people who have a need and people who can fulfil that need.

This distinction, evident in our job descriptions for two different offices, completely undermines our intention to foster a reciprocal, non-top-down presence of friendship (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 2023a). I am struck by how social workers refer to the people they work with as ‘clients’. Although this is not an entirely unproblematic way of referring to people (McLaughlin 2009), I find it instructive that social workers refer to those they assist in the same way that psychologists or coaches would.

However, to return to our controversial thesis, how would abolishing the office of the ruling elder in the DRC help, and even if it could, is it justifiable?

The elder “deacon”

The argument presented here will follow a two-pronged approach. First, T.F. Torrance challenges the assumption that there is a clear ‘biblical’ distinction between a ruling elder and a teaching elder in the New Testament or even within the broader tradition. Second, the prevailing assumption in the official thought of the DRC – that the deacon in the biblical tradition is exclusively or primarily focused on the practical work of service – is deconstructed by John N. Collins’ well-known argument.

Deacons – or elder deacons?

In this article, T.F. Torrance argues that the office of elders, as it exists today in the DRC, was introduced by Reformers such as Zwingli and Calvin to facilitate lay participation in the governance of the Church. To support this innovation, they sought historical precedents, drawing, among other examples, from the *senior plebis* or *seniores laici* found in the North African Church of the fourth and fifth centuries. In his Scottish Reformed tradition, the Westminster assembly found no biblical justification for the distinction between two kinds of elders (ruling and teaching).

It is worth quoting the conclusion of Torrance around the matter in full:

Clearly, the biblical grounds for the conception of elders in the Reformed Church had to be examined more thoroughly than before. As a result, Reformed scholars found themselves forced more and more to the conclusion that there is no clear evidence in the New Testament for what we call ‘elders’, let alone the theory that there are two kinds of Presbyter. The biblical passages to which appeal is made, when objectively considered, cannot be taken to bear the interpretation Presbyterians put upon them. Moreover, they were never understood in this sense by any of the Church Fathers, not even by Pseudo Ambrose who did not make use of 1 Tim. 5.17 in the way that was sometimes alleged. It is also the case that outside Presbyterian Churches, there is no Church that interprets the New Testament passages adduced by them in this way. Hence, Presbyterians are isolated from the rest of Christendom past and present in claiming that these biblical texts provide evidence for ‘elders’ in their sense. The conclusion seems inescapable: Presbyterians adduced this ‘biblical evidence’ in order to have some authoritative justification for an eldership they found, not within the New Testament itself ...

According to Torrance, the distinction maintained in the Dutch Reformed Church between ruling and teaching elders appears to lack justification. Furthermore, Collins challenges the traditional trope of the deacon as being primarily concerned with practical works of mercy. The central thesis of Collins’ work is that the direct equivalence between the role of the diaconate in the Early Church and what we today refer to as *social work* is *unsustainable* (Collins 2003) As a gloss, Jordheim (2014) summarises the proper function of deacons in Collins’ thought as follows:

Rather than being a humble servant, Collins says the Deacon is a “go-between” entrusted with an important message. The Deacon is doing something in the name of another. As an agent, the Deacon has a mandate as well as a personal obligation. Collins (2003: Making Connections) calls deacons “relational figure(s)”.

Interestingly, Collins speaks favourably of the Reformed Church's reflection on eldership, which has informed our discussion here. For Torrance, both deacons and elders – indeed, he sees no distinction between the two – exist to⁵ '... help the people in their reception of the Word and in their participation in the Sacraments, and to seek the fruit of the Gospel in the faith and life of the community'.

Conclusion: Presiders and intermediaries (*Voorgangers en Tussengangers*)

In its endeavour to rediscover and revitalise the diaconate in the DRC, the aim is to bring together Word and service through non-patronising accompaniment in communities. Word and service need to be integrated into the worship service itself, from which the service of the deacon and diaconal work flows into the community. This essentially bidirectional celebration is the 'source' from which ministry flows and the 'summit' towards which ministry is directed. It is a eucharistic event where the distinctions between have and have-nots, insiders and outsiders, hold no ontological significance. Here, individuals are ministered to as integrated beings – body and soul.

Some people are ordained to preside and take the lead at this integrative constitutive event. They are ministers of Word and Sacrament – presbyters in the terminology of the DRC as pastor-teachers. The current status quo is that, together with ministers of Word and Sacrament, there are elders primarily concerned with spiritual ministry, teaching, and oversight, and deacons primarily focused on practical service within the service and the community.

Within the 'Torrancian' model proposed here, the distinction would be not between elders in a 'ruling' capacity – who function in a 'teaching' capacity – and deacons, but between ordained ministers who *preside* at an integrated service of Word and Sacrament and those who assist at this integrative service and the ministry that flows from and towards it.

In Afrikaans, the distinction can be framed as one between a *voorganger* (presider) and a *tussenganger* (intermediary or go-between).

5 Thus it would seem to be the case that our elders now fulfil a ministry which in the New Testament itself is ascribed to deacons. In other words, the best, and indeed the only, biblical evidence for the ministry fulfilled by our elders is found in New Testament teaching about deacons.

This arrangement positions deacons in a liminal space, functioning between:

- The presider and the people
- The formal liturgy and the liturgy of life
- Ordained and lay ministry
- Leading and serving

By integrating the worship service and merging the offices of elder and deacon, this approach could provide the liturgical impetus needed for the church to renew its (word and deed) diaconal ministry in the world.

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THE BROKEN BODY OF CHRIST
IN A BROKEN WORLD: A LUTHERAN
PERSPECTIVE ON THE EUCHARIST
AND DIACONIA

Gideon van der Watt

Introduction

Since the 19th century, a theological discourse on agency in diaconal work has been simmering in Lutheran circles, particularly in Scandinavia. In recent decades, this debate has reignited. In his chapter in the authoritative *International Handbook of Practical Theology*, of which he is a co-editor, Trygve Wyller (2022:313–314) demonstrates how Martin Luther’s often-referenced concept of *extra nos*, which explains that justification is not accomplished from within ourselves but is received from outside ourselves, has been applied to God’s *diaconia* in the world. *Diaconia* should preferably be conducted *extra nos*, outside customary church spaces and detached from the direct agency of the church. This perspective also stems from the argument in missional theology that the church’s *raison d’être* is to exist for those outside the church.

In terms of Lutheran creation theology, God is present and active in spaces beyond the church or its agency – in culture, history, nature, and the everyday, as well as in the role the welfare state must play. During the Reformation, an argument was made for the separation of church and state (Luther’s concept of two kingdoms); therefore, instead of the ecclesial and monastic hierarchy taking responsibility for the poor, this duty should fall to the king. The church, as an institution, should thus consider detaching itself and its agency from diaconal work.

This argument for diaconia as God’s work, *extra nos* or apart from direct

church agency, stands in contrast to a classical mode of *diaconia*. In the late 19th century, Heinrich Wichern advocated for the reestablishment of the church's *diaconia*, which led to the church directly engaging in diaconal projects and the significant role of diaconal institutes and deaconesses (LWF 2006:17). Pietist confessionalism within the inner mission of European countries, as well as the Western missionary enterprises of the 19th and 20th centuries aimed at the Global South, presumed that the church should take direct responsibility for establishing and managing diaconal projects such as hospitals, orphanages, schools, and other forms of charitable work. However, those receiving the church's *diaconia* often experienced it as stemming from a position of power, resulting in paternalistic interventions that were closely linked to the colonial project or, at the very least, to the so-called 'benevolent colonial objectives' (LWF 2006:21).

Recently, this classical mode of *diaconia* finds itself increasingly under pressure. In secularist states, there is a growing hesitancy to channel state funds through faith-based organisations (FBOs) or churches. It is questionable whether diaconal institutions (NGOs), originally established by churches but which have eventually developed independently from them, should still be seen as or even called *diaconia*, despite doing good work without any distinct church connection. The often disappointing results of developmental projects, as well as the decrease in membership and capacity of churches in a secularist society, further contribute to the challenges churches face in sustaining diaconal projects (Nordstokke 2011:32ff, 44ff).

Therefore, it is indeed a question of whether the church should outsource diaconal projects to NGOs, professionals, the welfare state, or those who were originally seen as the recipients or objects of *diaconia*. Should *diaconia* be reimagined as a decentred activity, *extra nos*, disconnected from ecclesial structures and spaces? Is it really the church's role to engage in ambitious projects aimed at powerfully influencing and transforming society, or should the church, while coming to terms with the reality of being a small minority in society, accept a much humbler role as strangers in and priests for the world (Paas 2018:61ff)?

However, despite the critique against church agency in diaconal projects, the question remains: Is the church not by definition diaconal, with *diaconia* a core element of its identity and ministry? There are thus also renewed calls for a much closer connection between church and diaconal work. *Diaconia* is an essential and integral part of being church, a task not to be outsourced or cast away. This view is strongly emphasised

in most of the recent ecumenical documents issued by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF 2002:6; LWF 2006:68ff; LWF 2009:24ff) and by leading Lutheran scholars in the field of diaconia (Nordstokke 2011:14; 2019:27ff; Jørgensen 2015:18; Dietrich 2006:65ff; 2019:23).

It all boils down to the question: should it be a choice between *extra nos* or direct church agency, or is there a third space (Wyller 2022:315), a different imagining of being a diaconal church? What would be the deepest connection between church and *diaconia*?

This chapter endeavours to argue for a rediscovery of the deep connection between the Eucharist and *diaconia*, revisualising the relation between the eucharistic body of Christ and broken human bodies in the world, and restoring the praxis of celebrating the Eucharist in the context of the common meal (ταῖς ἀγάπαις ὑμῶν – Jude 12). Revisiting the historical diaconal roots in the celebration of the Eucharist could assist in reimagining the diaconal identity and calling of the church, creating proper spaces for both notions of *diaconia* as *extra nos* and the church's direct agency in *diaconia* by *being* a diaconal church, especially in the local context. This would entail a rediscovery and renewal of the Eucharist as a constitutive act of being church, serving as “counter-conduct” to *diaconia* as a patronising programme executed from a position of power. As ‘counter-conduct’, it necessitates a liberating and empowering approach (Wyller 2022:322–334), detached from empire and its legacy of rendering people as ‘victimized receivers of so-called colonial beneficence’ (Wyller 2022:320). Rediscovering the diaconal dimensions of the Eucharist can play a vital role in transforming the church into a diaconal church, one that receives and shares the broken body of Christ within a broken world.

***Diaconia* – A brief description**

The exact semantics of the *diaconia* word group (vocabulary) derived from biblical literature is disputed, and a clear-cut definition of *diaconia* or the office of a deacon is not possible (Van der Watt 2024:1910–208). In the LWF document *Diaconia in Context – Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment*, edited by Dr Kjell Nordstokke, *diaconia* is primarily understood as ‘a theological concept that points to the very identity and mission of the church’ (LWF 2009:8). However, it is also described in practical, functional terms as ‘a call to action, as a response to challenges of human suffering, injustice and care for creation’ (LWF 2009:8; cf. Klaasen 2020:122). Dietrich (2006:65) underlines that *diaconia* is part of the nature of the church, described as ‘the church’s body language’, lending

credibility to the church's witness. A generally accepted description is: 'Diakonia is the caring ministry of the Church. It is the Gospel in action and is expressed through loving your neighbour, creating inclusive communities, caring for creation and struggling for justice' (Nordstokke 2011:9; cf. Jørgensen 2015:10).

Among Protestant churches, there is no consensus regarding the office of a deacon. In the Early Church, the deacon was primarily understood as a liturgical functionary, assisting the bishop at the table, distributing aid to the poor, and managing the church's finances. During the Middle Ages, the responsibility for serving the poor shifted to the monasteries. There are indications that Luther 'intended to reestablish the diaconal ministry as a distinct office with an unequivocally social and caring profile, albeit as a "lower order"' (Boettcher 2006:16). Since the church's diaconal ministry is an integral part of the church's identity and calling, caring was eventually integrated into the pastor's work (Dietrich 2006:68), but then as something purely charitable, outside the church's worship service. More recently, there have been renewed calls to reinstate and professionalise the office of deacon in Lutheran churches and others.

Increasingly, diakonia is not only understood in terms of its ecclesiological foundation but as rooted in a Trinitarian theology, in God the compassionate Father – as experienced in God's compassionate actions and turn towards creation; in God's incarnational presence in Christ's *diakonia* of compassionate service;¹ and in the consoling and renewing communion through the Holy Spirit. This trinitarian image represents mutuality, reciprocity, and a shared life (Jørgensen 2015:10ff). The church's identity and calling to practical ministry are to mirror the Triune God's compassionate presence in the world.

It is therefore not primarily the church or people who act, but God through Christ in the Holy Spirit empowering the church to incarnate in the world and fulfil its diaconal mission. The Triune God is the primary agent in *diakonia*.

Dietrich consequently asked the vital question of whether, by reconnecting diaconal ministry with the worshipping congregation, 'one could highlight both the church's task as a diaconal church and point to the heart of the diaconal ministry, namely fellowship with the suffering and resurrected Christ in word and sacrament' (Dietrich 2006:69). This is also echoed by the WCC report *Called to Transformation – Ecumenical*

1 Cf. Mark 10:45 as *locus classicus* of Jesus' description of his own *diakonia*.

Diakonia: ‘As Christians experience the gracious gifts of sharing, healing and reconciliation at the Lord’s table, they are commissioned to a lifestyle and to practices that bring these gifts to the world. In other words, *diakonia* in the world is ‘rooted in faith and nourished by the eucharist’ (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:48).

The Eucharist and *diakonia* – historical perspectives

Christianity came into existence as a meal fellowship. Christ’s institution of the sacrament of bread and wine – the Eucharist, Holy Communion, Table of the Lord, or Lord’s Supper – was a foundational event in the church’s existence. The Lutheran theologian Gordon Lathrop writes that Christianity, from its inception, has never been a mere idea, a religious predisposition of individuals, or a philosophical concept, nor a practice of engaging with spiritual realities; rather, it has always been an explicit meeting around food and drink: ‘Christianity is a very specific kind of meeting: it is a meal fellowship. As such, it is an invitation for us together to see both God and the world anew from the perspective of that table, of that shared food’ (Lathrop 2005; cf. Senn 2010:29).

In the ministry of Jesus, as well as in the practices of the Early Church, *diakonia* has been closely linked to table fellowship, specifically to the Eucharist or the Lord’s Table.

The biblical praxis of relating table fellowship with diakonia

The Eucharist originated from mainly five contextual roots (cf. Brummer, Kießig & Rothgangel 2010:768ff):

- i) In the Jewish celebration of the Passover (Ex 12), which eventually developed into the Jewish *seder*, a sacrificial lamb formed the focal point. This celebration, observed as a joyous meal of fellowship, includes the singing of the *Hallel* (Psalms 113–118). During his final Passover meal, Jesus instituted the Sacrament of the Table (Matt 26:17; Lk 22:15). The Apostle Paul refers to Jesus as ‘our Passover Lamb’ who has been sacrificed and exhorts: ‘Therefore let us keep the Festival ...’ (1 Cor 5:7-8). Sharing food with those in need – an act of diaconal service – has always been a foundational feature of Passover celebrations (Ex 12:4).
- ii) Senn highlights the importance of the Greco-Roman customary meal fellowship known as the *symposium* – a banquet that included music, philosophical discussions, prayers, songs and libation offerings to a

deity (Senn 2010:37ff). ‘Christianity entered the Greco-Roman world as a table fellowship with the common meal providing the principal reason for gathering’ (Senn 2017:7).

- iii) Jesus’ earthly ministry often centred around table fellowships, and his preaching frequently employed the table (banquet) as a metaphor for the kingdom, both in present and eschatological senses. At the heart of Jesus Christ’s ministry lies table communion. The Gospels recount a series of events in which Jesus shared food or had inclusive table fellowship with unlikely guests. During these occasions, healing miracles occurred, and the hungry were fed. Some examples include the table communion in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Lk 7:36-50), where Jesus restored the life of the sinful woman who anointed him; Jesus’ table communion with publicans and sinners in the house of Levi (Mk 2:15-17); communion with the multitude (Matt 14:13-21), driven by Jesus’ compassion (καὶ ἐσπλαγχνισθῆ ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς); the repetition of the food miracle in Gentile territory (Matt 15:29-39) following Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman, who convinced him that even she, as a non-Jew, should have access to the table; dining with Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10); the wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1-11), where Jesus took on the role of host; and the meal where Jesus washed his disciples’ feet (Jn 13), among others (Neto 2019:100ff; Mogensen 2015:48ff).

In his parables and teachings, Jesus often employed the metaphor of table communion to explain the eschatological feast to which all are invited. The abundance of the feast celebrating the return of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32 is just one example. In Luke 22:24-30, particularly in verse 27, Jesus describes his *diaconia* by linking it specifically to table service in communion with his disciples: ‘For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? But I am among you as one who serves (διακονῶν)’ (cf. Lk 12:37; Lathrop 2005; Neto 2019:105). These concrete meals and meal metaphors were more than charitable events; they also served as radical prophetic acts countering the dominant socio-political systems of inequality and exclusion. The meals were tangible witnesses to the dawn of a new kingdom characterised by openness to all people, sharing, and fair distribution of bread. The church, as a sign of the kingdom, is to be envisioned as the grateful ‘sharing’ of what has been received – the sharing of food, drink, and other gifts that did not, in the first place, belong to ‘us alone’ but to all of us.

- iv) After his resurrection, Jesus revealed his ‘real presence’ as the risen One through the breaking of bread in several instances of table fellowship with his followers (Welker 2000:10ff). This is powerfully demonstrated in his journey with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:28-34). In breaking and sharing the bread, Jesus became both guest and host simultaneously (Mogensen 2015:48), unveiling the Lord’s compassionate presence. These table fellowships inspired those who participated to bear witness (Lk 24:33-34) and to care for others (Jn 21:14, 17).
- v) All these meal-fellowships culminated in the institution of the Lord’s Supper, or the Eucharist (Matt 26:26-29; Mk 14:22-25; Lk 22:19ff; 1 Cor 11:23-25). The Eucharist was instituted within the context of the nourishing Passover meal and is marked by the following movements: the bestowing of a blessing (εὐλογησας); the breaking and sharing of the bread with the words ‘this is my body’ (τουτο εστιν το σωμα μου); the prayer of thanksgiving (ευχαριστησας); the passing on of the cup with the words ‘this is my blood’ (τουτο εστιν το αιμα μου); and closing with the call to continue this practice in remembrance (αναμνησιν) of him, ‘proclaiming the Lord’s death until he comes’ (1 Cor 11:26). This *anamnesis* is imbued with expectation, pointing to and participating in the coming of the Kingdom, where the broken will be healed.

The early church

In the early church, there was an unmistakable connection between the celebration of the Eucharist and the service of the poor.

In the wake of Pentecost, the early church, as a gathered community, continued to regularly celebrate the breaking of the bread – τη κλασει αρτου (Acts 2:42) – initially daily but eventually mostly on the Lord’s Day (Sunday). The Eucharist was celebrated in the context of the *agape* meals, which they shared together in their homes, with glad and sincere hearts (Acts 2:46), while sharing what they had with one another (Acts 4:32–37). House churches were remodelled to accommodate communal feasts and to remember the words of Jesus and the teachings of the apostles. The four main modes of ministry or the church’s witness (*martyria*), namely devotion to the apostles’ teaching (*kerugma*), fellowship (*koinonia*), the breaking of bread (*diaconia*), and prayer (*leitourgia*) (Acts 2:42), were closely linked, even integrated – facets of the ministry that all sprang from and flowed into the celebration of the Eucharist.

The close connection between the Eucharist and sharing nourishing (agape) meals is also evident in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthians, dated circa 55 CE, where he expressed his concern about harmful and unworthy ways of partaking in the common meal before the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34). As the Corinthians gathered for the meal, some did not wait for others, resulting in those arriving later (the poor, the slaves) remaining hungry. Paul emphasised the need for radical inclusivity and equality – the meal should include patrons, clients, and slaves. Therefore, his exhortation was to 'wait for each other'.

Deacons served at the table but also took care of those in need. In Acts 6:1-5, seven men were elected 'to wait on tables', distributing food to Greek-speaking widows. From this table service, their calling expanded to include preaching and evangelising.

Traces of diaconal dimensions in the Eucharist in two early extra biblical Christian writings

That the Eucharist and *agape* meals (common meals) were closely connected, celebrated together, is clearly illustrated in the accounts of Christian practices in antiquity.

a) The Didache (50–120 AD)

The Didache, dating from the 1st century, provides guidelines for an unidentified Christian community, instructing followers of Christ on a way of life and various liturgical practices, such as fasting, communal prayers, and the sacraments. Sections 9 and 10 specifically address the celebration of the *Eucharistias*, emphasising the importance of prayers of thanksgiving. One example of a thanksgiving prayer links the eschatological nature of the Eucharist to the *parousia* of the resurrected Christ, when all things will be renewed:

'Remember, Lord, Thy Church, to deliver it from all evil and to make it perfect in Thy love, and gather it from the four winds, sanctified ... Let grace come, and let this world pass away. Hosanna to the God (Son) of David! If any one is holy, let him come; if any one is not so, let him repent. Maranatha. Amen' (Kirby 2024; cf. Kritzinger 2024:26).

This act of thanksgiving extended beyond prayers to include the offering of tangible thank offerings. Section 14 describes the Christian assembly on the Lord's Day:

But every Lord's Day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one who is at odds with his fellow come together with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be profaned.

Reconciliation was a necessary precondition for the pure celebration of the Eucharist and the bringing of sacrifices to the table. This aligns with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:23–24:

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

b) Justin Martyr (150–160 AD)

In his *First Apology* to Emperor Titus Ælius Adrianus Antoninus Pius Augustus Caesar, Justin Martyr describes the 'Weekly Worship of the Christians' in Chapter 67. He explains what occurs when Christians from cities and rural areas gather on a Sunday: '[T]he memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read', followed by exhortations and instructions to act accordingly. Then, all rise together in prayer, after which 'bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons'. The deacons, after assisting the bishop at the Table of the Lord in receiving the offerings, were entrusted with distributing the offerings to the poor (cf. Senn 2010:90; Vellguth 2014:39).

From the second and third centuries onward, the Eucharist and the agape meal were increasingly celebrated separately. For example, communal meal practices by 'secret societies' were progressively prohibited, as noted in Pliny the Younger's letter to Emperor Trajan regarding Christians. Influenced by the Greco-Roman *symposia* – *banquets featuring discussions and artistic performances typically held in basilicas* – and by *synagogue services*, the Eucharist became more closely associated with Bible readings, hymns, and prayers. Over time, the office of deacon was increasingly absorbed into the priesthood (Senn 2010:96).

Martin Luther on *diaconia* linked to the Lord's Table

Martin Luther's teaching on Holy Communion, which he refers to as the *Sacrament of the Altar* in his *Large Catechism*, is essentially that this sacrament was instituted and is administered by the Lord and is received by us in faith. He rejected the Roman Catholic understanding of transubstantiation of the elements of bread and wine, as well as the idea that Mass entails a repentant sacrifice – a repetition or enactment of Christ's sacrifice. Any suggestion of bringing a sacrifice to God in exchange for forgiveness would nullify Luther's theological leitmotif of 'salvation by grace alone'.

Against a tendency among fellow Reformers to spiritualise the Sacrament, Luther emphasised Christ's real presence (sacramental realism), albeit in a mysterious way. It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ that we receive, 'in, with and under' the elements (Luther's *Large Catechism* para 8 and 10). The real presence is a consistent outcome of the Incarnation (Jolkkonen 2014). Through the Word and the sacrament, Christ unites himself bodily with us, allowing himself and the beauty of his love to be seen and tasted. This position has also been called 'consubstantiation', but Lutheran scholars disapprove of the term (Kritzinger 2024:20). In his mercy, the Triune God turns towards us in self-giving love: '*Der ganze Mensch, mit Leib und seele, darf Gott begegnen. "Für euch" ist die Zielsetzung, die zum innersten Wesen des Abendmahl gehört*' (eds. Brummer et al. 2010:773). In the words 'for you', the totality of Christ's work of salvation is offered to us. The Eucharist is therefore first and foremost understood in a pastoral context.

Luther also battled against the doctrine of the sacrifice of the Mass. In the sacrament of the Eucharist, God is the giver of the gifts, not its recipient: 'God does not need any of your good things, but he will come to you and bestow upon you generously of his own good supply' (Quotation 1518, sermon by Luther in Jolkkonen 2014). We cannot offer the body and blood of Christ to God again – that would be blasphemous. The elements are to be received by the communicants as the gift of communion (Senn 2017:32).

But does this resistance to any notion of sacrifice in the Eucharist also imply Luther's denunciation of bringing thank offerings or ourselves as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1) to the Table, to be used in the diaconal ministry of the church? In other words, does the Eucharist also have a diaconal dimension in Lutheran theology? According to Jolkkonen (2014), there is a growing consensus among Lutheran scholars that Luther had a different understanding of sacrifice – not as an act in which one tries

to gain God's favour, but 'aposterior', as a response to the saving deed already accomplished by God, an offer of gratitude. In connection with the Eucharist, sacrifice could therefore also be understood in terms of the gifts of food and money to be brought to the celebration and distributed among the poor. In apostolic times, certain Old Testament traditions were still observed; 'Christians brought together food, money, and other useful things to be divided among those in need' (Jolkkonen 2014). As the Eucharistic liturgy commences, prayers of thanksgiving are said, and gifts are brought forth as signs of the congregation's gratitude. But as soon as they are consecrated, they become the sacrament, which is not sacrificed to God but distributed to people as God's gift. Christians also give themselves to God, along with their will, thanksgiving, and praise – this is the priesthood of believers.

In his 1519 sermon titled *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods* (Bachman 1981:5), Luther emphasised *koinonia*, or in Latin *communio* – the fellowship or “body of Christ” around the Table. Celebrating the Lord's Table in communion with others brings relief from burdens and angst. “Whoever is in despair, distressed by a sin-stricken conscience, terrified by death, or carrying some other burden upon his heart, if he would be rid of them all, let him go joyfully to the sacrament of the altar, lay down his woe in the midst of the community [of saints], and seek help from the entire company of the spiritual body” (Bachman 1981:53; see also Senn 2010:184). However, not only those participating in the table fellowship receive relief from suffering and despair; they are also called to carry the burdens of others: “As love and support are given you, you in turn must render love and support to Christ in his needy ones” and feel with sorrow “all the unjust suffering of the innocent” (Bachman 1960:53). This should also be done in a concrete way. Luther referred to the practices described in 1 Corinthians 11:23 of gathering food and material goods in the church, from which the deacons distributed them among those in need (Bachman 1960:57).

Luther encouraged believers to bring thank offerings (money) for alleviating poverty. This was intended to be more than mere charity; it was about public morality and involvement with the needs of the community, including the establishment of structures and institutions. The root causes of poverty needed to be addressed. Luther strongly opposed the practice of the poor reverting to begging. Motivated by Lutheran theology, new legislative structures were needed to address social welfare. A key aspect of their approach was the conviction that social ethics serve as the link between public worship and public ministry.

The two facets of ‘Gottesdienst’ (divine service), as understood by Luther and his colleagues, encompassed ‘both God’s service to us in Word and Sacrament and our service to God in worship and in love towards our neighbor’ (Senn 2010:185).

The motivation for the church’s *diaconia* also lies in what Luther called the absolute freedom Christians have in relation to God, while simultaneously being bound to serve their fellow human beings (Luther 1520:n.p.).

Diaconal dimensions in the Eucharist – some theological indicators

The diaconal perspectives of the Eucharist lie in the fact that God’s *diaconia* takes place within it. God serves us by giving himself totally and gratuitously in Christ. He is the primary agent in the Eucharist (Kritzinger 2024:6). This divine giving by the Triune God forms the foundation of the church’s *diaconia*. The eucharistic event finds its origin and fulfilment in God the Father. Jesus, the incarnation of God’s compassion, realises the salvation celebrated in the Eucharist. It is Christ the Lamb, the resurrected One, who serves as the living centre of the event. The Holy Spirit makes the revelation and presence of the Father and Son in the institutional words and the elements a living reality (Kritzinger 2024:11).

The Eucharist is an enactment of the whole gospel: ‘In bringing their gifts to the altar, the people are offering themselves in a manner that recalls Christ’s own self-sacrifice of his life for the life of the world – the epitome of the gospel that we proclaim and celebrate in the [E]ucharist’ (Senn 2017:18).

The WCC’s Faith and Order Paper No. 111, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982), is an important consensus document in which the bilateral Catholic-Lutheran discussion on the Eucharist played a significant role. In this document, the close connection between the Eucharist and diaconia is emphasised. It also highlights the different facets of *diaconia*. Paragraph 20 states that the Eucharist is a representative act of thanksgiving and offering on behalf of the whole world, embracing all aspects of life. It implies ‘reconciliation and sharing among all’ and presents a ‘constant challenge in the search for appropriate relationships in social, economic and political life’. It also comprises a strong prophetic witness: ‘All kinds of injustice, racism, separation and lack of freedom are radically challenged when we share in the body and blood of Christ’ (WCC 1982).

Paragraph 21 (WCC 1982) concentrates on the importance of the

liturgical celebration of the Eucharist for the church's *diaconal* ministry in the world:

Solidarity in the eucharistic communion of the body of Christ and responsible care of Christians for one another and the world find specific expression in the liturgies: in the mutual forgiveness of sins; the sign of peace; intercession for all; the eating and drinking together; the taking of the elements to the sick and those in prison or the celebration of the eucharist with them. All these manifestations of love in the eucharist are directly related to Christ's own testimony as a servant, in whose servanthood Christians themselves participate. As God in Christ has entered into the human situation, so eucharistic liturgy is near to the concrete and particular situations of men and women. In the early Church the ministry of deacons and deaconesses gave expression in a special way to this aspect of the eucharist. The place of such ministry between the table and the needy properly testifies to the redeeming presence of Christ in the world.

Diaconal dimensions in the Lutheran Eucharist celebration

There is an unmistakable connection between liturgical worship and social commitment, between faith and right living. The well-known slogan: *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi* underscores the important truth that the manner in which the church worships impacts the content of its faith. However, it also shapes the believer's way of life and the church's praxis of *diaconia*. The original meaning of liturgy is 'the public work of the people', denoting the work of Christ the High Priest for the people and, by extension, the work of the Body of Christ – the people of God – for all the people and the world (Regule 2010:292). Thus, liturgy can create a specific imagination of being a diaconal church; it also has transformative power over the concrete diaconal action of both believers and the church as a collective (Senn 2010:31).

Luther, to a large degree, retained all the elements of the Roman Mass. However, he made some significant alterations, which developed into the current Eucharistic liturgy as practiced in Lutheran churches worldwide. It can be fruitful to illuminate the diaconal dimensions present in some of these elements of the Lutheran Eucharistic liturgy.

The foundational liturgical order of the *Gottesdienst* consists of four

parts: the opening and invocation (*Eröffnung und Anrufen*); proclamation and confession (*Verkündigung und Bekenntnis*); Holy Communion (*Abendmahl*); and the sending and blessing (*Sendung und Segen*).

Towards the end of the 'proclamation and confession' section, just before the celebration of Holy Communion, thank offerings are collected, brought to the table, consecrated, and a hymn is sung in which congregants gratefully offer their 'bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God' (Rom 12:1). This is reminiscent of the practice of bringing concrete gifts (such as bread and wine or produce from the harvest) to the altar, which could later be distributed by deacons to the sick and poor. The tradition of bringing tangible offerings from the harvest remains a customary liturgical act in many African churches (Regule 2010:296).

The *epiklesis* (invocation of the Holy Spirit) is expressed through a song that calls upon the Holy Spirit to prepare the congregation for the celebration of the Lord's Table. The Eucharist is not a magical or mechanical act but a prayerful one. Only God can make God present and reveal divine grace through the sacrament. Therefore, the entirety of the Eucharistic action possesses an 'epicletic' character. It is a prayer asking God to make the bread and wine sacramental signs of Christ's body and blood, to unite those gathered in faith, and to transform them into the body of Christ in action. Through this, they are 'led into all justice, truth and unity, and empowered to fulfil its mission in the world' (Kritzinger 2024:24).

The *epiklesis* is followed by the *präfaton* or preparation for the Great Eucharistic Prayer. This preparation consists of three key movements:

(1) Blessing

The liturgist proclaims, 'The Lord is with you', and the congregation responds, 'And also with you'. This exchange affirms the Lord's presence in the celebration and serves as a mutual consolation, reminding all participants that they are embraced within the holy communion of the Triune God and the fellowship they share with one another.

(2) Sursum Corda

The invocation, 'Lift up your hearts', and the congregation's response, 'We lift them up to the Lord', is not an effort to spiritualise the event by directing minds toward heaven. Rather, it is a dedication of the participants' innermost being as living sacrifices (Senn 2017:38). This lifting of hearts is an act of love and praise offered to the Triune God. It recalls a life of gratitude that overflows into sharing what has been received with a world in need.

(3) Invitation to praise

The liturgist calls, 'Let us thank the Lord, our God', and the congregation replies, 'It is worthy and right'. This phrase is drawn from the repetitive worship songs before God's throne in the Book of Revelation: 'You are worthy' (Rev 4–5). It enacts eschatological trust in God and in the Lamb standing beside the throne, who is worthy to open the book of life and unlock the future of a new heaven and a new earth.

The moment of the great Eucharist (*eucharistia*) or prayers of thanksgiving arrives. It typically consists of phrases drawn from the Book of Revelation, liturgical songs by representatives of the church, and the whole of creation before the throne of God. God is thanked for the salvation, care, and renewal of everything and everyone through the Sacrificial Lamb and the work of the Holy Spirit. This prayer of thanksgiving is offered in solidarity with the entire church (past, present, and future) and is prayed on behalf of 'persons from every tribe and language and people and nation' (Rev 5:9), as well as for the whole of creation. In the elements of bread and wine, the gifts of creation and culture are presented to God in thanksgiving (Kritzinger 2024:11). The Eucharist concludes with the singing of the classical *Sanctus* or *Dreimal Heilig* and the *Vaterunser* prayer.

Before the actual institutional words are recited and the distribution of the bread and wine commences, there is another pause for mutual greeting. The liturgist turns from the table to the congregation, saying, 'The peace of the Lord be with you', to which the congregation responds, 'Peace be with you'. This mutual greeting of peace around the table is often expressed tangibly through handshakes or hugs between fellow worshippers, echoing the historical custom of the 'peace kiss' that affirms a reconciled communion. This greeting is radically inclusive, transcending ethnic, socio-economic, gender, and other divisions while fostering a new Christian identity. It opens the space for acceptance at the table, promoting a state of wholeness and integration within ourselves and with one another (Regule 2010:293), allowing us to be reconciled before participating in receiving and showing compassion. The Didache emphasised this precondition of reconciliation before the communal sacrament could be celebrated (Didache 14:2). Eucharistic sharing requires reconciliation; it implies sharing among brothers and sisters in the one family of God and witnesses against 'the persistence of unjust relationships' (Kritzinger 2024:25).

The exact biblical words of institution of the Eucharist are recalled and visibly demonstrated by the liturgist through the lifting up of the

bread and cup while blessing them. It is within the context of the entire Eucharistic liturgy – the words of institution, the breaking of bread, the pouring of wine, and the act of eating and drinking – that the *anamnesis*, or memorial enactment, of the Last Supper establishes the mysterious presence of the resurrected and living Christ ‘in, under, and with’ the elements. It becomes Christ himself serving us with the gifts of real bread and real wine, his body and blood. This *anamnesis* recalls the sacrificial offering on the cross, once and for all, reflecting on what Jesus Christ was, said, and did.

The words of institution also include the phrase ‘proclaiming the death of Christ until He comes’. This evokes an eschatological longing for a healed and renewed world. The Eucharist nourishes the congregation to become and be deacons in the dawn of this new world.

The words of institution are then followed by the singing of the *Agnus Dei*, affirming God’s compassion for and salvation of the whole world, serving as a touching prayer for peace.

The table is now laid, everything prepared, and the participants are invited: ‘*Kommt, es ist alles bereit. Smecket und sehet, wie Freundlich der Herr ist*’, or ‘come and taste the beauty of God’s love!’ This is an invitation to receive God’s grace and love within our bodies and with all our senses. It calls us to be reunited with the eucharistic body of Christ, mysteriously present in the bread and wine, and to be incorporated into the one body of Christ, the church, participating in the unity of that body. This is enacted bodily as participants move to the table, receiving and taking the bread and wine, eating and drinking, affirmed by the words: ‘this is my body broken for you’, and ‘this is my blood, poured out for you’. The realism of the sacrament lies in experiencing it with our whole bodies and all our senses. ‘The Eucharist is all about bodies’ (Sen 2017:XII) – it brings together the broken body of Christ, the sacramental body as bread and wine, the church as the body of Christ, and human bodies. ‘It is by no coincidence that Paul uses the term “Body of Christ” both for the gift of Holy Communion and for the community of believers. He establishes a direct link between the two’ (Nürnberg 2005:237).

There is also great significance in the fact that it is a *broken* body and *spilled* blood we receive in the sacrament. In this, the Lord clearly identifies with our own brokenness, and the vulnerability of our whole existence. However, in the *anamnesis*, we are also reminded of the broken and often defenceless bodies of others in the world; it calls us to solidarity with those in need. In Holy Communion, we find a resource for Christian social practice; we are required to do in reality what Jesus did and does.

Specifically, the church should identify itself with the suffering of broken people, just as Jesus himself, in his passion, identified with the afflicted (Senn 2017:79). Thus, there is also an element of lament in the Eucharist – we receive into our bodies nothing but the broken body of Christ, we share in his suffering, and we are reminded of the suffering in the world. Transformed by the bread we eat and the wine we drink, we become bread broken for the lives of our brothers and sisters, and wine poured out to quench their thirst.

The essence of the elements of bread and wine does not change; they remain mere bread and wine, products of nature but also products of human culture. In that sense, the bread and wine also witness ‘to the goodness of creation and to our inseparable engagement with the wellbeing of the earth’ (Lathrop 2005) – the economy of ‘just enough’ for sustainable consumption.

After receiving the bread and wine, often while humbly kneeling in front of or around the table, which is the central feature in the church’s liturgical space, the participants are sent away with a blessing and an exhortation to go in peace and live a life befitting those who have received eternal life, sharing God’s gifts of grace and goodness with others – a clear call to diaconal living, to partake in the ‘liturgy after the liturgy’.

The Holy Communion concludes with a prayer of thanksgiving, often incorporating the confessional formula frequently repeated in the Old Testament about God’s compassion: ‘The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love’ (Ps 103:8).

Our ‘amens’ in response to receiving the bread and wine are a pledge to bind up wounds, bring healing to the broken, and affirm access to life for all. This act stirs within us a concern for all those in the world who can neither eat nor drink what they need for life.

The entire celebration of Holy Communion should be marked by gratitude and humility, including from the pastor, who serves as the diakonos or table server. The essence of ministry is serving and sharing in the fellowship of the meal. Indeed, ministry is nothing less than table service! (Lathrop 2005)

Conclusions and practical suggestions

The chapter invites us to reimagine the church as the body of Christ, rooted in the Eucharist or table fellowship. It calls for a rediscovery of the Eucharist’s value as the source of the church’s diaconal identity, calling, and praxis. The transformative power of the Eucharist in reshaping the

diaconal dimension and intention of the church's ministry is something to be celebrated.

The chapter advocates for a contextual renewal – or revival – of Eucharistic practices, envisioning a *Eucharistic renaissance*. It emphasises the need to rediscover the richness of classical liturgical celebrations and to creatively adapt and implement them within local contexts, making them vibrant and meaningful for diverse communities.

Linking *diaconia* to the Eucharist may assist the church, as a minority institution within a secularised majority in society, to engage in meaningful and sustainable diaconal action. This action should not be characterised by the classical paternalistic interventions on the one hand, or by the complete outsourcing of its diaconal tasks to institutions and agencies *extra nos* on the other.

Practical and creative ways of linking the Eucharist and regular common meals (agape meals) should be considered, especially in diaconal outreach to those outside the church (Meijers 2019:85ff) and as it is celebrated in African Initiated Churches (Kustenbauder 2005).

A feasible way of local churches to engage in *diaconia*, as a 'diaconia from below' and from which different sustainable projects might spring, should be considered.

Linking *diaconia* with the Eucharist offers a framework for understanding *diaconia* through several key aspects: food security; inclusivity, equality, and reconciliation; prophetic witness against socio-political injustices; ecological justice; and the affirmation of bodies, particularly disabled bodies, among others.

The concept of 'sharing' as a characteristic feature of table fellowship (Mogensen 2015:48) can serve as a significant metaphor for describing the essence of *diaconia*. It also offers a mode of praxis for *diaconia* to overcome the paternalistic tendencies of the classical 'pietistic' paradigm.

We should consider the profound role that the Eucharist and table fellowships played in both imagining and supporting apartheid in South Africa – specifically through the act of not eating together – and how inclusive table fellowship as ministry (eating together) can create social capital and social cohesion (Kritzinger 2024:44ff; Wepener 2022:269). Laying tables as spaces for justice and reconciliation is an important diaconal ministry.

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SECTION D

DIACONIA:
A PRACTICE

CHAPTER 15

REDISCOVERING DIACONIA AND DEACONS IN THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

John Aitchison

Introduction

In 1982, the Synod of all the Anglican Churches in Southern Africa (ACSA) voted not to debate the findings of a Commission it had established in 1979 to examine the diaconate (one of the three established orders of their ordained clergy). Forty-one years later, a new Commission was asked to repeat the examination of the ministry of the permanent (or distinctive) diaconate, and its final report was released in April this year.

In this chapter, I aim to examine the ecclesiastical and socio-political factors that influenced these two commissions and their theological and ecclesiastical perspectives on the matter within the context of a changing South Africa, the world, and the Anglican Church – places where one might argue that diaconia is sorely needed.

But first, a preliminary issue.

Deacons as a clerical order

The Anglican Church relies on its interpretation of the New Testament and Patristic literature to justify its adherence to the tradition of having three main orders of ordained clerics. Given that the ACSA has tended to align closely with the High Church/Anglo-Catholic tradition within the Anglican communion, this practice has been a significant part of its identity – echoing Ignatius of Antioch’s assertion, ‘Apart from these, there is no Church’.

I do not wish to delve into the history of the rise and fall of the

diaconate in the Western Church,¹ but it is sufficient to note that when the Church of England broke away from the Church of Rome, it retained the diaconate in a more defined form than the Roman Church, where deacons had simply become apprentice priests. However, by the 20th century, Anglican deacons, too, had become merely ‘transitional’, on their way to being priested. Influenced by the post-Vatican II restoration of a permanent diaconate and the growing impact of deaconess orders in Lutheranism, interest in the permanent diaconate began to rise in the Roman Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, and other churches.

This renewed attention to deacons has been accompanied by shifts in the understanding of *diaconia* and questions the precise relationship between *diaconia* and the *diákonos*.

How, then, have assumptions about *diákonía* and *diákonoi* changed, as reflected in the two Southern African Anglican Commission reports and the responses to them?

The 1979 Commission

The assumptions behind the Anglican Commission of 1979 included the belief that the ancient orders needed to be revived through a genuine diaconate. However, in line with the conventional interpretation of Acts 6:1–7, the Commission envisioned deacons primarily fulfilling a welfare function – a perspective that was subsequently recontextualised within the apartheid context.²

Thus, the idea of a renaissance of the diaconate was driven by a curious mix of, first, High Church Anglicanism; second, the push towards understanding the New Testament and the early church through the lens of critical modern biblical studies (the latter being very much part of the focus of the Anglican theological training institutions of the time); and third, a recognition of the social teaching of the Scriptures and its application

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- 1 The history of the diaconate is complex and controversial. The fall of the diaconate was certainly influenced by the church’s mishandling of how to govern the massive increase in membership once Christianity was no longer proscribed in the Roman Empire. Collins (1990; 2002) has spurred much debate on both the meaning of *diaconia* and its application (or misapplication) to the office of the deacon over time.
 - 2 The Commission report was never published. The author of this chapter has an electronic copy of it and has also produced an edited version of the text, with most of the sections on the issue of the ordination of women removed, given the datedness of that particular controversy.

to the struggle against apartheid that would reach a climax in the 1980s.

One might slightly parody the logical sequence of thought here. We discern that the New Testament Church had deacons (Stephen, Philip, and the other five, as well as those named companions of Paul – Epaphras, Tychicus, Phoebe, and Apollos). The Seven of Acts 6:1–7 are clearly instructed to do welfare work. In the South African context, doing social welfare work is necessitated by the ravages of apartheid and the ethnic cleansing of the group areas and forced removals. But it was not just about helping the victims. Inspired by the examples of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany and their reading of Bonhoeffer, diaconal activity was also political, as Bonhoeffer (cited by Metaxas 2011) had pointed out:

We are not simply to bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.
– Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *“The Church and the Jewish Question”*.

Thus, the ministry of deacons was envisioned as specifically addressing the injustices of apartheid and providing care for its victims.

This vision was ultimately rejected, partly due to the growing influence of the charismatic movement within the Anglican Church’s clergy and leadership. They viewed the proposed ministry with suspicion, perceiving it as a politicisation of ministry. Additionally, they were wary of the critical approach to scripture taught in the theological colleges – factors that eventually contributed to the closure of the ecumenical Federal Theological Seminary in 1993.

In 2022, a member of the Commission recollected the following (Hayes, personal communication, 2022):

For three years members of the commission had travelled around the country for meetings, and done research (no easy web searches back then), and produced a comprehensive report, and a measure to change the Canons of the Church to make the ministry of deacons more effective.

The Synod did not hear it and reject it, it simply threw it out without debate. I had been taught that one of the things that made the Anglican Church different from any old sect was that it had retained a three-fold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons, but it showed that what it really believed was a ministry of priests, super priests and apprentice priests.

After it was thrown out, one of the members of synod, ..., came to me and said she was sorry. She knew that it has been thrown out because a clique in the diocese of Cape Town was determined to stifle debate on it, and so they had worked what, in my student days, was called a schlenter – primed apparently neutral people beforehand to manipulate things so as to stifle debate.

Despite the inauspicious official Anglican response, some supportive bishops cautiously began ordaining individuals specifically to diaconal ministry. This process was influenced by historical vicissitudes, including the perception that it represented a preliminary step toward the ordination of women as priests. Initially, this led to an increase in deacons. However, as the pressure to ordain women as priests became irresistible, this development eventually took a step backward. Today, with many women now serving as priests, any shortage of clergy has been alleviated, thereby reducing the perceived need for deacons.

Diaconia as welfare work

The perception of *diaconia* as welfare work – and therefore viewing deacons, who engage in *diaconia*, as welfare work operatives – remains a significant influence. This perspective inspires the sense of vocation in many who feel called to become deacons, informs the practices of many permanent deacons, and highlights the urgent need for compassionate Christian action in response to the poverty and disadvantage evident in South Africa and other parts of the world. A pertinent question arises: is this action the responsibility of the whole Church³ or is it work that can somehow be delegated, becoming a parachurch activity undertaken by special committees, activist faith-based NGOs, and similar organisations addressing issues such as racial justice, peace building, climate justice, and health and healing? This tendency, to my mind, permeates the book *Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diakonia* (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022), where *diaconia* is practised at the level of multinational

3 It is notable that a welfare and social justice emphasis is now taken up as a general mark of mission for all Anglicans in two of the so-called Five Marks of Mission (developed between 1984 and 1990 in the Anglican communion): ‘3. To respond to human need by loving service; and 4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation’.

good works through Christian agencies and NGOs. However impressive this document's attempts at providing theological and ecclesiastical underpinnings for its position, it is well expressed in the *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, which defines *diaconia* as 'the responsible service of the gospel by deeds and by words performed by Christians in response to the needs of people' (WCC & ACT Alliance 2022:16).

Even the impressive work of the Protestant diaconal orders in Germany and other countries is rendered ambiguous by the relationship between church and state and the various stages it has undergone: outright incompatibility until the legalisation of Christianity in the fourth century; a sense of separate but interacting domains until the Reformation, when the churches became state church cults (like the Church of England); and, in modern times, when the cult of the national state rules supreme and the church is relegated to the backwaters of society to perform good works among the victims of short-term state policies. In Germany, the money still flowed from the state to the church (through taxes), and such financial support is rare in the modern world. No doubt, this has its own constraints, which may leave unproblematised what such service in the modern world would entail, even accepting a more limited view of *diaconia as mainly about humble service to the needy – a world in which Bonhoeffer's mad drivers abound!*

If I sit next to a madman as he drives a car into a group of innocent bystanders, I cannot, as Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe, then comfort the wounded and bury the dead. I must try to wrestle the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver.

Then, in 1990, John Collins published *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, a work that effectively dismantled the notion of *diaconia* as mere welfare work. Despite this groundbreaking challenge, many continue to operate as if this metaphorical ship remains afloat, unaware that it has long since sunk.⁴

4 John Collins's 1990 book, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, thoroughly revised how to interpret the concept of *diaconia*. He argued that it was not really about humble caring service for the needy but about being sent on divine commissions (which could take multiple forms).

The lobbying for the diaconate

From about 2012, there was finally a sufficient, though still small, number of permanent deacons for a small lobby group to coalesce, initially in the Highveld diocese. This development owed much to the enormous energy of Deacon Gwynne Lawlor, a social worker by profession, who was ordained in 2012 as a self-supporting, permanent deacon. She believed that deacons were important but observed that the few who were ordained (many of whom were now close to or actually retired) tended to be disillusioned (Lawlor 2013):

I was terribly concerned when I picked up what seemed to be a sense of despair, a feeling of isolation and some disillusionment in the Deacons I met with regard to their invisibility in our church - our first meeting started off so awkwardly but gained momentum. There has been support, some excitement and a glimmer of hope among the Deacons because of what you have initiated with them - it would be awful to lose that momentum and with it the hope.

They formed a Fellowship of Deacons (initially for the Highveld diocese, later nationally). The Fellowship was recognised by the Archbishop. Two deacons could now attend meetings of the Provincial Standing Committee and the Provincial Synod. It affiliated with Diakonia International, and members attended the international conferences of that body. Finally, the lobbying of the group bore fruit. After much procrastination, in September 2022, it was agreed that the Archbishop would establish a new *Commission on the Ministry of the Distinctive and Permanent Diaconate*.

What was the perspective of this very small group of committed permanent deacons on the theological and ecclesiastical issues? Their position – shaped more by their practices and informal comments in emails and conversations than by a formal manifesto or position paper – did not simply perpetuate the view of deacons as welfare or social development workers in a fractured society. Instead, they recognised, albeit in a somewhat inchoate way, that the Church's current structures were overly clericalised, introverted, and failing to embody *diaconia*. Ironically, while this group advocated for an increase in clerics (deacons), they were simultaneously critical of the clericalism entrenched within the Church.

The 2022 Commission

The Commission was set up in 2022 consequent to a resolution of the Provincial Standing Committee that stated:

This Provincial Standing Committee:

Calls on all dioceses to nurture and promote the ministry of distinctive deacons within the Anglican Church of Southern Africa;

Requests the Archbishop to consider the implementation of the 2018 PSC resolution to establish a commission to investigate the ministry of the distinctive and permanent diaconate.

The Commission eventually had ten members, two bishops, four priests (two of whom headed theological colleges), and four deacons (one of whom was the convenor). It met online during 2023, and the report was finalised in April this year, to be tabled at the Provincial Synod in September 2024, with the hope that it would be debated this time round.

What is interesting about the Commission report is its wide-ranging analysis of the history of the diaconate, its consideration of the new views (post John Collins) on the nature of *diaconia* itself, and its explication of the need to see the diaconate as central to the galvanisation of *diaconia* (and to discourage the introverted clericalisation of the people of God within church worship to fill the gap caused by the declining number of stipendiary clergy). While this vision has abandoned the tamer interpretation of the deacon as a distributor of welfare, it adheres more strongly to the challenge posed by Bonhoeffer's formulation:

If you board the wrong train, it is no use running along the train corridor in the other direction.

The positions of the 2022 Commission

The Commission rejected the idea that the current Anglican three-fold order of Bishop, Priest, and Deacon accurately reflects biblical or patristic tradition and practice. Any meaningful restoration of the diaconate must be grounded in first principles, requiring a deeper understanding of the concept of *diaconia* and a more robust theology of the diaconate.

Based on 'the recent rediscovery of the biblical idea of *diakonia*' (largely due to the work of scholar John Collins), it is clear that Acts 6:1-7

can no longer be considered an account of the institution of a diaconal order engaged in welfare work. The narrative in Acts 6:1-7, through mistranslation and misinterpretation, has often led to the diaconate being perceived as an inferior form of ministry, and historically, a cause of the decline of a distinctive diaconate in the West. [This is not to say that Acts 6:1-7, and what it led to, cannot be seen as a powerful exemplar of what *diaconia* is in the context of the cross-cultural expansion of the Church.⁵

The *diakon* – words in the New Testament indicate that diaconal service is performed by a commissioned, authorised agent (of God or the church) and encompasses all aspects of Christian ministry and service. The saving work of Jesus, the apostolic mission, and eventually the work of those designated as ‘deacons’ were all actions of such commissioned ‘sent’ agents. Deacons, therefore, are not merely menial ‘soup kitchen’ workers but are authorised agents of the church, engaged in various acts of ministry, the necessity of which depends upon historical situations. Deacons exemplify the task of ministering to the world and keeping the worshipping community attuned to the tasks of *diaconia*.⁶

The new understanding of *diaconia* has dismantled the conception of the deacon as *only* involved in social welfare activities, thereby freeing up the other orders of ministry to focus on a more ‘spiritual’ ministry. This is a dead end. (This is not to say that the sending out of deacons to engage in social, economic, welfare, and justice organising should be discouraged; in the current Southern African and global context, it may well be a growing priority).

The diaconate is now seen as a full, equal, and distinctive order of individuals attending to the business of *diaconia* under the oversight of the bishop and presbyters, in a threshold ministry that integrates liturgy, proclamation, and service to the world (as it is believed to have done in the early centuries of the church), particularly in times of crisis in contemporary society.

An interesting distinction can be made between the order of the

5 Collin’s (2002) reading of Acts 6:1-7 is that it is a commissioning of a Greek speaking leadership as the Church reaches fully out beyond its original Aramaic enclave.

6 The Commission accepted the caveats that Collin’s total focus on the sentness of diaconal action needs to be contextualised by the responsiveness to human need exhibited in the ministry of the sent by God deacon, Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Breed 2017).

presbyterate⁷ as an order of *continuity* (responsible for caring for and celebrating the theology and tradition of the institutional Church and helping the gathered people of God live and work as part of the Kingdom of God through worship, learning, and pastoral care) and the order of the diaconate as an order of *transformation* (part of a movement to bring the gifts of life, liberation, love, learning, and servant leadership to transform society and the world).⁸

Whilst this conception of *diaconia* and the diaconate leads to a contextual understanding of ministry, this contextuality complicates any attempt to define what deacons should be and do. Various attempts have been made within the Anglican Communion to examine the deacons' job description, either simplifying it or detailing it. One simplification is to perceive the deacon as having both a church-facing enabling and educational role, as well as a world-facing catalytic, intermediary, and partnership role. Other, more complex attempts have employed competency grids.

The Commission tried to identify a number of functions that could be seen as diaconal:

↓ **TABLE 2:** Functions

Function	Categories
Proclaimer	Apostolic missionary, Herald of Christ's kingdom
Ikon	Ikon of Christ, Model of servanthood, Minister of service
Worship leader	Liturgical worship leader
Interpreter of needs and situations	Interpreter, Needs reporter

7 For reasons of clarity, the Commission report consistently uses the term 'presbyter' rather than 'priest' and 'states': 'Given the importance of the historical information on the diaconate and its relationship to the other two orders, we have generally preferred to use the term **presbyter** rather than **priest** in accord with New Testament usage. As is well known, no Christian minister is called a priest (*hieros*) in the New Testament and the English word "priest" is a linguistic corruption of the word *presbyteros* elder' (Church of the Province of Southern Africa 1981).

8 David Clark (2016; 2023), a Methodist deacon, has written most powerfully on the theology behind these conceptions – that of *diaconia* as the activities of mandated, commissioned persons who are operatives of the kingdom, calling all people to be servants of the kingdom community, and of the distinction between the orders of continuity and transformation.

Function	Categories
Administrator	
Educator and equipper	Teacher and catechist, Information giver, Equipper
Outreacher	An outwards reaching minister
Liminal/Threshold/Bridge	
Collaborator/Partner/Team worker	
Networker	Connector, Messenger, Ambassador
Prophet and social justice activist	Prophet and social justice activist, Disrupter

Clearly, these functions are not well expressed in the current, largely transitional diaconate of the Anglican Church. These are dynamic functions focused on galvanising the whole ministry and mission of the Church and the entire people of God.

When the Commission presented its recommendations, namely:

- Restore the distinctive diaconate,
- Teach about the nature of *diaconia* and the distinctive diaconate;
- Settle on an interim discernment and training process;
- Establish a provincial support mechanism for the renewal of the diaconate.

It was evident that these were not easy tasks.

At the macro level, if the Commission’s understanding of *diaconia* and the functions of a group of people to lead and support that *diaconia* is correct, then much must change, maybe everything. It gave the warning:

From the history of the rise and fall of the diaconate it is clear the ostensible reason for the downfall of the diaconate was clerical politics – and the Church failed to address (and halt) the conflict between the presbyters and the deacons. Yet the deeper causation was that the church did not timeously adapt church organisation and structures (and the leadership in them) to changing times.

At the micro level, several critical issues must be addressed:

- The difficulties and discrimination faced by current permanent deacons must be eradicated.

- There is a pervasive ignorance about the diaconate, both within and outside the church, largely due to the scarcity of visible role models.
- The formation of deacons is inadequate and requires significant improvement.
- The perception of self-supporting ministers – whether deacons or presbyters – as merely auxiliary resources for occasional use to support stipendiary clergy must come to an end.

Overall, there must be a nuanced understanding that the early church context in which Ignatius of Antioch spoke about the close relationship between bishops, presbyters, and deacons has not existed for more than a millennium and a half. The current institutional church context is one in which a single bishop oversees, at a great remove, a hundred or more lone presbyters in charge of congregations with no deacons. It is a context where the pressures of secularisation and late neo-liberal industrial capitalism steadily reduce both the number of stipendiary ministers and the churches' capacity to finance them. This context poses a challenge but also encourages temptations to find solutions that will be mere palliatives to a now untenable situation.

One of the temptations is to supposedly expand lay ministries, which simply become pseudo-clerical roles due to the decline in clergy numbers, absorbing the time and energy of increasing numbers of laypeople. This shift draws them away from life and witness in the world to the maintenance of the church's own structures and routines.

As a Scottish Episcopal Church document (2020) puts it:

[T]he Church has in many ways turned in on itself, and thereby arguably accelerated its own decline. Furthermore, in effectively giving priority to traditionally clerical roles, the Church, intentionally or otherwise, implies that these are more important than those activities in and through which lay Christians have, over the centuries, been the “leaven” which has brought Gospel values to bear upon life in the world. ... The question needs to be asked whether the Church, in monopolising the spare time of its more committed and public spirited lay members, is thereby contributing also to the decline of voluntary associations and charities, through which its lay members previously exercised their mission in the world and made the contacts on which evangelism depends. It might be suggested that this theologically ill-considered development has

denuded the Church of its most effective agency in its mission outward to the world.

The Commission is fairly brutal in its analysis that you cannot change the diaconate without changing much else (:58):

It is also precisely in times of stress and change that political conflict (and by political we mean “the art of living together in community” which includes whatever has to do with power relations among individuals, such as the distribution of resources or status) can be at its worst. Any attempt to renew the diaconate as an order within the Church must take into account the historical clash between the powers and status of presbyter and deacon (and more latterly between lay-ministers and deacons). In other words, a renewal of the diaconate must also be simultaneously a renewal of the presbytery (and the episcopacy). The current context – and one thinks here of growing secularisation in the world, growing inequality in society, immiseration for often majorities of people, ecological and pandemic disasters, the general decline of respect for truth and the growth of misinformation through social media, decline in clerical vocations and church finances – indicates change and difficult change.

So the Commission came to the conclusion that (:85):

The sentness to do *diakonia* is not some footnote on the history of the ordained clergy but a call to respond today, in our context, to the divine mission given by the resurrected Lord to his Church.

Where are we going?

I do not know. Sometimes we feel that we should archive the Commission Reports and the Fellowship of Deacons documents for some future and more opportune time.

But at heart, I cannot agree. The *kairos* time is always now. We are in a world where reckless drivers have abandoned even nominal adherence to the rules of the road. Who could have imagined that less than eighty years after the Holocaust, leaders of Western countries would aid and abet

another one in Palestine? Who could have imagined that the democratic imperatives of the 20th century would culminate in rising populist crypto-fascism and growing disparities in wealth? Who could have imagined that a majority of devout evangelical Christians in the United States of America would lose their minds? Who would have imagined that the most flourishing churches today, the prosperity churches, claim to be followers of a Jesus of Nazareth who, according to the usual unreliable sources, said:

But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.
Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.
Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.
Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you,
for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

In Acts 6, we learn of the leadership of the young church courageously and astoundingly ordaining leaders from a group of semi-aliens, culturally and linguistically foreign to them. Those selected and sent trusted the Spirit, and their *diaconia* bore fruit in martyrdom and evangelisation, reaching Ethiopia, Samaria, and the rest of the world. We could at least take some steps in a similar direction.

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CHAPTER 16

DIACONIA IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY: APPROACHES TO DIACONAL IDENTITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Johannes Eurich

Introduction

Open societies in late modernity are pluralistic societies characterised by a wide array of ideological orientations. The once influential denominational milieus of Christian churches – long central to the Christianisation of societies, particularly in Europe – have lost much of their binding force. Mainline churches are experiencing a steady decline in membership, while church-based organisations, such as those engaged in diaconia, struggle to preserve their Christian identity. Religious pluralism, therefore, is not only a societal phenomenon but one that also profoundly affects churches and their affiliated organisations in various ways. This chapter explores the search for a diaconal identity and examines how a Christian orientation can be sustained within diaconal organisations amidst the challenges posed by religious pluralism. This question is examined with a focus on diaconal social service providers, which complement the diaconal commitment of church congregations. In some countries, these providers have evolved into large non-profit organisations distinguished by their professionalism in service delivery, efficiency in organisational management, and strong external orientation toward customers and competitors. There are therefore differences from the diaconal commitment of church congregations, which is generally typified by a high level of commitment from volunteers and correspondingly differing decision-making processes. This chapter is intended as a supplement to the

diaconal commitment of church congregations, but it should be clear that both types of diaconal action are mutually beneficial to one another, and both can learn from each other, especially when facing similar challenges in a pluralistic society.

To understand this pluralistic context and how it challenges the identity of diaconal service providers in the non-profit sector, it is necessary to examine the changes within that sector. The reason for this is that the non-profit sector – based on the intermediary model (cf. Evers 1995:119–139) – now implies a plurality of actors who follow different logics of action and adhere to various worldviews. Thus, the non-profit sector will first be considered, then approaches to shaping a diaconal identity by diaconal service providers in this sector will be examined, and finally, a brief outlook will be given regarding approaches dealing with religious pluralisation in diaconal organisations.

Plurality is a characteristic of the non-profit sector

Non-profit welfare organisations operate across multiple sectors, functioning within an intermediariesphere that spans the state, the market, and civil society (cf. DiMaggio & Anheier 1990:137-159; Salamon & Anheier 1996; Kramer 2000:1-24; Halfpenny & Reid 2002: 533-550). As a result, these organisations are influenced by the logics of all three sectors, with their control impulses intricately intertwined. This interweaving often entails the coexistence of state elements – primarily concerning funding and standardisation – with market economy dynamics, such as competition among autonomous service providers, and civil society elements that facilitate the use of ‘social capital’ (through support associations, local networks of initiatives, associations, and commercial enterprises that support social services, as well as self-advocacy organisations, etc.) (cf. Evers 1995:119-139). Welfare organisations, such as diaconal institutions, are therefore not uniformly functioning entities; rather, they consist of a dense network comprising market, civil society, and state elements, which are often reflected within a hospital, home, unemployment project, or advice centre (Schulz 2010:35).

An example of the state’s influence is the legal framework that both guarantees and restricts these organisations. When these organisations operate as social service providers, they are generally also subject to market economy principles. In the case of religious welfare organisations, such as diaconal organisations, there exists a corresponding community character, which can exert strong binding effects, particularly concerning church expectations.

To illustrate this analytical perspective, let us consider the example of a restaurant focused on integrating people with cognitive impairments. This establishment was founded by a diaconal organisation as a social enterprise aimed at the integration of disabled individuals who had previously lived as residents within this organisation. Similar examples of diaconal organisations could be identified in other fields of activity.

The overarching aim of the social enterprise is social in nature and revolves around integrating people into the labour market and local community, which for those involved has traditionally been limited primarily to interactions within their own institution. Differentiated and case-specific funding is crucial to the success of this initiative. The goal is to generate income from the restaurant, which is operated by individuals with disabilities. In addition, state funding programmes are utilised to subsidise the employment of these individuals and provide financial support to promote their integration into the labour market.

Consequently, the social enterprise engages with all three sectors: in addition to state funding and market service provision, community involvement is also significant, particularly in terms of volunteer contributions. According to the understanding of civil society that underpins this discussion, the social enterprise exists as an organisation within the intermediary sphere, influenced by the three sectors of state, market, and community.

As Evers and Ewert (2010:105) summarise, ‘In view of these manifold entanglements with the state, market and community or civil society, the intermediary sphere is not only defined by the sum of the associations there, but also by its connection to the public sphere. The aim here is to mediate entanglements and tensions that refer back to the structurally different principles of state, market and community – hence “intermediary”.

A plurality of orientations and logics is, therefore, one of the constitutive elements of a non-profit organisation (NPO), such as a diaconal social service provider (cf. Brandsen, van de Donk & Putters 2005:749–766). Based on these observations alone, initial conclusions can be drawn about the influence of different orientations on the self-image of diaconia. For example, the function of theology as the guiding discipline of diaconia is questioned, as it cannot solely determine the processes in diaconal organisations. Consequently, the theological programme must be integrated with other orientations. Particularly under competitive conditions, the economic control criteria become clearly (over)emphasised (cf. Eurich 2013b:205). Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that there is harmony between the individual logics and objectives of the respective

spheres. Rather, a characteristic of NPOs appears to be the tension between various internal organisational elements ‘based on commercial, governmental, and charitable requirements, each of which is specific to the environment in which the organisation operates’ (Schulz 2010:38, own translation).

The management process of an NPO, which is inherently complex, is also embedded in overarching societal changes (Evers & Laville 2004). For instance, shifts in mentality and altered role perceptions among professionals and recipients of social services must be viewed in the context of the transformation processes affecting society and certain policy areas. Indicators of such changes include the expansion of social entitlements, which provide increased opportunities for participation, needs-oriented services with options for choice, and respect for the right to self-determination of service recipients. Nowadays, opportunities for users to have a say and shape their own lives reflect a move away from authoritative guidelines imposed by professionals. The sharing of authority and power signifies a departure from the traditional view of professionals as authoritative figures who claimed the right to make decisions and interpretations on behalf of passive recipients (Kremer & Tonkens 2006). Alongside this change in the understanding of the professional-user dynamic, a differentiation of identity characteristics can also be observed. Depending on the context, users may be seen as consumers, co-producers, citizens, patients, or members of a community. This differentiation of identity characteristics naturally encompasses ideological foundations. Consequently, diaconal organisations must engage with and serve various interest groups, along with their convictions and orientations. Given the multitude of ideological and religious orientations in an open society, diaconal organisations must also navigate religious pluralisation processes both internally, in relation to their employees, and externally, in relation to their customers and other stakeholder groups.

To summarise briefly, intermediary organisations such as diaconal organisations must mediate between different orientations (e.g., state and association-related orientations). They need to manage the creation of unity while maintaining diversity (e.g. organisational unity and diversity of stakeholders) and balance different control logics (e.g., economic rationality and value-based – specifically theological – in the case of diaconal organisations). Additionally, they must ensure the creation and maintenance of community while promoting emancipation from its ties (cf. the discussion about the right to self-determination) (cf. Büscher & Krolzik 2021; Venter 2023). Religious pluralisation processes compel

intermediary organisations to address specific tasks in each of the three sectoral relations (cf. Newman 2001; eds. Peters & Pierre 2000): a) towards the ideologically neutral state, for legitimising religiously based services within a particular tradition (including coordination with or differentiation from other religious traditions); b) towards their religiously pluralistic staff and customers, for the plausibility of specific religiously based services within a particular tradition (also including coordination with or differentiation from other religious traditions); and c) concerning their (Christian) value base, for mediating their religious foundations with the requirements of economic rationality, such as customer loyalty or branding.

How can the Christian foundations of diaconia be maintained under these conditions of pluralisation, and how can diaconal organisations retain an influence on their diaconal self-image?

Approaches to deal with the question of diaconal identity

The history of diaconal organisations illustrates the challenges in substantiating the theological foundation of diaconia. This is particularly evident when a local community, such as a deaconess house, evolves into a diaconal enterprise with a pluralistic staff team over time. Often rooted in pietism, these homes have developed into complex institutions that must navigate the balancing act of becoming modern social enterprises while preserving their Christian heritage. I identify at least four different attempts to respond in this context, which may overlap or complement each other in parts:

- (1) Christian orientation of employees: In many diaconal organisations, deacons and deaconesses have long shaped the image of the institution: externally through their attire, and internally through the fundamental Christian attitude with which they carried out their service (cf. Olsen 1992). The work of the sisters for those in need was motivated by Christian love and conducted with piety and a self-sacrificing attitude – a time-bound expression of Christian charity that was fulfilled in various ways depending on the individual (cf. Blackmore 2007). Although some aspects of the work of deaconesses are criticised today, they still made a significant contribution to the Christian identity of the organisation and decisively influenced its climate and pious practices. This has changed with the decrease in the number of deaconesses and the increase in employees who are more distant from the Christian

faith. As a result, diaconal institutions have lost a group of easily recognisable employees who represent the fundamental Christian attitude. To address this, some institutions are now attempting to revive communal forms of life and embed them within the organisations as the foundation of Christian charity, while others are offering faith courses for diaconal employees. Overall, there is a rising availability of programmes, such as literature on faith formation and spirituality in diaconal work, aimed at promoting a Christian orientation or at least openness to spiritual dimensions among a pluralistic workforce (cf. Beldermann 2021).

- (2) Functionalisation of theological foundations: A frequently taken path is the functionalisation of theological foundations for organisational purposes, particularly in the context of diaconal management models (cf. Hofmann 2021; Eurich 2013a). The impact of functionalisation on the foundations of diaconal self-understanding will be illustrated by the mission statements that are widely used in connection with management models. Mission statements are intended to clearly present ‘what the identity and main tasks of an organisation are. They show the goals and intentions, the underlying motives and the value orientation, in short the ideal framework in which individual services are to be located’ (Schmidt 2005: 54 [own translation]; cf. Merriam-Webster n.d.). Mission statements are thus a necessary instrument of diaconal management and can be used to communicate the value base of an organisation to both its staff and customers. However, mission statements have the shortcoming that, although such ‘theologisations’ provide guidance and orientation at the level of reflection, they can never replace the actual practice of faith. The gap created by the loss of committed Christians as the ‘carrier groups’ of Christian identity in an organisation, as described above, cannot be filled by mission statements or similar instruments at the reflective level. Furthermore, mission statements in diaconal organisations with a pluralistic staff sometimes replace Christian terminology with secular terms to ensure compatibility with basic humanistic values such as solidarity or human dignity. While this effort seeks to accommodate non-Christian employees, it contributes to an unclear and sometimes weak image of the Christian identity of a diaconal organisation.
- (3) Eliminating the difference between Christian and other philanthropic organisations: As a third reaction to religious pluralisation, some approaches seek to connect with a general human philanthropy based on creational theology. The two Swiss authors Rüegger and Sigrüst

(2011), for example, suggest that the term ‘diaconia’ should no longer be used because there is supposedly no significant difference between diaconal organisations and other philanthropic organisations (both are engaged in helping, which is something every human can do) (cf. Rügger & Sigrist 2011:31, 81). Aside from questioning this approach on theological grounds (cf. Eurich 2014:33-43), it raises a serious problem of legitimacy: If Christian aid is characterised as general human help that no longer refers to a specific religious tradition, how do diaconal organisations then differ from other altruistic organisations? The effects on the self-image of diaconal organisations would be serious: if there is no longer a distinguishing feature between the two, diaconal organisations lose their Christian identity and become like any other secular organisation (cf. Hofmann & Leis-Peters 2021). It follows that there would also be no reason to maintain a diaconal welfare association; rather, the individual diaconal organisations could merge into philanthropic institutions run by the state or market players. This approach completely ignores the contribution and significance of religious communities and their aid organisations for the formation of morality (or specific moral convictions) in the public sphere (cf. Bowers du Toit 2021).

- (4) *Transparticularisation*: The fourth and so far most convincing attempt to respond to religious pluralisation is the so-called *transparticularisation* of theological interpretations, which can be used, for example, as an approach in shaping a diaconal corporate culture. *Transparticularisation* is an approach that seeks to preserve central concepts of the Christian tradition while entering into dialogue with other worldviews. Peter Dabrock understands *transparticularisation* as the dialogue between Christian contexts of justification and values and the ‘justification strategies of foreign discourse or cultural practices’ (Dabrock 2004:139, own translation). *Transparticularisation* is characterised by a twofold movement: on the one hand, it aims ‘to gain and justify norms’ (Dabrock 2002:139, own translation) through a reference back to Christian content, and on the other hand, it embraces an openness to dialogue with other moral and religious norms. In such processes, there exists, in a certain sense, both an interplay and a confrontation with other orientations (cf. Maaser 2016:32). To promote the diaconal self-image, the double movement of ethical-anthropological discursivity outward and dogmatic commitment inward is important, especially in dialogue with other orientations: ‘In this constant process of orientation, she identifies similarities and differences with others,

affirming or rejecting certain views' (Maaser 2016:32, own translation).

For diaconia, transparticularisation means that, on the one hand, it should clarify its Christian positioning, but not without reflecting on the validity of this particular stance; on the other hand, it should meet other assertions of validity with tolerance and openness. Practically, this means that diaconal self-understanding, in the face of religious pluralisation, requires diaconia to have the courage to reaffirm its Christian core while recognising other orientations and seeking common ground in a way that is sensitive to differences and open to pluralism. Thus, diaconia has both the opportunity and the task of making its Christian foundations plausible to a pluralistic workforce and public, as well as acknowledging religious pluralisation by transcending the particularity of its own tradition towards universalisation without abolishing it. The extent to which this approach can contribute to the self-image of diaconal institutions at an organisational level is described in the following section.

Diaconal self-image in organisational development

Organisations must have appropriate structures in order to function. From a sociological perspective, organisations consist solely of decisions. The self-image of an organisation is also reflected in its decisions. The German theologian and sociologist Günter Thomas (2013) writes:

The identity and classification of an organisation is revealed in its decisions: whether it is a sports club, a commercial enterprise, or a church congregation, and also whether it is a good sports club or a lively church congregation. (...) It is these decisions and the distinctions that shape them in the operational execution of an organisation that, figuratively speaking, "express" the identity of an organisation (own translation).

Which guiding distinctions determine the self-image and identity of a diaconal organisation in a pluralistic environment? Günter Thomas (2013) makes a further observation in this regard:

In their fee-based activities, Christian organisations do not initially and fundamentally provide a distinctively special service. What they provide should be marketable, i.e. comparable. Those who organise themselves in line with the

market want and need to be comparable. However, diaconal organisations understand this service in a specifically religious way, i.e. in a manner that arises from the Christian faith. In liberal theological terms, they differ in their meaning, or more classically, in the interpretation of their actions as a testimony or even as a ‘representation of faith (own translation).

Therefore, it is a matter of communicating this interpretation in the decisions directed towards employees and their ethos, and in the decisions directed towards patients in their neediness and trust, or making it plausible in the sense of the above-mentioned transparticularisation. Staff undoubtedly have a key role to play here. This is because the ‘Christianity’ of an organisation is first gauged by outsiders through the dedication of the staff. If this does not meet the expectations of customers or users, all other Christian interpretations may be negated.

However, the staff of diaconal organisations may vary from country to country, and within a country from region to region, but they are often pluralistic. Taking Germany as an example, this has been confirmed by studies on the spirituality of employees in diaconal hospitals in Germany (cf. ed. Stockmeier, Giebel & Lubatsch 2013). One study about workplaces in diaconal hospitals centred on the power of faith as the basis of care and revealed that only 10% of the personnel wish to receive more information about faith and/or religious activities (cf. Lubatsch 2012). However, approximately 26% of the employees in diaconal hospitals desire support in dealing with questions of meaning (cf. Lubatsch 2012). How can these figures be interpreted? One explanation is that 26% of employees no longer hold a religious (pre)-understanding of the fundamentals of Christian faith and its contribution to care. Consequently, the potential of Christian faith to assist in addressing questions of meaning is often unrecognised by the caregivers. The desire for support in dealing with questions of meaning can be addressed through training programmes designed as a collective search for answers in a dialogue-oriented manner concerning questions of faith and care. Against this backdrop, it is questionable whether formal requirements in employment contracts are an effective instrument for aligning employees with the diaconal self-image of the organisation. The organisation must continually strive to shape its diaconal identity.

Practical implications can be derived from this: in addition to any formal regulation, the mediation processes described above must be initiated, and communicative persuasion work must be carried out. Several practical approaches can achieve this. One widespread approach

is to shape a diaconal corporate culture that focuses on questions of and communication processes about diaconal identity (Hofmann & Leis-Peters 2021; ed. Hofmann et al. 2020; Haas & Starnitzke 2019). As part of this, opportunities to experience Christian faith should be offered through special events and religious services in a low-key manner. Committed Christians should be encouraged to contribute to the diaconal identity of their organisation. Studies from organisational research indicate that only 20% to 30% of the employees can shape the culture of an organisation (Hauser, Schubert & Aicher 2008). An adequate group of Christian employees (such as deacons within diaconal organisations) would therefore be sufficient to introduce and shape a specific diaconal identity within a pluralistic context (cf. the role of present-day deacons and deaconesses in diaconal organisations in Germany, Eurich 2017).

Managing diversity is another approach explored within the field of organisational development studies. This perspective not only acknowledges diversity within an organisation but seeks to respond to it constructively (Thomas & Ely 1996). Rather than merely tolerating diversity or defining differences, managing diversity involves appreciating individual diversity and recognising it as an enrichment for the organisation. Effective diversity management requires a reflective examination of one's own assumptions. As Bendl (2004:56, own translation) asserts, 'Diversity is not about others – it is about you'. The aim is to foster an awareness of diversity, variety, and difference, as well as of the similarities that exist, while interpreting diversity positively and valuing it within the framework of Christian values. Providing clear and actionable guidance for managing diversity from a Christian perspective remains an area that requires further articulation, particularly for diaconal organisations.

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CHAPTER 17

COLLABORATIVE-INTEGRATED, MISSIONAL DIACONAL PRAXIS: INTRODUCING THE SCALING DIACONATE MODEL

Nioma Venter

Introduction

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) has carved a unique and significant niche in South Africa's social welfare landscape. Its long-standing history of providing physical care to meet social needs is a testament to its commitment. The emergence of church-affiliated social welfare organisations further evidences this dedication. These organisations have been a significant force in the non-governmental sector in South Africa since the mid-20th century. As of 2024, twelve registered social service organisations directly originate from and maintain ties with the DRC. Additionally, local congregations continue to address immediate community needs through what is typically referred to as a ministry of mercy within the church.

In the post-1994 era, the DRC has proactively grappled with the challenge of responding to South Africa's complex socio-economic issues more systematically rather than reactively. The church and its affiliated social service organisations have recognised the potential for a greater impact through interdisciplinary and intersectoral collaboration. This aligns with the 21st-century ecumenical emphasis on partnerships, networks, and collaboration. However, collaboration between the church and social service organisations has often been problematic, characterised more by distance and fragmentation than by cooperation and integration.

The changing political landscape after 1994 prompted the DRC to

reevaluate its identity and calling within the diverse cultural context of South Africa. This led to an ecclesiological redefinition, culminating in the General Synod's adoption of a missional ecclesiology in 2013. The transition from an inward-focused church concept to a missional ecclesiology has been described as an extraordinary decade of rapid missional growth, unparalleled in South African church history (Marais 2017:65).

Considering these developments, research in the DRC diaconate has focused on developing practices that embody this missional ecclesiology and, more specifically, an integrated diaconal praxis to ensure sustainable change and impact. One such prototype of a collaborative-integrated diaconal praxis is the emergence of Little Seeds, a partnership agreement between congregations in the Western Cape Synod of the DRC and the church-affiliated social welfare organisation, Badisa.

This chapter presents the outcomes of a biographical case study of Little Seeds for early childhood development (ECD) as a collaborative-integrated approach between church and organisation in the Western Cape Synod of the DRC (Venter 2023). It demonstrates the strategic cornerstones (theory) and missional transformation (theology) needed for collective systemic impact in addressing poverty, inequality, and unemployment. It introduces a model to assist congregations in scaling diaconal ministry. This model offers a structured approach to bridge the gap between the congregation's ministry of compassion (*'barmhartigheidsbediening'*) and social welfare collaboration in the modern world, which is a vital focus of the presentation.

Little Seeds: Building a landing strip for collaboration

Little Seeds is the prototype of a praxis model with an interdisciplinary, intersectoral, and interdependent approach to diaconal ministry. The study of Little Seeds as a prototype has yielded the Scaling Diaconate Model (SDM), which can serve as a 'landing strip' (Scharmer 2009:627–628) for developing future prototypes to facilitate the DRC's vision for a collaborative-integrated, missional-diaconal praxis.

Little Seeds deliberately seeks integrated collaboration between *Diaconia* and Badisa. A collaboration agreement is needed where partners retain the autonomy to define their specific partnership terms, allowing for contextual adaptation and community input. The foundational principle remains collaboration, which achieves synergistic outcomes (integration) that surpass individual efforts. Venter (2023:158–150) shows that the

collaborative-integrated paradigm directs tightly coupled collaborative relationships

- with a shared interest (vision and goal);
- with a diversity of individual, organisational, and disciplinary partners;
- with deep visibility of interdependent relationships;
- embracing different degrees of integration;
- sharing of knowledge, capabilities, and capacities;
- with near-real-time sharing of information;
- achieving collective impact.

Diaconia is a joint ministry representing 520 congregations of the DRC (Western Cape Synod) and the Uniting Reformed Church (URC) (Cape region). Badisa is a registered non-governmental organisation (NGO) founded in 2003 as the collaborative professional social service organisation of these two churches. Badisa is one of the largest service providers engaged by the provincial Department of Social Development (DSD) in the Western Cape.

The journey towards establishing Little Seeds began in 2015 with initial discussions between *Diaconia* and Badisa. At that time, Badisa was already a designated child protection organisation with established ECD programmes, including registered centres and community-based childminder projects. Despite their shared interests, these early deliberations did not immediately lead to a collaboration agreement, partly due to existing tensions caused by the differing organisational cultures of the church and the NGO.

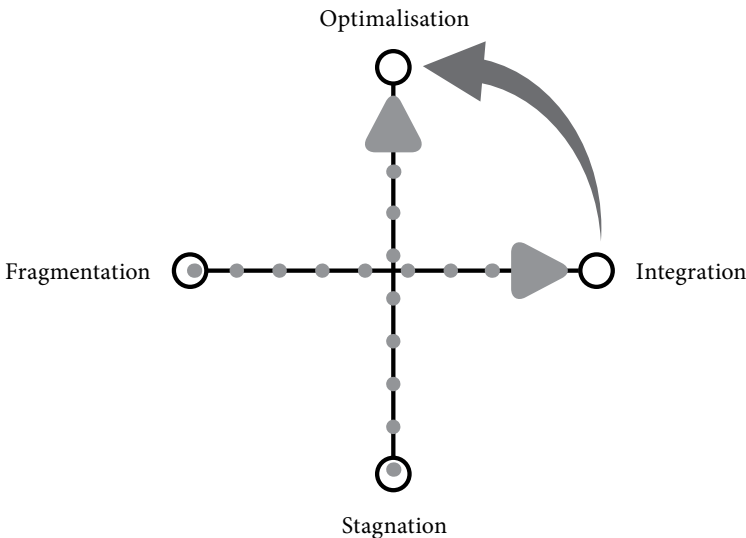
Following this initial setback, *Diaconia* pursued a different path in 2016, partnering with SmartStart, an interdependent social franchise organisation. *Diaconia* became one of only fourteen SmartStart franchises in South Africa and, notably, the only faith-based franchise within the group.

However, within two years, the rapid growth of this ministry innovation presented *Diaconia* with significant operational challenges. The highly regulated nature of ECD, requiring multi-disciplinary and systemic involvement, coupled with the increasing demand for full-time management capacity, prompted *Diaconia* to approach Badisa again.

In 2018, renewed collaboration efforts commenced, coinciding with the researcher's involvement as a dual-skilled social worker and theologian at *Diaconia*. A Project Implementation Team (PIT) was formed, comprising two senior management team members from both Badisa and *Diaconia*

(including myself). This team was tasked with exploring the current reality and envisioning an ideal future for collaboration.

The PIT utilised a strategic model featuring a simple graph to guide their discussions. With fragmentation and integration at opposite ends of a horizontal axis, and optimisation and stagnation at opposite ends of a vertical axis, the partners began a critical self-evaluation. The team recognised Badisa and *Diaconia*'s existing ECD involvement as fragmented, although there was a shared vision and overlap in the communities where both parties were engaged. They realised that optimisation through a collaborative-integrated approach was a logical strategy to enhance an effective response to poverty through ECD.



↑ **FIGURE 2:** Potential shifts toward impact (Venter 2023:77)

The desired move was from fragmentation to integration and from integration to optimisation. The mere realisation energised the partners. The energy was towards:

- A shared vision and strategy
- Shared values and interests in a community (a shared community)
- Shared resources

Nonetheless, structuring such partnerships and determining the roles of the different partners remained challenging. If *Diaconia* and Badisa could navigate their differing organisational cultures and leverage the

unique strengths of each party for the benefit of the whole, this prototype could provide a framework for further development towards an integrated approach between church and organisation. Diaconia and Badisa engaged in a facilitated process, during which experiences were captured and researched as the partnership developed.

Reflecting on the differing cultures of church and organisation, as well as their unique strengths, is crucial for understanding the challenges that arise between them and for effectively overcoming or managing these challenges in a partnership.

Cultural differences between church and organisation

Even when two entities share a common vision, bridging their differences remains a complex challenge. Eurich (2020:4-5) sheds light on a critical factor contributing to the distance between church and organisation by exploring the theory of differing logic and goals guiding diverse entities.

The church is a volunteer-driven movement with institutional elements that differ from those of organisations like Badisa, a non-profit service provider. Little Seeds' research revealed several paradoxes between the church's volunteer logic and Badisa's non-profit reasoning. These include workforce composition, ministry approach, relationship dynamics, and market engagement. Churches rely more heavily on volunteers (believers) than on full-time staff, whereas organisations employ more full-time workers than volunteers. Churches prioritise charitable and sympathetic involvement, valuing participation over measurable outcomes. In contrast, organisations must adhere to professional standards that emphasise efficiency and output-driven criteria. Churches foster open and inviting relationships, reinforced by concepts of unity and biblical imagery. Organisations, however, operate through formal contracts and agreements. Böckel (2016:93, cited in Eurich 2020:5) notes that organisations are generally more responsive to economic and political markets, particularly regarding service delivery feedback. Organisations must navigate and integrate stakeholders from three sectors: state, market, and civil society. In this context, competition, economic power, and strategic positioning are decisive markers in the market (Eurich 2020:5).

The empirical study of Little Seeds revealed significant cultural differences between the church and the organisation, challenging their partnership. Respondents highlighted several key areas of tension. Firstly, there was a notable contrast between Badisa's highly regulated operational environment and *Diaconia's* more informal working style. This disparity created friction in day-to-day operations and decision-making processes.

Secondly, the decision-making protocol in Badisa was perceived as cumbersome, leading to frustration, delays, and uncertainty among team members. Badisa's bureaucratic approach stood in stark contrast to the more agile and responsive decision-making culture desired by participants from *Diaconia*. Lastly, some respondents described the organisational structure of Badisa as overly hierarchical, while the more empowering and participative leadership style of *Diaconia* was more favourable. The presence of multiple layers of management in Badisa was seen as an impediment to progress, with the sentiment that 'too many bosses slow down progress' being expressed (Venter 2023:163).

These fundamental differences in operational logic present significant challenges when attempting to align the efforts of a local congregation and a church-affiliated social welfare organisation, despite their shared overarching goals. However, differing logic should not necessarily be a problem; it could be an opportunity if collaborators succeed in developing a structural mechanism with a distinctive ethos. In her *Theology of Partnership*, Ross (2010:145-146) explains that shared involvement, responsibility, and liability are essential to successful collaboration. Mutual appreciation unlocks the strength of these conditions and is considered the non-negotiable foundation for collaborative ethics.

The empirical results of studying the Little Seeds prototype valuably revealed the unique strengths of the church and the organisation in the context of the DRC and church-affiliated social welfare partners.

Collaborating from a position of strength

The church fosters a service culture, with volunteers motivated by a sense of calling rather than obligation. Its broad access to large groups of people enables the church to raise awareness and mobilise support effectively. Every pulpit provides an opportunity to raise a prophetic voice, share information, and mobilise people to get involved. The church's willingness to respond to contextual challenges speaks to its innovative nature. It is free to innovate since it does not have to adhere to formal agreements with other sectors or investors. The church possesses abundant resources to enhance its logistical capabilities, including human capital, buildings, and physical space. Furthermore, its relationship-oriented nature and theological grounding strengthen its ability to build partnerships and influence local communities. The extensive geographical reach of its congregations across South Africa expands the footprint of initiatives like Little Seeds, while its deep understanding of local needs ensures sustainability. The church's influence also facilitates volunteer engagement, making it an invaluable

partner in ECD efforts (Venter 2023:131–135). The literature review further revealed that the church has the exceptional ability to convene and connect people and to communicate, which are strengths that add value to partners in collaboration (Lundie, Hancox & Farrel 2018:50).

The strengths of Badisa in its partnership with *Diaconia* for Little Seeds are evident in several key areas. Table 1 summarises the outcome of the empirical study. As a well-established organisation with prior experience in ECD, Badisa is familiar with the Children’s Law and has protocols, setting it apart from *Diaconia*, which is new to ECD. Badisa’s governance, order, and compliance systems, praised by multiple respondents, ensure good governance and professional responsibility. While these established systems initially created some tension, they are crucial for maintaining ethical standards and supporting the success of initiatives like Little Seeds. Additionally, Badisa’s designated areas in communities create a neutral territory that fosters collaboration between local churches. Its empathetic approach and the community’s trust in Badisa’s social workers further enhance its impact. The organisation also brings stability, experienced professionals, and a strong network of social work programmes, especially in ECD, making it an invaluable partner in sustaining and expanding the project’s reach. These findings are summarised in Table 3 below.

√**TABLE 3:** Unique strengths of church and organisation (Venter 2023:136–139)

Badisa / Organisation	Diaconia / Church
1. Well-established organisation with prior experience in early childhood development (ECD).	1. Fosters a service culture, with volunteers driven by a sense of calling rather than obligation.
2. Familiarity with the Children’s Law and established protocols for compliance.	2. Broad access to large groups enables effective awareness-raising and mobilisation of support.
3. Strong governance systems ensuring order, professionalism, and ethical conduct.	3. The pulpit is a platform for sharing information and mobilising community involvement.
4. Provides stability and structure, supporting the success of initiatives like Little Seeds.	4. Innovative and responsive to contextual challenges, with freedom to innovate without formal constraints.
5. Assigned areas in communities create a neutral ground for collaboration between local churches.	5. Abundant resources, including human capital, buildings, and physical space, enhance logistical capabilities.
6. An empathetic approach fosters community trust, enhancing its social impact.	

Badisa / Organisation	Diaconia / Church
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Experienced professionals ensure high-quality service delivery. 8. Established networks and social work programmes, mainly focused on ECD, contribute to long-term project sustainability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Relationship-oriented nature and strong theological grounding support partnership-building and community influence. 7. Extensive geographical reach throughout South Africa expands the impact of initiatives like Little Seeds. 8. A deep understanding of local needs ensures sustainability. 9. Facilitates volunteer engagement, making it a key partner in ECD efforts. 10. Convene, connect, and communicate – creating relationships among the complex lives of members and communities to engage, access, and align resources.

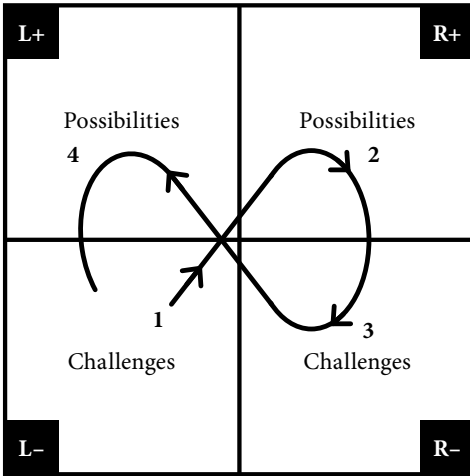
Considering the strengths of different parties to the partnership raises the question of how these strengths can be aligned. Johnson (2014) suggests polarity management as a solution.

Not a problem to solve but a polarity to manage

Polarity management assumes that ‘competitive values’ are managed in a complementary manner. When the church and the organisation develop a creative aperture, as seen with Little Seeds, they navigate the seemingly paradoxical approaches that foster collective impact. Johnson (2014), in his book *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*, presents what he calls a polarity map as a framework for maximising the strengths of collaborators and managing challenges as they arise. Polarity management involves balancing the contributions and challenges of each role player.

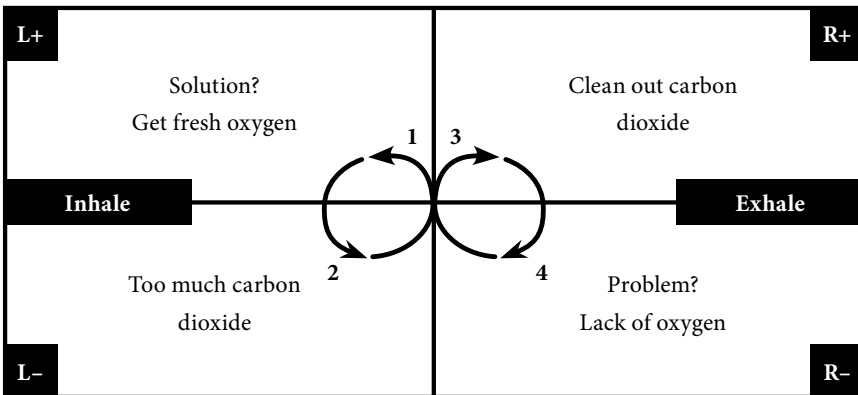
As illustrated in Figure 6, Johnson’s polarity map identifies two poles, each represented within four windows containing both positive and negative aspects. When collaboration shifts toward the downside of one pole, moving to the opposite pole’s ‘upside’ helps manage the downside, creating a continuous and dynamic cycle. This process, referred to by Johnson (2014) as the ‘polarity two-step’, underscores the idea that

different parties contribute unique strengths (possibilities) alongside their challenges. The ongoing management of these polarities involves navigating between possibilities and challenges to maintain balanced collaboration.



← **FIGURE 3:** Polarity two-step (source: Johnson 2014)

Johnson explains the polarity two-step by comparing it to the process of breathing. During inhalation, oxygen is taken in as a positive action (L+), but when it converts to carbon dioxide, it becomes a negative (L-). During exhalation, the lungs are emptied of carbon dioxide (R+), but there is an immediate renewed need for oxygen (R-). In the crossover movement between inhalation and exhalation, Figure 7 illustrates the upward crossover movement applied to unlock the strengths and manage the challenges of two systems working together (Johnson 2014:21).



↑ **FIGURE 4:** Breathing illustrates the polarity two-step (Johnson 2014)

Missional ecclesiology and collaboration in diaconal ministry

One of the research objectives of the Little Seeds study was to review the underlying theological framework, regulatory policy, and other official documentation that directs and informs development in the diaconate of the DRC. More specifically, the research aimed to examine collaboration and partnership in networks through a theological lens, and to this end, a literature review was undertaken.

The influence of missional theology

The literature review highlights the significant influence of missional theology on the identity and calling of the DRC and how this influences the approach to diaconate ministry. As ecclesiological perspectives evolved in the DRC in the 21st century, missional theology has increasingly shaped the principles and practices of the church's diaconate. This progression has been particularly noticeable since the publication of the *Framework Document on the Missional Nature and Calling of the DRC* (Niemandt & Meiring 2013). The document offers a concise ecclesiology but requires further hermeneutical development, such as a diaconal theology based on the missional theology paradigm. Synod agendas and reports testify to the transformation of the church's diaconal theology before and since 2013.

Rooting diaconal praxis in missional theology

In a seminal study on the DRC's compassion ministry ('barmhartigheidsbediening'), Van der Merwe (2014:147–155) outlines six foundational cornerstones for a missional diaconal theology. These cornerstones offer a framework for the diaconate of the DRC that incorporates progress in missional transformation. They build upon a missional ecclesiology and guide further development of its diaconal praxis. The six cornerstones are:

- (i) God's calling of a new community: The church is called to participate in God's mission, joining his ongoing work of compassion and care for the world. Diaconal work cannot be separated from God's mission but is instrumental in it.
- (ii) Diaconia as 'being' and 'doing': Diaconia reflects God's nature, particularly the relational love and respect within the Trinity. Diaconia cannot be reduced to mere church programmes (projects); it embodies the heart of the church's mission, as God is both the source and purpose of diaconal ministry.
- (iii) The coming of God's Kingdom: Diaconia actively participates in the

re-creation of the world according to God's original purpose. Acts of mercy and justice within diaconal ministry testify to the coming of God's Kingdom, addressing systems that disrupt harmony and peace.

- (iv) Diaconia in solidarity with the world: The church moves from communion within the Trinity into acts of kindness and justice, standing in solidarity with those in need. This solidarity manifests through being a neighbour, sharing with others, and actively addressing injustice.
- (v) Jesus as the example: Jesus's life as Prophet, Priest, and King serves as the model for diaconal ministry. His Kingship is proclaimed through acts of diaconia, and his priestly role is embodied in loving, grace-filled relationships within the community.
- (vi) Compassion and care from God Triune: Diaconal work begins with God's compassion and care. As the origin and ultimate purpose of diaconal ministry, God's love flows through the church to the world, shaping the nature and content of diaconia.

This theological framework informed the development process of *Little Seeds* throughout. The study concluded its theological reflection with several key findings:

- (i) A missional ecclesiology framework, officially adopted by the DRC in 2013, has guided the development of diaconal praxis since its publication;
 - The DRC's most recent policy (from 1993) was outdated at the time of the *Little Seeds* study. Efforts to update this policy with a missional paradigm were underway, culminating in October 2023 when the General Assembly of the DRC adopted a *Framework Document on the Diaconal Nature and Calling of the DR Church* (DRC 2023:239).
 - Renewal in a Reformed church such as the DRC is usually confirmed through changes to its Church Order. Therefore, the inclusion of Article 2¹ in the DRC's Church Order in 2019 (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 2019a) is significant, as it reflects a distinctively missional approach;

1 'Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk is deur God Drie-enig geroep om deel te neem aan die missie van God in die wêreld. Die kerk word deur die Heilige Gees opgebou om God se eer te dien en verkondig die bediening van versoening en die heil van Christus' (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, Artikel 2, 2019a).

- (ii) While practice-oriented research on the diaconate remains limited, there is increasing recognition within the General Synod for ongoing research and development in this area.

Missional theology informs diaconal praxis, which is relational, inviting, empowering, appreciative, holistic, inclusive, and comprehensive.

Missional theology and biblical images: Koinonia – as unity and diversity

Theocentric reflection rooted in the *missio Dei* emphasises God's love, mercy, and justice as the foundation of diaconal service. Miroslav Volf (cited in Van der Merwe 2014:126) refers to the Triune God as 'the network of perfect love'. According to Volf, a long-standing theological perspective has been that an unquestionable hierarchy exists within the Trinity. However, he aligns himself with a view in which the three Persons of the Trinity form a community of perfect love. A hierarchy is inconceivable in a community where different partners share divine attributes. This description of the Trinity as a 'community of perfect love' provides a crucial key for an argument in which the relational nature of the Triune God shapes the essence of partnership in diaconal ministry.

Within this framework, a collaborative-integrated model emerges. It affirms partnerships and networks as strategies for addressing socio-economic challenges and advancing the Kingdom of God. The relational nature of diaconia enhances the potential for unity and effective collaboration, which aligns with the DRC's theological conviction of a biblical imperative for collective action.

Celesti and Bowers-du Toit (2019:2) suggest that the concept of partnership should naturally translate into the Christian community. Eminent biblical imagery and principles offer a firm grounding for integration and collaboration. One such image is the body of Christ, which emphasises unity and diversity – unity being enriched by the diversity within. Louw and Nida (1989:562) define *koinonia* as a close, mutual relationship and consider it the best term to describe the gift of unity. This demonstrates that God seeks relational and functional unity within the church. Jesus' prayer for his followers to be one, as He and the Father are one (Jn 17), speaks directly to this unity. The term 'integrate' means 'to make whole', while 'collaboration' means 'to work with' (Venter 2023:51). These concepts echo Jesus' prayer for unity and Paul's teaching on the essential roles of each member of the body working together. Rooted in these biblical principles, the 2023 vision of the DRC fully embraces the idea of partnership and collaboration:

We dream of a network of inclusive congregations at the grassroots level, driven by God's love, serving our communities (DRC 2020:5).

The biblical concepts of unity, diversity, and collaboration within the body of Christ provide a solid theological foundation for partnership and integration in Christian communities and are accorded in the ecumenical world.

Ecumenical accord with partnerships in mission

The literature review confirms the importance of partnerships, networks, and collaboration as highlighted in various studies and ecumenical discussions (Eurich 2020; eds. Kok & Van den Heuvel 2019; WCC 2013). These themes were central to reflections on diaconal ministry at the WWC's meeting in Busan in 2013, where interdisciplinary approaches and networked collaboration were advocated to enhance the effectiveness of ministry. With their influence and public trust, churches are uniquely positioned to convene relevant stakeholders, playing a pivotal role as facilitators in local settings.

Despite the support for the idea of partnerships, ecumenical reports express concern regarding the need to develop nuanced and pragmatic approaches (praxis) to partnerships and integrated strategies within the church. It appears to be a common global challenge that church and church-affiliated social welfare programmes operate in a fragmented manner, existing in silos and stagnating rather than optimising the potential for collaboration.

Introducing the Scaling Diaconate Model

The SDM is organic and can be applied to various contexts and diaconal issues. Its relational nature presupposes that innovation and creativity arise from the synergy between diverse partners. This asset-based model creates a meaningful impact using available resources, but such outcomes would not have been possible if the partners had remained isolated. It recognises and mobilises the potential of an interdisciplinary, intersectoral, and interdependent approach. The model facilitates the constructive management of polarities without the risk of fragmentation. Table 4 presents a basic framework for collaboration as suggested by the SDM.

↓ **TABLE 4:** SDM framework for collaboration (Venter 2023:177)

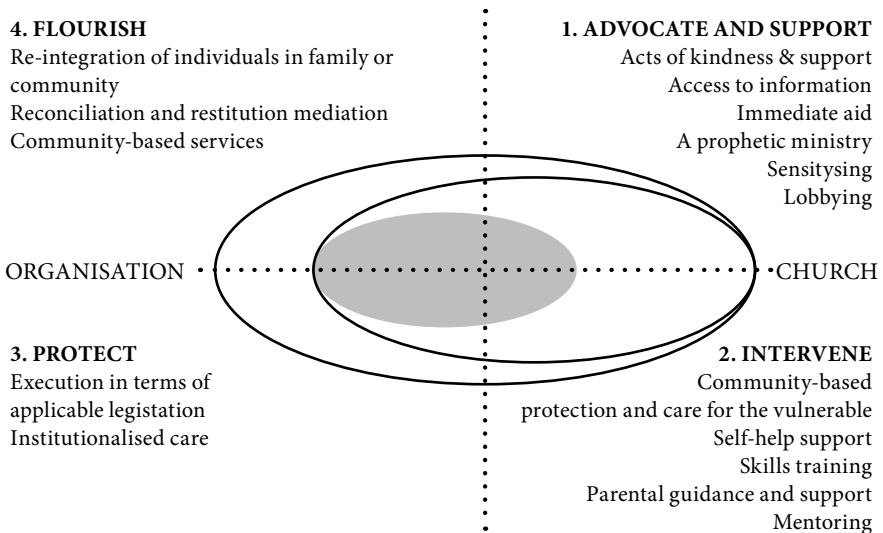
i	Delineate diaconal engagement into four zones.
ii	Identify and map the unique contributions and logic of the role players within each zone and recognise polarities.
iii	Scale diaconal involvement in and between zones through infinite and cross-migration of activities/ministries.
iv	Maintain living relationships with supporting agreements.

Delineate diaconal engagement in four zones

The social landscape in South Africa presents a complex array of challenges. The SDM delineates four areas or zones in which diaconal ministry potentially occurs. These zones include advocacy and support, early intervention, protection, and flourishing, each representing distinct activities.

The zones are not linear (although numbered); they follow a non-linear approach, emphasising flexibility. Either partner can enter the process from any given zone.

A key concern for the DRC is fragmentation, which occurs when the church becomes confined to a single zone, particularly when other zones are left to specialised professionals. Fragmentation is likely if each partner adheres to its strengths or ‘comfort zone’. The Little Seeds research revealed the tendencies of churches and organisations regarding activities in specific zones. Figure 8 illustrates these findings.



↑ **FIGURE 5:** Delineating zones and predictable activities

Zone 1: Advocate and support

The church's role in this zone of the SDM focuses on supporting immediate relief, often in the short term. Providing assistance in times of need comes naturally to the church and aligns well with a charitable approach. Pulpits and access to large groups of people facilitate awareness-raising, which can also be viewed as a prophetic deed or an advocacy role. While immediate relief is crucial, long-term impact is achieved when the church collaborates with organisations like Badisa, expanding its involvement beyond temporary interventions.

Zone 2: Intervene

In this zone, activities become more focused and structured, emphasising proactive interventions to protect against and prevent the escalation of issues related to problems after they occur. The Little Seeds programme enables congregations to identify children at risk of stunted development and implement ECD interventions tailored to their specific context. Examples of such interventions include parental guidance, skills training, relationship-building, emotional and spiritual support for ECD workers, and ensuring safe environments for children. The church's role is highlighted as ideal for these interventions due to its relational capacity, which fosters long-term involvement and community-wide impact. Other activities that enhance the church's diaconal influence in this zone include mentoring, quality assurance of existing services (even from different sectors), and creating sustainable job opportunities.

Zone 3: Protect

This zone in the SDM requires professional accreditation and expert skills, focusing on statutory services governed by legislation. In this zone, ECD programmes comply with legal standards, and professional assistance is essential when a child's safety is at risk due to neglect, abuse, or trauma. The church cannot perform these statutory tasks and must collaborate with child protection services like Badisa. This partnership ensures a holistic approach to child protection, allowing for specialised interventions such as foster care, volunteering in residential care facilities, and involvement in ECD governance. The collaboration between the church and social welfare organisations is crucial for scaling and innovating in this regulated environment.

Zone 4: Flourish

This zone in the SDM represents an ideal society where restoration, equal rights, and opportunities for all are achieved, manifesting God's shalom in the community. It focuses on restored health (aftercare) and fosters life-giving relationships. This approach aligns with community-based care, where diaconal work promotes reintegration, reconciliation, and holistic support outside institutional settings. The goal is a community that reflects justice and equality, where collaboration between the church and social services enables scaling through their unique contributions and shared efforts. Typical and unique to this zone is diaconal intervention that supports the reintegration of children with their families, mediation for reconciliation and restitution, aftercare from substance abuse, and the treatment and care of individuals or groups in a community-based setting outside of residential care.

Identify and map the unique contributions and logic of the role players within each zone and recognise polarities

To scale the diaconate, the combined strengths of the church and the social welfare organisation align intentionally. Appreciation for unique strengths (indicated in the previous section) is rooted in an asset-based approach. The SDM navigates and manages tensions revealed through empirical data, such as relational issues, personal issues, structural differences, cultural differences, and historical obstacles.

After establishing the benevolent intent, the SDM can be applied as a roadmap to facilitate collaboration between the church and the organisation on any social issue. It functions like an empty canvas that awaits the creation of something new – something that would not have been possible in isolation.

Partners agree on dominant functions and specific roles within each zone. They acknowledge the differing logics and complete a Johnson map (2014) to identify possibilities and challenges for both parties. In each zone, the polarity map is utilised to negotiate roles and responsibilities and to establish organisational mechanisms to optimise diaconal intervention.

Scaling within and between zones

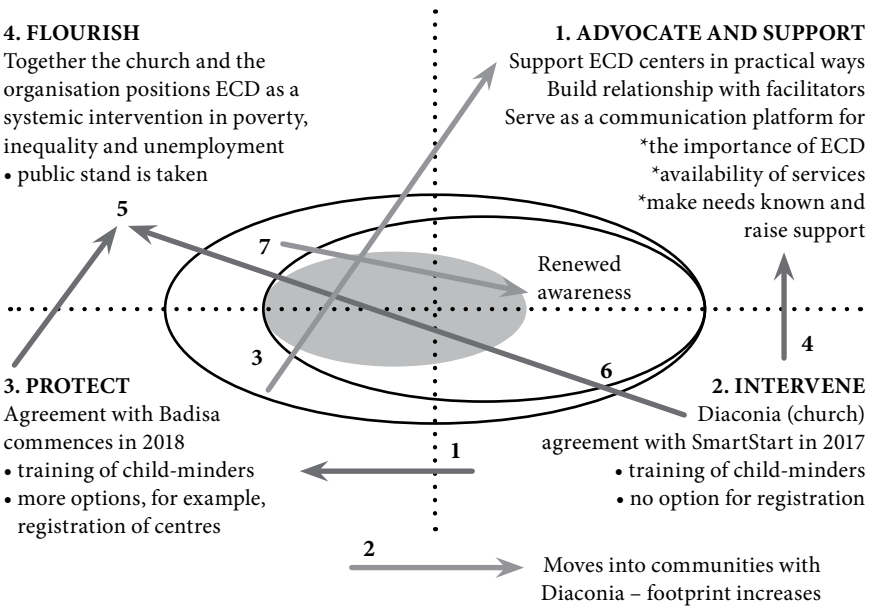
The SDM presents an innovative approach to ministry development, characterised by its non-linear and dynamic nature. Unlike traditional sequential models, the SDM emphasises an infinite cross-movement design, allowing for flexible progression between zones based on contextual needs and the negotiation of roles and responsibilities between partners in the faith communities.

Drawing inspiration from network mindsets and the concept of ‘co-evolution’ in collaborative ecosystems, the model encourages fluid movement between zones. This approach recognises that ministry development does not follow a predetermined path but instead adapts to the evolving needs of communities and the capacities of service providers. The model’s design facilitates the sharing of capabilities and resources across different sectors, promoting an integrated approach to addressing social issues.

The Little Seeds case study illustrates the practical application of inter-zone scaling, showcasing dynamic movements between different zones:

1. Transitioning from **intervention** to **protection** through collaboration with Badisa.
2. The reciprocal movement from **protection** back to **intervention**, which extends the reach of services.
3. Leveraging capacity and expertise to create **awareness** by moving from **protection** to **advocacy**.
4. Facilitating a shift from **intervention** to **advocacy** through the sharing of outcomes and opportunities.

Refer to the arrows in Figure 9 for a visual representation of these movements, accompanied by the explanatory notes provided below.



↑ **FIGURE 6:** Infinite cross-movement to inter-zone scaling (Venter 2023:204)

Explanation of the infinite cross-movement between zones:

1. Scaling from Zone 2 to Zone 3: *Diaconia* (the church) wishes to systematically intervene in poverty and inequality and engage in ECD (Zone 2). Complying with legislation becomes challenging, so they reach out to Badisa (Zone 3).
2. Scaling from Zone 3 to Zone 2: Badisa (organisation) is a registered child protection service compliant with legislation. By partnering with *Diaconia*, Badisa gains access to previously unreached areas, while *Diaconia* relies on Badisa's expertise and professional contribution.
3. Scaling from Zone 3 to Zone 1: Badisa now realises that access to pulpits holds the potential to raise awareness of child protection and capitalise on the partnership with *Diaconia* in Zone 1.
4. Scaling from Zone 2 to Zone 1: *Diaconia* engages with its congregations in Zone 1 and testifies to the ministry in Zone 2. This is the next level of awareness raising and strengthens the movement with more volunteers and contributions in response to the feedback.
5. Scaling from Zone 3 to Zone 4: With the joint experience of Badisa and *Diaconia*, a movement from Zone 3 to Zone 4 is initiated.
6. The movement of Zone 2 to Zone 4 entails building a new social fabric while jointly advocating for a just society. These innovations arise from the partnership.
7. Scaling from Zone 4 to Zone 1: A holistic approach has been developed through collaboration between the church and organisation. Therefore, *Diaconia* returns to its congregations, and advocacy for the protection and rights of children escalates, reaching yet another level of awareness raising and sensitisation.

The SDM is not an exact recipe but a living relationship relying on evident relational principles that engage the mutual will to optimise impact through collaboration. It relies on the co-evolution of service delivery and diaconal ministry.

Maintaining living relationships supported by agreements and appropriate structures

In the Little Seeds case study, Venter (2023:207) concludes the following concerning the nature of living relationships within the SDM:

In the image of God Triune, the relational nature of the diaconate is significant and directional for the ministry of the diaconate. The diaconate is primarily a relationship and not a

service the church provides. Likewise, collaborative-integrated praxis relies strongly on living (organic) relationships that keep growing. Living relationships are not prescriptive but build on values, principles, and ethics. In the same way, the Scaling Diaconate Model does not prescribe the nature of agreements in each relationship. Instead, the model suggests a robust relationship approach, predicted by the context, open for collaboration in mission, organic growth, and a general network mindset.

Leadership within the SDM diverges significantly from traditional hierarchical structures. The model posits that success lies in effective network organisation rather than in individual leadership dynamics. Partnerships are encouraged to share responsibility across all aspects, including leadership roles. Such an approach fosters the development of ecosystems, rather than focusing on the growth of individual entities, with trust, shared knowledge, skills, and resources forming the core strengths of these networks.

Central to this approach is the concept of context-specific agreements that define partnerships. These agreements emphasise a shared vision, goals, and objectives, allowing for flexibility and adaptability to local needs. The model promotes collaborative integration, encouraging resource sharing and interdisciplinary cooperation without necessitating formal structural merging. This flexibility extends to the structuring of networks, which can be formed through various agreements, such as memorandums of understanding, joint ventures, or partnerships, with formal or informal ties.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter presented the SDM as an innovative framework for collaborative-integrated diaconal ministry, drawing insights from the Little Seeds case study and a literature review. The SDM, originating from the Little Seeds process, offers a dynamic, non-linear approach to addressing complex social challenges through partnerships between churches and social welfare organisations.

The model is grounded in missional theology, emphasising the respectful and loving relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the foundation for collaboration in diaconal service. It aligns with ecumenical trends towards partnerships and networks in ministry,

addressing the common challenge of fragmentation in church and social welfare programmes.

The SDM provides a practical framework for the DRC and its affiliated organisations to optimise their collective impact on poverty, inequality, and unemployment in South Africa. By fostering collaborative integration, the model supports a more holistic and practical approach to diaconal ministry, where the ultimate goal is impact, driven by the vision of the Kingdom of God.

This approach empowers churches and organisations to scale their diaconal efforts, leveraging their unique strengths and optimising their collective impact.

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DIACONIA, SOCIAL WORK AND
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:
BEYOND PRAGMATICS TO A
DIALOGUE OF NORMATIVE
FRAMEWORKS¹

Yolande Steenkamp and Nadia von Wielligh

Introduction

Nowhere are the intersecting fault lines of socio-economic inequality and unsustainable environmental practices, both of which accompany the global hegemony of neoliberalism, more keenly felt than in the developing countries of the world. Here on the African continent, this often coincides with cultural and religious practices that undermine gender equality (Viviers & Mzondi 2016; Duvenage 2022), hinder literacy (especially that of women), and complicate transparency in governance. Together, this unholy matrimony renders a web of unsustainable communities and ecosystems that many would argue casts doubt upon the claim that religion might be part of the solution contributing to sustainable and dignifying futures.

This chapter contributes to the theme of religion and sustainable development from the perspective of Christian *diaconia*. The discipline of

1 This chapter is an expanded version of a paper presented by the authors at the conference: *Diaconal/diaconate identities in a pluralistic Africa society: Ecumenical and inter-religious opportunities and challenges*, held at the University of Pretoria on 28–30 August 2024.

diaconia serves as an entry point for the interdisciplinary discussion, while also including the discipline of social work to address the South African context, where religious organisations often express their diaconal work in part through Christian-based NGOs that employ social workers. The engagement addresses the basis for dialogue between the disciplines of theology, social work, and sustainable development, and as such makes an argument for faith-based communities to partner with organisations in order to implement sustainable development through programmes such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

While many pragmatic reasons exist for collaboration in sustainable development, this contribution argues that normative grounds for collaboration between *diaconia*, social work, and sustainable development are found in shared normative values among the three disciplines. The chapter proceeds through a brief review of the discipline of sustainable development, with emphasis on its normative claims, before considering how this enables fruitful dialogue with the disciplines of social work and *diaconia* in particular, and theology more generally. Finally, the chapter points out how theology (and *diaconia* scholarship in particular), social work, and sustainable development discourse all stand to benefit from a dialogue between the normative motivations that drive the ‘why’ of their programmes. There already exists alignment between the focus of *diaconia* on the value and dignity of the human person and the commitment of sustainable development to inclusivity (‘leave no one behind’) and equity. Yet the possibility of increased depth and expansion emerges from reading *diaconia* together with sustainable development. While justice is often discussed as a normative value in sustainable development, *diaconia* could enrich this further through its emphasis on service, love, and compassion. Similarly, theology may benefit from the invitation of the sustainable development discourse to broaden its focus from a narrowly human one to include the well-being of the natural and economic spheres. The interconnectedness of life and ecosystems – which would include our social and economic systems – demands the sustainability of the whole in order to thrive, and unsustainable environmental practices cannot coexist with social justice and human flourishing. In this respect, *diaconia* has much to integrate from other theological disciplines that highlight the importance of proper care for creation and the stewardship of resources.

A shared basis of normativity as foundation for interdisciplinary engagement and collaboration for sustainable development

To claim that *diaconia*, social work, and sustainable development have normative foundations refers to the fact that these disciplines are grounded in value judgements regarding what is desirable. This includes ideas or beliefs about why this is the case, and a preference for descriptions of how things ought to be, along with strategies for achieving that ideal, rather than merely describing the way things are and providing explanations for why this is so. This section offers a brief exploration of what this means for the disciplines under discussion.

Sustainable development

The Brundtland report of 1987 marks a shift in global development thinking to that of sustainable development, which it defined as follows (Brundtland 1987:ch. 2 §1):

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

- the concept of ‘needs’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs.

The years that followed revealed a wide range of approaches to and definitions of sustainable development, leading some to describe it as a ‘vague and ambiguous “theory”’ (Lafferty 1996; Pesqueux 2009:185–186) that was ineffective as a guide for policymaking (Holden, Linnerud & Banister 2014). Nevertheless, the enormous influence of the concept has not only endured but continues to shape global decision-making. This is evident from its pivotal role in key deliberations and

decisions,² including the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, the 2012 United Nations (UN) Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro (Rio+20), the 2022 Stockholm+50: A Healthy Planet for the Prosperity of All – Our Responsibility, Our Opportunity, and the recent Summit of the Future held at the UN headquarters in New York in September 2024.

But where can the origins of the idea of sustainable development be traced? Charles V. Kidd (1992) traced the emergence of the concept of ‘sustainability’ to six sources that developed over different time periods, some of which held opposing assessments and claims. These are the ecological/carrying capacity root, the resource/environment root, the biosphere root, the critique of technology root, the ‘no growth-slow growth’ root, and the ecodevelopment root (Kidd 1992:5–12). While many of these roots focused on the assumptions and methodologies of the hard sciences rather than on normative values such as equity (e.g., ecological/carrying capacity root), normative concepts were central to the emergence of the term ‘sustainability’ from the beginning. Even in 1992, Kidd concluded that the diverse sources feeding into the concept made the pursuit of a final definition futile (Kidd 1992:3); yet, it is clear that normativity has been central to ‘sustainability’ from the start.

The emerging ‘sustainable development’ concept was informed by the ‘limits to growth’ idea, which arose from calculations suggesting that resources may become inadequate to sustain economic growth. In the 1960s and 1970s, this idea transformed into a normative insistence on intentionally limiting growth to protect the environment (Kidd 1992:7, 9–12). Kidd assessed that the ‘no growth-slow growth’ stance extended beyond mere environmental protection to encompass convictions that ‘a no-growth economy can promote ethical values and superior social goals’ (Kidd 1992:11). While the argument exists that continued economic growth is possible provided its sustainability is ensured through a balance between ecological and social dimensions, the ‘no-growth’ position has left a lasting impact on the concept of sustainability by embedding strong normative moral and ethical values, as well as long-term perspectives through which these values are examined (Kidd 1992:11–12).

2 The United Nations Report (2022) on the Stockholm+50 Conference described the period of 1972–2022 as an ‘era of environmental agreements and initiatives’. This includes the Bruntland Report (1978), of course, as well as the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992) the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development (2002), and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015), amongst others.

Intergenerational equity, defined as the ‘moral obligation of each generation to heed the needs of future generations’, also plays an important role in this regard (Kidd 1992:7–8). Yet, amidst the challenges that climate change poses to existing and especially future generations, there remains a moral argument for developing countries, particularly the least developed, to have the opportunity to develop despite the associated ecological costs. This argument asserts that developing countries have the right to sustainable development, at least to a basic threshold, while negotiating with the norm of sustainability, which requires that sustainable actions be prioritised (Jayasuriya 2018:2).

The right to develop requires the use of limited resources now, whereas the norm of sustainability argues that these resources must be protected for both environmental protection and intergenerational justice. Intragenerational justice requires us to consider whether actions that protect the future may be causing greater injustice within the present generation (Jayasuriya 2018:ii).

A distinguishing factor of sustainable development is its integration of the social, economic, and ecological dimensions. This can adopt a descriptive approach, recognising how these dimensions are fundamentally interlinked. This is evident in the following observation by Peeters (2012:2§1):

For example, climate change is affecting the availability of water and fertile land, which in turn is leading to a growing stream of environmental refugees; the loss of open space, air pollution and traffic noise are related to health problems; and the worst-off are suffering the most from the rise in prices for energy, food and other goods.

When normative values in development are emphasised, maintaining a balance between the social, economic, and ecological dimensions becomes a prescriptive approach to ensuring sustainable development. This perspective first emerged in 1977 with Professor Ignacy Sachs’ concept of ‘codevelopment’, which combined the notion of balance between the three dimensions with intergenerational equity (Kidd 1992:12).

William Lafferty (1996:187) argued that the concept of sustainable development could ‘be viewed as expressing essential normative standards

for a global ethics of environment-and-development', thereby fulfilling both consensualism and realism as 'two important criteria for ethical legitimacy'. His assessment of the Brundtland Report was that it aimed 'to establish sustainable development as a central normative concept for both assessing and changing global relationships' (Lafferty 1996:188). Moving almost three decades into the future to the 2015 document 'Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', we find that the normative foundation of sustainable development, as expressed here, is no less prominent. The 2030 Agenda rests on the normative principles of universality, interconnectedness, and a rights-based approach. It calls for the participation of all sectors of society, including civil society organisations, faith communities, and the private sector, in achieving these ambitious goals, with the assumption being that the normative claims of the framework are so self-evident that they justify this call to global action to 'leave no one behind' in terms of basic needs while respecting planetary boundaries.

In terms of normativity, the following can be said regarding the sustainable development paradigm: it proceeds from an interconnected, dynamic systems view of reality that acknowledges the interdependence of economic, social, and environmental factors, as well as the interconnected nature of reality itself. A holistic understanding sees peace and partnership not only as means for implementing sustainable development but also as outcomes thereof. Thus, this understanding of reality as interconnected leads to a holistic approach to development, which includes the values of inclusion ('leave-no-one-behind') and equity (reducing inequalities, intergenerational justice).

Finally, although we cannot expand on this in detail, sustainable development, as outlined in the 2030 Agenda, has integrated some criticisms of post-development theory concerning mainstream development paradigms. It aims to avoid imposing Western-centric models and values on cultures and societies and instead calls for local cultures to be not only valued but also acknowledged for their contributions to sustainable development. This localisation of sustainable development requires pluralism, respect for cultural diversity, and self-determination, meaning that communities should have the autonomy to define their own development paths based on their values and needs. It must also encompass a critical evaluation of economic growth and economic development theory in the context of sustainable development, as examined, for example, by Pelsa and Balina (2022). Their analysis highlights some shortcomings of the theory of economic growth, such as

its naive assumption that economic growth will always result in human progress and its focus on wealth creation without addressing ethical issues associated with that, including the fair distribution of wealth. Economic development, however, assesses whether the well-being of a given population is increasing while also emphasising intergenerational justice and using planetary boundaries ‘as a starting point and builds around it a new, functioning system for evaluation, development, employment policy, etc.’ (Pelsa & Balina 2022:99–100). Since economic growth and economic development are closely linked, they conclude that sustainable development, which balances economic, social, and environmental dimensions, should represent the goal of society (Pelsa & Balina 2022:100).

Diaconia and theology

Religious communities serve as reservoirs of knowledge, and their faith-based sensemaking of the world gives rise to normative convictions. These convictions, rooted in faith, endow religious communities with a ‘significant transformative potential’, as they inspire and legitimise certain ways of being in the world. These influences may manifest as individual actions or become institutionalised, ultimately shaping social and cultural values and worldviews (Stork et al. 2022:775). This section examines the normative foundations of *diaconia* as a basis for fostering partnerships in pursuit of sustainable development.

The most fundamental norm for *diaconia* lies in the doctrine of God. In this context, we specifically engage with Knoetze’s (2023) argument that the *missio Trinitatis Dei* provides the theological foundation for *diaconia*:

“The *missio Dei*, of the Father, Son, and Spirit,” he writes, “is directed at the realities of this life. The new heaven and the new earth are not mutually exclusive. ... This new earth, a new man, and new life come through the merciful *dikaioisune* of the Father, the *diakonia* of the Son, and the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit. The diaconate and the missionary ministry of the church are caught in the essence of God and therefore belong to the essence of missionary ecclesiology. From the trinitarian perspective, the purpose of the diaconate is described as well as the relationship between the diaconate, the church, and the kingdom (Knoetze 2023:1).

Knoetze makes the important point that, in discerning her calling to *diaconia*, the community of believers must simultaneously face the three

dimensions of God, the world, and the future, and that the church is called to remain open to all three (Knoetze 2023:4). However, it is primarily the trinitarian God who calls the church, to which the church responds in obedience by serving a world in need. Referring to Cilliers's (2021:20) argument, understanding the *missio Dei* as a movement from God means that creation is part of God's mission; indeed, it is God's mission. This implies that God's mission cannot be reduced to spiritual life but must also include physical life:

God's mission has to do with the suffering of ordinary people, and therefore God's mission is also diaconia. In the same way, the Spirit that has been sent confirms creation as *missio Dei*, since the Spirit is not poured out on the supernatural, but on the natural, the flesh (Knoetze 2023:2 discussing Cilliers 2021, translation by YS).

The soteriological intent of the mission of God portrays Christ as the great diakonos, bringing glory to the Father by drawing humanity into *koinonia* – communion with the Father through the Holy Spirit, as well as with one another and creation. This unity is ultimately found in God and reborn into the new creation. Since glorification, salvation, and *koinonia* are interdependent, there 'can be no diaconate without the glorification of God, the salvation of humanity, and fellowship with the Holy Spirit and the saints' (Knoetze 2023:3, translation by YS).

This means that as the church is called to partake in the *missio Dei*, its work must be holistic, oriented towards the Father, in loving custodianship of the earth, and in fellowship with all humanity in caring for the vulnerable and the poor. However, being rooted in the reign of Christ moves this beyond mere charity or acts of mercy, lending a political and social dimension to the diaconate of the Church 'that includes matters such as structural injustice, human dignity, and much more'. The deacon, therefore, does not only assume the form of a servant but also that of one who has been sent and represents the king, thus possessing authority in Christ (Knoetze 2023:4).

Diaconia is foundationally grounded in the being of the trinitarian God. Through the redemptive work of Christ, humanity, together with all of creation, is invited into communion with the Father through fellowship with the Holy Spirit. This grounding reveals a fundamentally relational ontology at the core of the theological justification for the diaconate. Beyond the normative claims of equity and justice often encountered in

sustainable development discourse, this relational ontology provides a basis for dialogue with the dynamic and interconnected systems view of reality emphasised in sustainable development discourse.

A second scholar whose work we will consider is Patrick Nanthambwe (2023). Although his article is not focused on *diaconia per se*, it centres on the ‘grounds that compel a theological reflection on development’ (Nanthambwe 2023:1). His specific focus is on biblical support for arguments in favour of a dialogue between theology and development. He claims that such an investigation demonstrates that God’s aim for creation reveals a significant similarity with the integrated approach of sustainable development, namely ‘that God’s aim for his creation is development that strikes a balance between economic, environmental, and social elements’ (Nanthambwe 2023:1).

In his section on theological and biblical concepts for development, Nanthambwe explores some of the scriptural metaphors or images present in the Christian religious imagination, reflecting on five key themes: development as fruitfulness, development as blessedness, development as prosperity, development as being in peace (*shalom*), and development as progress. While not systematised, he suggests that these concepts constitute the ‘driving force that moves churches to intervene in community development, ensuring that people’s lives are fruitful, blessed, prosperous, peaceful, and that they are progressing in making their lives better’ (Nanthambwe 2023:8). What is particularly interesting is that two of these themes overlap with the so-called five pillars of sustainable development, as outlined in the preamble of the 2030 Agenda, or the “5 P’s”: People, Planet, *Prosperity*, *Peace*, and Partnership, providing ample room for both dialogue and collaboration.

Social work

Social work is a value-based profession. As specified by Klos et al. (2022), the practice of social workers is grounded in values, principles, and ethics. Consequently, social work is deeply rooted in normative principles that guide its practice, objectives, and interactions. It is a profession fundamentally committed to social justice, human rights, the well-being of individuals and communities, service to others, respecting the dignity and worth of individuals, and maintaining integrity and competence (Peeters 2012; Chechak 2015; Blanz & Kolbeck 2022; Klos et al. 2022). Due to its foundations in social justice, equality, and fairness, Reamer (1994), a prominent scholar of social work ethics, characterised social work as ‘*the most normative of the so-called helping professions*’. Within the

South African context, Makhubele, Matlakala and Mabvurira (2018:103) suggested that 'ubuntu' should be included as a core value in social work. Ubuntu implies '... human interdependence as related to the norms of, and respect for, reciprocity, selflessness and symbiosis'.

According to the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), social workers must adhere to principles of human rights and social justice, which are central to their professional identity (IASSW & IFSW 2014; IFSW 2018; Blanz & Kolbeck 2022). This normative framework mandates that social workers advocate for marginalised and oppressed populations, addressing systemic inequalities that hinder their clients' well-being. The international definition of social work, as approved by the IFSW and the IASSW in July 2014, therefore supports the value-based nature of the profession (IASSW & IFSW 2014):

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

The ethical foundations of social work are encapsulated in various international and national codes of ethics. These codes serve as moral compasses for social workers, ensuring that their actions align with the core values of the profession. The first formalised codes of ethics were adopted in 1947 by the Delegate Conference of the American Association of Social Workers (Reamer 2006). In the South African context, the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) is the regulatory body entrusted with setting and maintaining standards of ethical practice for social service professionals (SACSSP 2007).

Professional standards and competencies further delineate the normative framework of social work. These standards are designed to ensure that social workers possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and values to perform their roles effectively and ethically. The Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession, developed by the IFSW and the IASSW, emphasise the importance of a

comprehensive education that integrates both theoretical and practical components (IFSW & IASSW 2020; Blanz & Kolbeck 2022).

Discussions on the meaning and central concerns of social work must hold the tension between the philosophical and the applied, as the profession's commitment to practical intervention is rooted in normative convictions regarding justice and human worth – or even the concept of the good life itself, which is one of the most basic philosophical questions (Martinez-Brawley & Zorita 2016:S7). Since many of the philosophical debates in social work have centred around the nature of and methods of generating scientific knowledge (Martinez-Brawley & Zorita 2016:S7–S9), it is important to note that our claim regarding the normative basis of social work does not imply an argument for any one epistemology over another, e.g., positivism or constructionism, or for a specific normative framework over another, e.g., justice over human worth. Instead, our approach emphasises normativity as expressions of value judgements, as opposed to approaches such as pragmatism or descriptivism, arguing that social work does not merely aim to understand a given social system but aims to influence it based on certain ideals, values, and principles. That being said, Martinez-Brawley and Zorita's review of thirty years of editorials in the journal *Social Work* has shown that the bulk of philosophical engagement has centred around the question of the social work profession in relation to the world of science. The authors concluded with a warning that the Flexner-induced obsession with scientific method has led to a reduction in philosophical questions concerned with meaning (Martinez-Brawley & Zorita 2016:S13).

Competencies in social work encompass a wide range of areas, including cultural competence, ethical decision-making, and advocacy. Cultural competence requires social workers to be aware of and sensitive to cultural differences, ensuring they provide culturally appropriate services (Sue 2006). Ethical decision-making involves navigating complex moral dilemmas, balancing the needs and rights of clients with professional and societal expectations (Banks 2012). Advocacy, a cornerstone of social work practice, involves championing the rights and interests of clients, particularly those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged (Teater 2014).

The normative framework of social work also necessitates a commitment to continuous professional development. Nissen et al. (2014) and Jivanjee et al. (2016) suggest that, as societal conditions and professional knowledge evolve, lifelong learning enables social workers to respond to consistently changing and complex environments, while substantiating their evidence-based practice within the context of an increasingly

expansive information landscape. This commitment to lifelong learning ensures that practitioners remain competent and effective in their roles (Tsui 2005).

Towards dialogue: The benefits of interdisciplinary engagement

Drawing from the previous sections, we will now offer a very brief discussion of four potential areas for further study. The goal is not to be exhaustive, but rather to suggest a few initial parameters within which future studies may unfold.

Linking economic and ecological dimensions with human flourishing

Social and ecological problems are often interlinked (Peeters 2012:5), with both impacting long-term economic well-being. Sustainable development theory has explicated this fact and demonstrated that sustaining life rests on the condition of balance between these three dimensions. Both theology and social work have tended to limit its mission to the human sphere, whether social or individual/spiritual, with attempts to incorporate the ecological dimension (e.g., Conradie 2010; 2014; Peeters 2012) increasingly emerging only since the 2000s. More recent policy documents within the fields of missiology (e.g., *Together Towards Life* [TTL]) (ed. Keum 2013) and social work (IFSW 2020) show the understanding that social, economic, and environmental issues are deeply interconnected to now be common to all three fields. This principle provides a common ground for social work, *diaconia*, and sustainable development to engage in collaborative efforts that recognise the complex interdependencies of the modern world.

A normative foundation for the dialogue between *diaconia* and sustainable development lies in the deep relationality that underpins both concepts. The 2030 Agenda, for instance, is rooted in the interconnectedness of systems, encompassing the social, economic, and environmental spheres, while also recognising how peace and partnerships influence these systems. This systemic thinking, with its inherent complexity, further highlights relationality through its focus on fostering relationships among diverse stakeholders and perspectives, particularly in collaborative governance. Sustainable development also emphasises the relationship between present, past, and future generations, captured in the principle that meeting the needs of current generations must not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Theology and *diaconia* have much to

contribute in terms of trinitarian thinking and its profound influence on missional ecclesiology.

Where policies do not reach: On the communal inner life and sustainable transformation

Much of the global effort surrounding the SDGs has been focused on policymaking and the sustained measurement of progress by assessing indicators based on such policies. The logic of the back-casting approach followed to derive these targets and indicators is clear and has given rise to the hope of large-scale change enacted across various contexts, making the idea of glocal transformation towards a sustainable future by 2030 sound attainable. The argument goes something like this: A clear picture of the world we want, informed by scientific understanding and models of the intersecting and interlinking nature of the world, as well as the impacts of human intervention, will deliver us the world we all desire through steady progress optimised by large-scale systems change.

Amidst the sluggish progress on the SDGs in a post-COVID world marked by rising conflicts and economic challenges, an increasing number of voices argue that deeper transformations are necessary. They contend that purely 'structural changes across all sectors of society' (Sachs et al. 2019:805) are insufficient to achieve the envisioned outcomes. Beyond renewed policies, it is suggested that sustainable futures hinge on shifts in mindsets and communal paradigms that drive changes in human behaviour (Shrivastava et al. 2020).

A striking example of this perspective is the *Inner Development Goals* (IDGs), an initiative that sees itself as not only aligned with the 2030 Agenda but also as enhancing progress on the SDGs by emphasising the cultivation of abilities, skills, and inner qualities necessary to address global challenges effectively. As articulated in its 2021 report:

The starting point for this initiative was a belief that there is a blind spot in our efforts to create a sustainable global society. We have accumulated much knowledge about environmental problems, climate change, poverty, public health, various social ills, etc. In UN's Agenda 2030 [*sic*] goals and targets have been formulated for 17 critically important areas relating to sustainability. We know a lot about conditions and causes, and there is also a lot of knowledge and ideas about what could and ought to be done. We have a vision of what needs to happen, but progress along this vision has been disappointing. The initiators

of the IDG project ... were motivated by a belief that what has been largely missing is a keen insight into what abilities, qualities or skills we need to foster among those individuals, groups and organizations that play crucial roles in working to fulfill [*sic*] the visions (Jordan 2021:3).

The point is that sustainable futures involve not only systems, models, and policies but also human beings. Religion plays a significant role in the paradigm shifts and changed mindsets necessary for sustainable development: 'Religious communities are crucial stakeholders for achieving these paradigm shifts because of their ability to act as agents of social change and to function as sources of knowledge' (Stork et al. 2022:775). The realm of deep motivational transformation that culminates in cultural change is precisely where religion operates, advocating for its role in fostering the collective inner transformations required for the implementation of the SDGs.

However, we cannot assume that religious transformations of cultural values will always support the social, economic, and environmental commitments of sustainable development. On the contrary, the introduction stated that issues such as gender inequality are often perpetuated by the stubborn persistence of cultural aversion to change, strengthened by religious convictions that an undesirable present is somehow sanctioned by divine will. Because of this very real risk, the dialogue between religious and other stakeholders must remain active and open to critique.

The prophetic voice

However brief the overview of the normative foundations of sustainable development, *diaconia* and social work was (section 2), it was sufficient to illustrate that individuals engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue from their various fields, or those participating in collaborative projects from their respective areas of practice, share significant overlap in the normative foundations underlying the three disciplines. While deeper worldviews, epistemologies, and motivations may differ, in most cases individuals should find that the shared language and values (e.g., justice, dignity) provide ample platforms for dialogue and collaboration, from which further learning from the various disciplines will naturally follow.

The prophetic calling to speak truth to power – urging individuals and communities toward repentance and transformed lives, even in the face of looming judgment – holds critical relevance in this context. Where

suffering persists, resources are misused, and the global commons is ravaged by structural greed, there is an urgent need to call communities to embrace simpler, more sustainable lifestyles. Several important themes emerge in this regard, all of which are highlighted in recent policy documents referenced in this chapter. These include *TTL* (ed. Keum 2013) in the field of missiology, *Social Work and the United Nations SDGs* from the social work domain (IFSW 2020), and the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN 2015).

- **Justice and Equity:** Across social, economic, and environmental dimensions, all these documents highlight the importance of justice. *TTL* frames justice within a theological context, whereas the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and *Social Work and the SDGs* articulate it through the lens of human rights and sustainable development.
- **Interconnectedness:** The understanding that social, economic, and environmental issues are deeply interconnected is central to all three documents. This principle provides common ground for social work, *diaconia*, and sustainable development to engage in collaborative efforts that recognise the complex interdependencies of the modern world. Although perhaps not immediately recognised as such, the conviction that deep relationality underlies reality constitutes a fundamental normative foundation for dialogue between *diaconia*, social work, and sustainable development. The *2030 Agenda* is grounded in the deep interconnectedness of systems, including the social, economic, and environmental spheres, as well as the recognition of how peace and partnership impact these systems. Due in part to the complexity resulting from this systemic thinking, relationality is further evident in sustainable development through its emphasis on relationships between diverse stakeholders and perspectives, including collaborative governance. Even the relationship between present, past, and future generations of human beings is emphasised in sustainable development through the dictum that the needs of current generations must not be met at the cost of future generations.
- **Solidarity and Participation:** The call for inclusive participation is echoed throughout the documents. The *2030 Agenda* and the IFSW document both emphasise multi-stakeholder partnerships, while *TTL* highlights the role of faith communities. This shared commitment to solidarity and participatory approaches underpins the potential for collaborative action across disciplines, particularly in local grassroots contexts where persistent systemic problems can be addressed through innovative partnerships.

- **Care for Creation:** The theological concept of stewardship in *TTL* resonates with the environmental goals of the *2030 Agenda* and the ecological focus of the IFSW document. This shared concern for the planet encourages a unified approach to ecological sustainability. The discussion of God's act of creation as part of the *missio Dei* is crucial in this context, to prevent God's soteriological initiative from being reduced to the spiritual or non-physical world.

While each discipline brings unique perspectives and strengths to the table, their shared commitment to justice, interconnectedness, and care for creation creates a strong foundation for dialogue and joint action.

Partnership and local impact: Faith-based organisations at work in implementing the SDGs

With over 80% of the world's population affiliated in some way with a religious community, and with faith-based organisations (FBOs) or communities being among the largest providers of social services globally, religious communities are indispensable in implementing sustainable development at the grassroots level. COVID-19 has illustrated how faith-based communities and FBOs act as first responders in providing both socio-psychological and physical relief during times of crisis. In South Africa, a two-year roundtable engagement with various religious leaders revealed the effectiveness of religious communities in caring for community members and administering government relief efforts, while also highlighting how the government's resistance to partner with faith communities frustrated these efforts, where collaboration could have multiplied their impact (Mapitsa 2022). Given the significant role that ecumenical networks and relations played during the pandemic as organising vehicles for interventions that supported communities, the report underscored the importance of establishing and strengthening such networks before a disaster strikes, while simultaneously equipping them for disaster response through appropriate training (Mapitsa 2022:13).

In Africa, one is sure to find religious groupings and spiritual infrastructure even where there are no schools or medical services. This positions religion as a resource for wide systemic change. With many of these religious communities already active in supporting their communities to the best of their abilities, large-scale education through the many free online options available could equip numerous believers to redesign their community service to optimise systemic impact – something that NGOs and sustainable development practitioners could provide expertise for.

However, faith communities at the grassroots level represent only one side of the coin. Most religions are also institutionalised within associative bodies that can engage ecumenically, not only with one another within a single faith but also between different faiths and with non-religious partners such as governments and the private sector. One form that such engagement might take is advocacy through ecumenical bodies like the WCC, which can assume a prophetic voice in its dealings with government on issues such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which stands to have one of the largest impacts on economic development on the continent. Ecumenical engagement could also involve pooling resources to conduct studies for the design and implementation of local interventions, including the critical aspect of peacebuilding, especially in contexts of violent religious extremism.

Conclusion

In an era of global crises – ranging from environmental degradation to deepening social inequalities – the intersection of social work, theology (specifically *diaconia*), and sustainable development becomes not just relevant but essential. Each discipline carries unique yet overlapping commitments to the well-being of individuals, communities, and the planet. By engaging in dialogue, these fields can coalesce around shared values and offer a holistic response to the challenges of our time. We submit that the shared language regarding normative foundations provides solid ground for broadening dialogue, collaboration, and partnership across borders – whether national, sectoral, ecclesial, or disciplinary.

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CAN ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP BE
REGARDED AS DIACONIA? A CRITICAL
INVESTIGATION OF THEOLOGICAL
ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS'
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
PROJECTS AND DIACONIA

Jacques W. Beukes

Introduction

Alongside teaching, learning, and research, engaged scholarship and community involvement are essential functions of South African universities (Hart, Daniels & September-Brown 2023). Universities are expected to fulfil social responsibilities, serving as anchors in their cities and regions by driving development within their geographical areas and advocating for social concerns (Saidi 2023). If these expectations are applied to universities, one can imagine the even greater expectations placed on theological institutions, seminaries, colleges, and related disciplines, which are guided by biblical and Christian values. The Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology at the University of South Africa (UNISA) has been actively involved in the Meal of Peace community engagement project for over a decade. The project seeks to develop interventions rooted in biblical principles such as peace, justice, marginalisation, vulnerability, and homelessness. Using Contextual Bible Studies (CBS) and Participation Action Research (PAR) methodologies, the project addresses specific challenges faced by homeless, marginalised, destitute, and vulnerable individuals in the

Tshwane city centre (Pretoria). This is done with homeless people living on the streets and in shelters.

The research critically examines the principles and practices of diaconia and community participation from both church and scholarly perspectives. It evaluates whether theologically engaged scholarship within academic institutions can be regarded as diaconia. Furthermore, it examines the complexities of defining a diaconal identity in a secular, pluralistic, and globalised world, bringing this challenge to the forefront of the discussion.

The Meal for Peace project

This *Meal of Peace* project is a community engagement initiative led by the staff of the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, engaging with homeless individuals in the city of Tshwane (Pretoria). Homelessness refers to relocation (displacement), severe kinds of vulnerability, disenfranchisement, and the absence of access to sustainable means of livelihood, whether housing, employment, sanitation, social networks, or education.

This *Meal of Peace* project collaborates with the Tshwane Leadership Foundation (TLF) and the Homeless Forum, forming a long-standing partnership aimed at improving the lives of homeless individuals in the inner city of Tshwane (Mashau & Kritzing 2014:15). This research initiative seeks to create solutions grounded in biblical values such as peace, justice, marginalisation, vulnerability, and homelessness. Interventions are implemented using CBS as a methodological approach to address the challenges faced by homeless, disadvantaged, poor, and vulnerable individuals in the Tshwane city centre (Pretoria). However, it must be emphasised that justice is not fully served if the project is limited to Bibles Studies and shared meals. To address this, additional components of the *Meal of Peace* project include the establishment of a bursary fund for homeless individuals to pursue tertiary education at UNISA. During the 2014 community engagement encounter, it became evident that many homeless young people were already studying at UNISA for various qualifications (Mashau & Kritzing 2014:15). The bursary fund is just one concrete way of empowering homeless people to find employment and develop their skills.

Another significant and far-reaching outcome of the *Meal of Peace* project is the series of summits and stakeholder meetings where the City of Tshwane's local government homeless policy is evaluated and revised.

These consultations involve representatives of homeless individuals, local government departments, and various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and faith-based organisations (FBOs) active in this field. These collaborative efforts aim to develop a comprehensive strategy for the City of Tshwane to address and ultimately eradicate homelessness in the community.

This project is a third-generation exercise in terms of David Korten's different "generations" of development theory (Korten 1990:115–123; cf. Beukes & Plaatjies van Huffel 2016:228; Mashau & Kritzinger 2014:16). First-generation projects can be characterised as charity (to give people fish), second-generation projects teach people how to fish for themselves, and third-generation projects involve lobbying authorities (alongside those learning to catch fish) to advocate for changes in existing legislation and policies that exclude or oppress homeless people (Korten 1990: 115–123; cf. Beukes & Plaatjies van Huffel 2016: 228; Mashau & Kritzinger 2014:16). As a third-generation project, the aim is to combat local inertia, which is maintained by structures that centralise resource control, keeping essential services out of reach for the poor and perpetuating corruption and exploitation. There is a pressing need for a policy and institutional environment that facilitates, rather than limits, sustainable and inclusive local development actions. Therefore, the third-generation approach strives for changes in policies and institutions at local, national, and global levels (Korten 1990:121; Beukes & Plaatjies van Huffel 2016:228). This approach argues that ordinary people cannot enjoy the dividends of development unless newly formed policies incorporate development from the local level. Nevertheless, this process is long and slow, as it takes time to achieve the necessary transformation of institutions. Consequently, the personnel of the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History, and Missiology engage in lobbying authorities alongside the homeless, promoting changes in current legislation and practices that marginalise or oppress those who are homeless.

What is in a name? Engaged scholarship and or community engagement

The Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology at UNISA participates in the *Meal for Peace* project in response to the requirement for higher education institutions (HEIs) to engage with their communities. Additionally, the project provides an opportunity for the department to apply theology in practice, integrating theory and praxis.

Various literature (Nicotera, et al. 2011; Paynter 2014) and definitions highlight overlapping principles and factors in conceptualising engaged scholarship, community engagement, and community development.

Community engagement has emerged as an unofficial movement in higher education, with terms such as ‘the engaged campus’, ‘civic engagement’, and ‘the public good’ commonly found in institutional mission statements (Nicotera et al. 2011:37). However, engaged scholarship extends beyond mere community service (Paynter 2014:57). While it can be seen as a form of service, it must be distinguished from simply performing good works within a community, as it encompasses far more (cf. Paynter 2014:49). The UNISA Policy Document on Community Engagement defines ‘community engagement’ as:

...the scholarly activity of academic research and teaching that involves external communities and stakeholders in collaborative activities that address the socioeconomic imperatives of South Africa and the African continent while also enriching the teaching, learning and research objectives of the university (UNISA 2013:3; cf. Botha 2015:1)

Based on this definition, the thesis of this chapter argues that any ‘donation of time and/or resources by UNISA employees ... to benefit a community’ can only be regarded as community engagement if a clear and demonstrable organic link exists between the two (UNISA 2013:33). The term ‘organic link’ refers to the genuine reciprocity and collaboration between the academy and the community in the co-creation of new knowledge (Botha 2015:1).

However, such engagement can also be considered secular if Christianity does not serve as the foundational or motivational factor for involvement.

Diaconia: Principles and goals in a nutshell

The discussion begins with an overview of the origin of the word ‘diaconia’. The Greek word from which diaconia is derived, ‘*διακονία*’ (diaconia), is directly translated into English as ‘ministry’ (Billmounce Greek Dictionary 2023), implying the provision of some form of service. The verb form, ‘*διακονέω*’, is translated as ‘I serve’ (Rollinson 2011:76). Another related noun, ‘*διάκονος*’, is translated by Rollinson (2011:17) as ‘deacon’, means ‘servant’, a role commonly found in Christian churches,

where deacons are typically responsible for caring and nurturing within the congregation. Breed (2014:3) highlights yet another related term, ‘*diakonoï*’, which signifies an act of service performed as an obedient response to God’s instructions. This aligns with the perspective of Nel et al. (2021:9–14), who describe the church’s mission as a channel for sharing God’s love and the gospel. These actions are meant to act as a channel to share the love of God and the Gospel. Acts of *diaconia* are not only directed inward, toward the church community, but also outward, reaching the broader community surrounding congregations and FBOs.

Originating in the New Testament, the term was coined in 19th-century Germany to describe churches’ social practices, particularly their care for the poor and the marginalised in the context of the fundamental inequalities and social rifts brought about by industrialisation in 19th-century Western Europe (Nordstokke 2020; Öhlmann 2023:6). The term ‘*diaconia*’ was used almost exclusively in relation to domestic affairs until the middle of the 20th century. *Diaconia* was part of what was considered the ‘Inner Mission’, i.e., service by the church and Christians within national borders (Öhlmann 2023:6). However, Leer-Helgesen (2018:150; Öhlmann 2023:6) argues that until the 1980s and 1990s, *diaconia* was primarily understood as humble and silent service or charity.

We have become accustomed to the idea that *diaconia*, as a term, expresses the actions and service of the church, reflecting its identity and mission within faith communities. Consequently, the church is called to provide and empower. Both imperatives are motivated by the church’s identity, rooted in what Christ did and how he lived during his time on earth. So, what is the church? How did Christ embody *diaconia*? Was it through an institutional church or as an individual? He certainly did not operate within the framework of an institutional church.

The Australian scholar John N. Collins has demonstrated that this reading is based on a misinterpretation. After studying numerous Greek texts from the period when the New Testament was written, he concluded that ‘*diakonia*’ is never used to mean charitable or humble service. Rather, it denotes an honourable task or a mission assigned to a person, such as an envoy, spokesperson, or ‘go-between’ entrusted with important tidings. In other instances, it refers to a mediator, a person given a commission on behalf of someone in authority, fulfilling a vital task (Collins 1990:194). With this in mind, Collins examines all biblical passages containing the ‘*diak*’-word, concluding that none refer to services for the sick and poor (Collins 2002:27-85). When related to Jesus, it pertains to his Messianic mandate ‘to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mk 10:45); in other words,

as Saviour, he fulfils the mission given to him by the Father. Similarly, the Apostle Paul writes about his 'diaconia' as the ministry in which he takes pride (Rom 11:13) and which is 'received in the Lord' (Col 4:17). In some instances, deacons are referred to as a specific order of ministry (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8). Still, in none of these passages are there any indications that they are responsible for charity work; rather, they seem to be designated to assist the bishop (Nordstokke 2020:180–181; Collins 1990). This reinterpretation of the biblical meaning of 'diaconia' broadens the scope of understanding. 'Diaconia' presents new perspectives on this term, which can serve as a point of reference when elaborating a theology of diaconia (Nordstokke, 2011:41–47).

Nordstokke (2014:171) helps us further understand what diaconia means by providing the secular equivalent for the term '*social action*'. The focus of this type of action is to help those who have physical needs that they cannot meet themselves. In the theological sense, where diaconia comes into play, these needs can also be spiritual. This means that the needs of people are being met through actions or programmes typically found in churches. It includes activities such as counselling, praying, and sermons, etc. Nordstokke (2014:171) states that these acts help congregations and faith communities discover '*what we are and what we do as Christians*'.

Swart (2013:6–10) contributes to this conversation by introducing the idea that diaconia can take place in two ways, which should be considered concurrently. The first is diaconia for the primary community of the congregations, meaning that the congregation is being served and has its needs met by the church, whether physical or spiritual. The second is diaconia, which addresses communities that are easily forgotten; for Swart (2013:6–10), this refers to society's poor and marginalised individuals.

The lecturers involved in this project also serve the church as religious leaders, pastors, ministers of Word and Sacraments, and reverends. Although we might argue that these lecturers are not participating in this project as representatives of the institutional church or congregations, we can certainly contend that they are engaged as individual Christian citizens with a common purpose and goal.

It was previously noted that many religious communities have long been involved in caring for the marginalised and transforming society. In the Protestant Christian tradition, one important concept underpinning and describing the social work of churches is the concept of 'diaconia'.

The goal of diaconia should be to foster transformation so that communities can eventually sustain themselves without relying on charity and generosity. Nordstokke (2014:185–186) supports this view by

saying that the outcome of diaconia should be empowerment. This raises the question: can engaged scholarship be regarded as diaconia?

Engaged scholarship by Christian theologians and diaconia: Two sides of the same coin?

Earlier, I mentioned the overlapping definitions of *engaged scholarship*, *community engagement*, and *community development*. I also noted that, without a Christian foundation, these concepts are often considered secular in many circles. But what about the field of theology and community development? For instance, I graduated with a PhD in Practical Theology, specialising in Community Development.

The fields of theology and development, and more broadly, religion and development, primarily investigate these issues with a focus on the Global South and within the discursive framework of development concepts. Meanwhile, diaconal studies have traditionally adopted a Christian perspective and have historically concentrated on the Global North (Öhlmann 2023:1). The field of diaconal studies is now challenged by increasing religious pluralism and is under pressure to incorporate perspectives from the Global South, especially in light of the decline of Christian church membership in the Global North, while the Global South is experiencing the opposite trend.

Diaconal studies, the study of Christian social practice as an academic field, emerged in the European context mainly in the second half of the 20th century. It has its roots in the 19th-century diaconal movement (Nordstokke 2020), which led to the institutionalisation and professionalisation of church-based social care and services during the 19th century and into the 20th century. Initially emerging as a sub-discipline of Protestant theology, the field has broadened and drawn on other disciplines, such as management studies and social work, leading to a debate on whether diaconal studies can be considered a sub-discipline of theology or should be regarded as a transdisciplinary field of its own. The focus of diaconal studies has primarily been on the Global North, particularly Germany and the Scandinavian countries; only recently have perspectives from and on the Global South entered the field significantly.

There have been recent conceptual advances regarding diaconia. A new framework of ecumenical diaconia has emerged, providing important impulses to diaconal studies as the study of Christian social practice from a global perspective (Öhlmann 2023:2). Both fields share the same object of inquiry, namely the social impact of religion. While the former field

approaches this with a primary perspective on the Global South through the conceptual lens of development, the latter focuses mainly on the contribution of churches to social services in Europe.

Moreover, several current overlaps can be identified, such as the intertwined nature of the religion and development and diaconia debates in the Global South, the relationship between the religious and the secular in religious and social practice, their shared nature as fields of applied research marked by a close relationship with practice, and the debate on FBOs (Öhlmann 2023:2). Improving people's lives, caring for marginalised individuals and communities, providing social services, and facilitating social transformation have long been important aspects in South Africa from a theological point of view, whether regarded as diaconia, Christian social practice, transformation (and theology/religion), or community development (and theology).

Accordingly, Nordstokke (2013:290) adds that *diaconia* is both congregational, ecumenical, local, and global because 'the misery of distant places has been brought near to us'. Recent problems of natural disasters (like cyclones) and pandemics (i.e., COVID-19) exposed the indispensability of *diaconia* as a missionary discipline that needs internal and external attention (Tagwirei 2023:2).

The German scholar Öhlmann (2023:13–14) emphasised that the separation of discourses on theology/religion, development, and the field of diaconal studies is a phenomenon of the Global North. In the Global South, however, these discourses go hand in hand. An example of this can be found in the South African academic landscape, where discourses on religion and development, theology and development, and diaconia are closely intertwined and sometimes even used interchangeably (Bowers du Toit 2016, fn. 1). This is exemplified in the works of scholars such as Ignatius Swart (2021; Swart et al. 2022), Nadine Bowers du Toit (2016; 2019), Simanga Kumalo (2014; 2015), Jacques Beukes (2019; Beukes & Beukes 2023), and John Klaasen, among many others.

An example from practice is the Latin American Protestant Foundation, the diaconia and development wing of the Evangelical Church of the River Plate, which uses diaconia and development almost interchangeably, as the website illustrates: "Diaconia that transforms ... we work for social and environmental development in Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay" (Hora de Hobar, 2021). Lastly, the significant overlap between discussions on ecumenical diaconia and theology/religion and development – particularly from Global South perspectives – is exemplified in the recent *International Handbook on Ecumenical Diakonia* (eds. Ampony et al.

2021). Many chapters on the Global South could just as easily be featured in an international handbook on theology/religion and development.

Diaconia identity in a secular and pluralistic society challenged?

Various Christian denominations use different concepts to explain their biblical mandate to be involved in society. Concepts such as *Christian social practice*, *community development from a theological perspective*, *diaconia*, *ecumenical diaconia*, *evangelism*, *inner-mission*, *integral mission*, *missional diaconia*, *religion and development*, *social action*, *social change*, *social ministry*, *theology and development*, *transformation*, *transformational development*, and *transformational diaconia* are employed to describe Christian involvement in society.

Regardless of the terminology, diaconal identity faces significant challenges within a secular, pluralistic global context. While the study of diaconia pertains to the uniqueness of diaconal services and the religious identity associated with them, a pertinent question arises: what aspect of these social services is distinctly Christian? (Öhlmann 2023:11). When examining these terms from a Christian perspective, across different denominations, we must consider what is unique or what significance a name holds. Particularly in a context where various religious and non-religious social service providers compete, diaconal services must operate and compete according to market standards. In a pluralistic religious society, the impulses, motivations, justifications, and initiatives for providing assistance and solidarity to those in need are increasingly less overtly derived from the Christian environment.

Concluding remarks

Back to the question: can the theologically engaged scholarship of academic institutions be regarded as diaconia? For Nordstokke (2020:171), it can be perceived as secular, lacking the ability to express the distinct Christian nature of such actions. But what if the role players or participants were Christian? What if the department, although not a church per se, is considered Christian? What if the motivation for undertaking an action is derived from a Christian perspective, even within the context of higher education? What if the methodology is Christian, such as CBS? Öhlmann (2023:14) aids in this discussion by stating that the subject matter of diaconal studies should not be limited to phenomena that are

explicitly marked as diaconia or ecumenical diaconia. The terminology of diaconia is not universally used across different contexts, churches, or even religious communities. However, the content of the religious social practice described under the banner of diaconia is applicable across various contexts and religious communities. It constitutes an important and coherent object of study.

Suppose we accept the proposition that religion and religious communities impact society, and that a significant theme of the contemporary religious resurgence is the aim of religious communities to bring about change in the world (Hegland 1987a; 1987b). In that case, this engagement of religion in society merits specific academic attention. The study of diaconia in Europe could benefit substantially from incorporating international perspectives and the ideas of transformation and development. The international debates on faith-based and rights-based diaconia, along with the relationship between spirituality and service in secular, religious, and religiously pluralistic contexts, have much to offer diaconal reflection in Europe. This could broaden the understanding of diaconal reflection beyond notions of assistance and aid. Moreover, the discipline could further expand its perspective beyond the current main focus on the European context (Ohlmann 2023:15).

The overarching theme of inquiry in this field would be the impact and role of religion in society, which is deliberately broad and not limited to specific expressions of religion, social service, or particular contexts. It would certainly include institutionalised religion but would not be limited to organisational perspectives. It would encompass notions of lived religion and the perspective of 'what the members do' (Klaasen 2020:122) as individuals and as communities, at local, national, and international levels. The scope of inquiry would encompass the micro, meso, and macro levels. If we can view diaconia from this angle, engaged scholarship from a theological department or faculty might be regarded as diaconia. Based on what I have argued so far, we might arrive at two answers to this question: a Global North answer and a Global South answer. The response from the Global North (No-Yes-Yes) would be: 'No, it does not belong to the church; Yes, if the help is provided by Christian-motivated personnel; Yes, even if the religious origin of the aid is no longer necessarily recognisable' (cf. Eurich 2024). The answer from the Global South would be Yes-Yes-Yes.

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AFTERWORD

THE IMPORTANCE OF A FRAMEWORK TO ALIGN THE UNDERSTANDINGS

Sean Esterhuizen & Johannes Knoetze

It is a pleasure to present this special publication, featuring selected papers from our 2024 conference, 'Diaconal/Diaconate Identities in a Pluralistic African Society: Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Opportunities and Challenges'. The conference brought together researchers, scholars, and practitioners from across Africa and Europe. Together, they explored developments in the field of diaconal studies, exchanged innovative ideas, and shared practical insights. This volume showcases some of the most impactful contributions presented at the event.

In *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Daniel L. Migliore (2014:230) wrote: "The task of theology is to continue the journey of faith seeking understanding by "beginning again and again at the beginning". For Christians, this beginning is the living Lord Jesus Christ, whose story is told in Scripture, enlivened by the Spirit, summarised in the church's rule of faith, and retold by faithful believers across different cultural idioms, times, and places.

This raises a profound question: How does the church continuously return to the beginning to follow the living Christ in ever-changing cultural, temporal, and geographic contexts? The dynamic nature of faith calls for thoughtful reflection, especially in light of significant Christian, political, and socio-economic shifts that have shaped the ministry of the church.

In Africa, diverse religious landscapes have led to both church growth and instances of decline. Globally, wars in Ukraine and the Middle East have had political and socio-economic repercussions that directly or indirectly affect Southern Africa, including the church's diaconal ministries. These ministries, often focused on serving the most vulnerable

and marginalised, face growing challenges in regions marked by deep poverty and inequality.

At the same time, the church in Southern Africa and beyond has experienced a notable transformation: a decline in membership within traditional mainline missionary churches, the proliferation of African Independent/Initiated Churches (AICs), and a significant rise in Pentecostalism. These shifts provoke an essential question: How do these developments influence and enrich our understanding of diaconia?

In a world characterised by ‘post-’ contexts – post-colonial Africa, post-modernity, post-apartheid South Africa, and post-Christendom Europe – faith communities are increasingly rediscovering the importance of intentional and communal Christian practices. This renewed focus has heightened interest in diaconia, not only as a foundational ministry of the church but also as a missional practice that engages and sustains faith communities.

As an essential aspect of the church’s mission, diaconia involves the entire people of God, transcending the specific roles of elected deacons or social work professionals. Today, many Christians are embracing diaconia as a central calling, embodying God’s mission in the world through acts of service, justice, and compassion.

Although a few recent publications on diaconia have emerged, primarily from Europe, there remains a significant gap in studies focusing specifically on diaconia within the African context and theology from Africa. Much of the academic literature addressing poverty, the poor, and other diaconal-related topics in Africa tends to centre on development or sustainable development. Frequently, these works take the form of ‘how-to’ manuals. It is against this background that we believe this book makes a contribution.

While acknowledging that diaconia encompasses both scholarly/theological and programmatic dimensions, the authors particularly attend to the theological foundations underpinning diaconal ministry in Africa. The chapters reflect the rich diversity of research and critical thinking within the field of Practical Theology and Mission studies.

A recurring theme throughout these chapters is the urgent need to standardise the understanding and application of diaconia within the African context. Such standardisation would involve developing an integrated framework that defines the core principles and practices of diaconia while remaining flexible to the unique regional contexts across the continent.

A well-defined framework could strengthen the church’s mission,

foster greater collaboration across theological and denominational traditions, and bring clarity and consistency to diaconal ministry. However, this endeavour requires a nuanced approach that considers the diverse contexts in which diaconia is practiced. It also calls for ongoing dialogue among Christian communities to ensure that the process of standardisation enriches rather than restricts the church's service to the world.

One potential starting point is the framework outlined in the publication *Called to Transformation* by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and others, which was frequently referenced. This publication provides a valuable baseline that can be adapted and built upon to serve the unique needs of diaconal ministry in Africa.

Johannes Eurich observed that the increasing pluralisation of European society is presenting significant challenges to the church and its diaconal ministry in many countries. He noted a decline in church membership in traditionally 'Christianised' nations, contrasted by an increase in membership in the Global South. However, this growth brings its own complexities. Many church and faith-based non-profit organisations in Europe are now employing fewer church-affiliated workers, with a growing number of non-Christian employees filling these roles.

Stéphan van der Watt offered critical insights into the false dichotomy often drawn between mission and compassionate service, or diaconia. He argued that this dualism, typical of pietistic evangelical circles, limits the scope of ministry. The Bible, he emphasised, teaches both evangelism and sociopolitical involvement as essential aspects of the church's mission. Yet, this dualistic thinking has constrained the diaconia of the DRC to mere acts of compassion. Citing David Bosch, he underscored the importance of a holistic approach: *'The deed without the word is dumb; the word without the deed is empty'*.

John Aitchison addressed the need to restore the distinctive role of the diaconate within the church. He called for clarity in its purpose, the elimination of prejudices surrounding it, and either an extension of the transitional diaconate or the creation of separate ordinations. He emphasised the importance of teaching about the nature of diaconia and the distinctive diaconate, improving discernment and training processes, and adapting church organisations and leadership structures to better support this ministry over time.

Nioma Venter identified a pressing issue within the Reformed churches in South Africa, particularly the Dutch Reformed family of churches: the fragmentation of diaconal efforts. She described how congregational

ministries and church-affiliated social welfare organisations often operate as parallel structures, with minimal collaboration. This siloed approach undermines the effectiveness of diaconal work and highlights the need for greater integration and cooperation.

Gideon van der Watt brought attention to the ongoing debate surrounding the vocabulary of diaconia, noting the absence of a clear and universally accepted definition. He emphasised that diaconia is more than a functional term; it is a theological concept that reflects the very identity and mission of the church, as articulated by the LWF. Functionally, diaconia is described as a call to action, a response to human suffering, injustice, and the care of creation. Theologically, it is part of the church's essence – what Dietrich describes as 'the church's body language', lending credibility to its message. Van der Watt also drew on Nordstokke and Jørgensen's description of diaconia as '*the caring ministry of the Church. It is the Gospel in action, expressed through loving your neighbor, creating inclusive communities, caring for creation, and struggling for justice*'.

From these and other contributions, it is evident that a framework for diaconia must address these diverse yet interconnected challenges. Many of the ideas presented at the conference suggest the need for an integrated approach, one that defines the core principles of diaconia while allowing for flexibility to address the unique contexts in which it is practiced. Such a framework would not only enrich the church's mission but also foster greater collaboration and consistency across traditions and denominations.

Proposed framework for diaconia: Key components

This outline highlights the key components of a possible framework for diaconia in the African context:

1. Theological Foundation

A robust theological foundation is essential to guide diaconal practice:

- **Biblical basis:** Anchor the framework in Scripture, identifying key passages that inform and inspire the practice of diaconia.
- **Christological focus:** Emphasise Jesus Christ as the ultimate servant and embodiment of diaconia, underscoring the call for Christians to imitate (and incarnate) his example in service to others.
- **Ecclesiological perspective:** Define diaconia as integral to the church's mission and identity, central to the life and witness of the Christian community.

2. Core Principles

The following principles form the heart of diaconia:

- Service and compassion: Affirm diaconia as a ministry of service, especially to the marginalised, rooted in love, compassion, and justice.
- Holistic approach: Encourage a holistic perspective, addressing physical, emotional, spiritual, and social needs, recognising their interconnectedness in human well-being.
- Inclusivity and justice: Ensure diaconia serves all people without discrimination, while advocating for justice as a foundational aspect of Christian service.

3. Functional Guidelines

Practical guidelines are necessary for the effective implementation of diaconia:

- Defining roles: Clearly delineate the roles of those involved in diaconia, including ordained deacons, laity, volunteers, and church organisations, emphasising shared responsibility across the church.
- Types of diaconal work: Identify and categorise forms of diaconal work, such as social services, advocacy, pastoral care, community development, and emergency relief, with actionable guidelines for each area.
- Standards of practice: Establish ethical and professional standards to ensure accountability, transparency, and effectiveness in service delivery.

4. Contextual Adaptation

Diaconia must adapt to diverse cultural and social contexts:

- Cultural sensitivity: Foster sensitivity to local cultures, traditions, and social structures, ensuring that diaconal practices engage meaningfully with communities.
- Local needs assessment: Provide tools and guidelines for assessing local needs and resources, tailoring initiatives to specific challenges and opportunities.
- Flexible application: Create a framework that is flexible enough to accommodate various contexts – urban and rural, socio-economic diversity, and different governmental regulations – while upholding core values and objectives.

5. Ecumenical Collaboration

Collaboration among Christian traditions enriches and strengthens diaconal ministry:

- **Shared vision:** Promote a shared vision of diaconia across denominations, fostering unity and cooperation in service.
- **Dialogue and mutual learning:** Encourage ongoing dialogue and mutual learning between traditions, enhancing diaconia through diverse perspectives and practices.

6. Education and Formation

Education is crucial for equipping those engaged in diaconia:

- **Training programmes:** Develop standardised and context-specific training programmes that focus on theological education, practical skills, and leadership development.
- **Theological reflection:** Integrate diaconia into theological education, ensuring that clergy and laity alike grasp its significance and application.
- **Continuing education:** Provide ongoing opportunities for formation and professional development to support the growth of diaconal practitioners.

Benefits of a diaconia framework

- **Consistency:** A framework contributes to a unified understanding and practice of diaconia across diverse contexts, reducing confusion and fragmentation.
- **Enhanced collaboration:** By providing a (common) structure, the framework fosters collaboration among churches, organisations, and communities, enabling more coordinated and impactful service.
- **Improved effectiveness:** Clear guidelines and standards enhance the effectiveness of diaconal work, ensuring it is conducted in a professional, ethical, and impactful manner.
- **Adaptability:** The emphasis on contextual adaptation ensures the framework remains relevant in diverse settings, making it a valuable tool for the global church.

Key questions addressed by a diaconia framework

- Emerging forms of diaconia: What new expressions of diaconia are arising in response to contemporary challenges?
- Innovative approaches: How can the church innovate in its approach to diaconia, particularly in areas such as digital ministry, environmental justice, and social entrepreneurship?
- Anticipating future needs: How can we foresee and respond to emerging needs and opportunities in diaconia?
- Societal trends: What societal trends or changes should the church monitor, and how can we proactively address them through diaconia?
- Role of technology: What role does technology play in the future of diaconia, and how can we leverage it to enhance reach and effectiveness while addressing its limitations and ethical implications?

Challenges of implementation

- Cultural and contextual differences: Balancing standardisation with contextual adaptation poses challenges, as different cultures and contexts may necessitate varied approaches to diaconia.
- Denominational variations: Achieving consensus across Christian denominations, each with distinct theological emphases and practices, may prove difficult.
- Resource disparities: Implementing a standardised framework in areas with limited resources requires innovative solutions to ensure accessibility and sustainability.

Conclusion

Creating a diaconia framework involves developing a comprehensive yet flexible structure that guides Christian service across diverse contexts and traditions. By establishing core theological principles alongside mechanisms for contextual adaptation, such a framework can unify and strengthen the church's diaconal ministry, as well as relationships with NGOs.

While challenges remain – particularly in navigating cultural, denominational, and resource-based differences – the potential benefits of enhanced collaboration, consistency, and effectiveness make this endeavour crucial for the global Christian community.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the authors for their dedication

in contributing to this publication. It is our hope that this publication will serve as a valuable resource for readers and a testament to the vibrancy and significance of ongoing research in diaconia. We look forward to witnessing how the ideas and findings presented here will shape the future of the church and its ministry, particularly in Africa.



Johannes J. Knoetze is a Full Professor in Mission Studies at the University of Pretoria. He holds a Doctoral Divinitatis (DD) in Missiology from the University of Pretoria and previously served as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church of Southern Africa. His research focuses on Missional Diaconate in Africa, particularly among millennials and in poverty alleviation, as well as theological education. Knoetze is an NRF-rated researcher and a member of several academic associations, including SAMS, SPTSA, IAMS, and ReDi. He also serves as a board member of NetACT Africa.

Jacques W. Beukes is an Associate Professor in Christian Spirituality at UNISA. He holds a PhD in Practical Theology with a focus on Community Development from Stellenbosch University. His research areas include diaconia, theology and development, eco-diaconia, spirituality, and youth ministry. An NRF-rated researcher, Beukes has published extensively in his field and serves on the editorial board of *Religion and Development*. He is also a board member of ReDi and a member of academic societies such as SAMS, SPTSA, IAPT, and IASYM.



In the heart of South Africa's dynamic and diverse society: *DIACONIA – Acts, understandings, and stories of service in a pluralistic South Africa* delves into the church's call to serve amidst deep-seated socioeconomic, political, and historical challenges. This book explores diaconia – Christian service – as a transformative force addressing poverty, inequality, social exclusion, corruption, and environmental crises. It does so through a rich tapestry of theological reflections, empirical studies, and real-life narratives that illuminate the power of faith-driven engagement.

Bringing together voices from across Africa and Europe, the book stems from a groundbreaking conference that examined diaconal identities in a pluralistic African context. The contributions span historical perspectives, contemporary challenges, and practical models of service, offering fresh insights into the role of the church in a post-apartheid, post-Christendom society.

Engaging with diaconia as an act of faith that transcends religious boundaries, *DIACONIA* is essential reading for theologians, practitioners, policymakers, and faith-based organisations seeking to understand and embody Christian social action in a rapidly changing world.



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