

FINAL DRAFT (Participants)

Theological Perspectives on Diakonia in the Twenty First Century

From the Conference jointly organized by Justice and Diakonia, Just and Inclusive Communities, and Mission and Evangelism programmes of the World Council of Churches in Colombo, Sri Lanka, June 2-6, 2012

This theological reflection is intentionally inductive – contextual and experiential. The 50 participants involved in various diaconal initiatives in about 25 countries brought with them some hard questions as well as insights on new possibilities, arising out of their engagement in the lives of the marginalised people. They put forth some of the following challenges to be taken into account in this reflection on Diakonia in the Twenty First Century. These were: the institutionalization of injustice, particularly in the present regime of neo-liberal economic globalization; the reality of climate change and its impact; wars and conflicts and the consequent destruction, trauma, and broken relationships; the fragmentation of communities due to aggressive assertion of religious and ethnic identities; the dispossession and displacement of vulnerable people; the violence against many sections of society, especially of women, children, people with disabilities, and the aged; malnutrition, disease and the HIV and Aids pandemic; and the marginalization of ethnic and religious minorities, Indigenous peoples, the Afro-descendent communities, the Dalits in South Asia, and others discriminated for various reasons.

Sri Lanka, a nation ravaged by prolonged war and conflict, struggling to find possibilities for healing and hope, was the context of this conference. The conference was hosted by the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka that represented the witness of churches - small, fragmented and on the margins with limited space for public engagement, yet striving hard to be healers and reconcilers. The conference, therefore, opted to look at diakonia from three specific vantage points as elaborated below:

First, it pursued its reflection by holding diakonia as a primary expression of the churches' participation in the ongoing mission of God. This option was to assert that churches are not to be exclusive, inward looking religious communities, but have a calling to be engaged in the world. The event also responded to the common tendency to view and pursue diakonia in institutional forms and to respond to only those challenges that these forms would allow.

Second, it attempted to re-imagine diakonia from the vantage point of those who are, in many cases, traditionally considered recipients or as objects of churches' diakonia - the vulnerable and marginalized communities. Besides the theological reasons, this option was to search for more people-based and less resource-intensive forms of diakonia, arising out of their aspirations, and in doing so to ensure their agency in redefining diakonia in today's world. It was also to suggest a possible shift in churches' approach from patronizing interventions to catalytic accompaniment.

And third, in view of the fact that many of the current models of diakonia were shaped by the perceptions and preferences of the churches in the geo-political north, the conference wanted to explore what diakonia would be when seen from the vantage point of the global South where the dynamics of life are radically different. Incidentally, more Christians live in the South, mostly as fragmented minority communities, often in hostile contexts, as socially and economically marginalized, and amidst intense struggles for life. This preference for the South does not imply that the global North does not have these challenges or possibilities as mentioned above. Neither does it mean a rejection of the contributions of churches in the North towards diakonia and this reflection. This was deliberately opted for, in view of the variety of life-expressions as well as Christian

expressions that the South offers, and in an effort to address some of the complex questions arising there about human predicament, and the fate and future of the earth.

The following is the summary of their reflections on the theme as seen from the vantage points as mentioned above:

I. Church, Mission and Diakonia

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you...” (Jn.20:21)

1. God’s mission is for the realisation of God’s vision for the world, a world in which ‘God rejoices because there shall no more be the sound of weeping, or the cry of distress, where people shall not die young, where people build houses and live in them and enjoy the fruits of their labour, where people will not die of calamities, and where the aggressors are transformed so that all shall live in peace.’ (Isa.65:17-25) This eschatological hope of a “new heaven and earth” (Rev.21:1) is not passive but constantly breaks into our present, inviting people to become co-workers with God by realising it in every here and now. This mission of God is dynamic and inclusive of all people and forces that uphold the sanctity and integrity of God’s creation.
2. The Church, as a community called into being through baptism and lead by the Holy Spirit, participates in this mission through its very being, proclamation and service. Commonly understood as service, diakonia is a way of living out its faith and hope as a community, witnessing to what God has done in Jesus Christ.
3. Through its diakonia, the Church witnesses to God’s purpose in Jesus Christ and participates in God’s mission. In its diakonia, the Church follows the way of its Servant Lord who claimed that he came to serve and not to be served (Mk.10:45). In Christ, the Church is called to hold forth the power of service over the power of domination, so that life, in all its fullness, may be possible for all. Therefore, the church presents itself not only as a sign of the coming reign of God but also of the way towards it, the Christ’s way.
4. As a diaconal community, the church is called to live out its Christian witness both at local and larger as well as personal and corporate levels. This is to be reflected in all the different expressions of being Church: in worship and proclamation, in practices of hospitality and visitation (Heb. 13:1-3), in public witness and advocacy. As “liturgy after the liturgy” – empowered by what faith celebrates - diakonia involves actions of care, relief and service, but goes further and addresses the root causes of injustice embedded in oppressive systems and structures. Sustained action for justice is upheld by our faith in and allegiance to the God of life when faced with the death-dealing powers of Empire.
5. Every Christian community in every geo-political and socio-economic context is called to be a diaconal community, witnessing to God’s transforming grace through acts of service that hold forth the promise of God’s reign. It heals relationships, and nurtures partnerships for the sake of God’s good creation. In bringing people and

communities together around issues of life and of justice and peace, diakonia stands out as a reason for unity and as such also needs to be seen as its instrument. As an expression of participation in God's mission in the world, diakonia is beyond all parochial interests or the agenda of religious propagation.

6. Some of the larger institutional expressions of diakonia must be affirmed for their role in enabling human resource development, meeting human need in crisis situations, and for advancing the causes of justice and economic development of the vulnerable sections. Since some of these and other traditional forms of diakonia have tended to rely on infrastructure, institutions, expertise and resources, many Christian communities have come to see themselves either as supporters or as beneficiaries and rarely as participants in diakonia. Such specialised ministries do not replace the mandate of every Christian community to be diaconal.
7. As a response in faith to the hope of the coming reign of God, the signs of which are present in all experiences of hope amidst turmoil, in actions that heal and nurture people and relationships, in struggles that seek justice and affirm truth, diakonia has to be dynamic, contextual, and versatile. It must effect partnerships, not only at the level of global or larger church structures, but also among congregations, special ministries, and networks of people committed to values of justice, peace and human dignity at local, regional and national levels.

II. The diakonia of the marginalised people

"The stone that was rejected..." (Acts 4:11)

8. For many, diakonia is a Christian response to people in need and situations of crisis, and is characterised by actions of reaching out to them from locations of power and privilege with resources and infrastructure. Such an understanding has often resulted in viewing those in need as objects or recipients of diakonia. Many philanthropic or humanitarian initiatives are also guided by such attitudes. Such an understanding has not only failed to acknowledge the diakonia of the marginalised people but also treated them as mere objects and recipients. Some of the traditional forms of diakonia have been pursued without attitudes of respect, awareness of the potential, or a spirit of partnership with local communities.
9. Some diaconal initiatives which began with the intention of serving the weak and the vulnerable people, over the years have become instruments of service to the privileged and affluent sections of the society. Unfortunately, service is hardly the objective of some Christian educational and health institutions in many parts of the world today. Furthermore, the overwhelming culture of globalisation with its accents on profit making and consumerism has also introduced new meanings to service, resulting in the co-option of the traditional service structures into meeting the requirements of economic activity and interests. Because of this trend, reaching out to those disempowered by social and economic structures does not seem a priority for some churches anymore. Some other diaconal initiatives have also been used as means of

proselytisation. Diakonia is integral to who we are as Christians, and diaconal initiatives should not be misused. Repenting for these and other ways in which the churches have deviated from the path of God's mission is urgent and essential for their credibility and integrity.

10. Even if they do not have the material and financial resources to do diakonia in the way many churches are accustomed to, marginalised people through their lives and everyday resistance, practise diakonia. They testify to the sinfulness of the world, holding it accountable for its complicity and silence. Therefore, God opts for the marginalised people, not because they are weak by choice, nor because of paternalistic compassion, but primarily because their lives point towards the urgent need of social transformation.
11. The world may tend to see the margins as places of disgrace and powerlessness; but the biblical witness points towards God who is always present in the struggles of those unjustly pushed to the margins of society. It gives several accounts of God's attention and caring love to people in situations of oppression and consequent depravation. God hears the cry of the oppressed and responds by sustaining and accompanying them in their journey towards liberation. (Exo.3:7-8). This is the diakonia of God: a diakonia of liberation as well as of restoring dignity, and ensuring justice and peace.
12. "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (Jn.1:46) This critical question indicates the decisive entry point that God made for this mission when sending the Son into the world. Jesus announces his diakonia as one that liberates the oppressed, opens the eyes that are blind, and heals the sick. (Lk. 4: 16f) By asserting time and again that he has come to seek the lost and the least, Jesus constantly locates himself among the marginalised of his time. His diakonia rejects abusive power (Lk.4:1-12), refuses to be co-opted by the prevailing logic of power (Mk.10.45) and defies oppressive religious traditions (Lk.11:37-54). Instead, his diakonia opts to restore the ones who are denied life, even if these actions ultimately led him to the cross. [e.g. the man with the withered hand (Mk. 3:1-6)]. Through such an option, he exposes and confronts the forces of marginalisation. To that extent, the margins are the privileged spaces for God's compassion and justice and of God's presence in vulnerability and resistance. Here the sick were healed, the domination of evil spirits broken, the dignity of the marginalized defended, and the disciples empowered with life-affirming values for ministry.
13. Furthermore, marginalised people are not to be seen always as those in need and despair. They resist injustice and oppression in their own ways and through their struggles for life, justice, dignity and rights for themselves and for all, unveil the presence and power of God in their lives. For example, people with disabilities are promoting the values of sensitivity and partnership; the Afro-descendent communities, the Dalits and other discriminated communities are calling churches and communities to resist and overcome cultures and practices that discriminate and dehumanise millions of people; the Indigenous peoples are advocating for the value of the interconnectedness of life, even as their own lives and lands are threatened; young people in disadvantaged situations are resisting policies that deprive them of

opportunities for education and employment; and vulnerable migrant workers, through their struggles for human rights, dignity and justice, are challenging political systems that deny them basic human rights in the name of national interests. There are many such expressions in every part of the world, in the global south as well as in the global north. In all such expressions, in their actions and allegiances towards liberation and transformation, the churches today have new possibilities of diakonia as well as of new ecclesial self-discovery. Diakonia of the marginalised, then, is crucial for church's engagement in realising God's *oikoumene*, the alternative vision of the world.

14. From a theological perspective the language of marginalized people may be conceived as a way of labelling or of reducing people to victims of systems and structures. Diakonia, however, must acknowledge the destructive and dehumanizing power of such structures, not only in order to point to the tragic effects of their reality, but also to the demands, legitimate rights and power of marginalized people to transform the world. In a world where people are treated as objects and commodities and are also mistreated on account of their identities such as gender, ethnicity, colour, caste, age, disability, sexual orientation, and economic and cultural locations, diakonia must build persons and communities, affirm the dignity of all people, and transform cultures and practices that discriminate and abuse some people.
15. Marginalised people, through their yearnings for life with dignity and justice and through their participation in movements, are offering alternative visions of a world free of forces that deny justice, dignity and life for many. To many churches this is a demanding challenge but even more a liberating promise for renewing traditional models of diaconal practice and theological reflection, towards new patterns of inclusiveness, sharing, and transformative action. Jesus too found himself among the marginalised of his time as began his ministry of announcing the coming reign of God. Majority of Christian congregations around the world are mostly poor, and marginalised on account of several factors, and this reality needs to be seen as an opportunity and a resource for more authentic ecumenical engagement. Partnership and solidarity with the marginalised alone will ensure the credibility of the churches' claim of their participation in the mission of God.

III. Diakonia for transformation

"To do justice and to love kindness." (Mic. 6:8)

16. Diakonia, then, is service that makes the celebration of life possible for all. It is faith effecting change, transforming people and situations so that God's reign may be real in the lives of all people, in every here and now.
17. The Biblical God is one who seeks and effects change in concrete situations of life, especially of those who are denied the same. Therefore, diakonia as an action in God's love must strive to transform people, systems and cultures. God announces judgement upon those who abuse power and deny justice to the poor. Jesus too challenged unjust

systems and practices and called the powerful and privileged who benefit from such, to repent and be transformed by the values of love, sharing, truthfulness and humility.

18. Diakonia is not limited to binding the wounds of the victims or doing acts of compassion. While such expressions of love and care are necessary, they do not preclude efforts aimed at confronting and transforming the forces and factors which cause suffering and deprivation. Diaconal ministry thus involves both comforting the victim and confronting “the powers and principalities” (Eph. 6:12). It must heal the victim as well as the one who victimises. It is a radical spirituality of struggle and commitment for transformation of sinful social structures and for the liberation of their victims. Without transformative work, diakonia would be a mere expression of service, subtly serving the interests of the oppressive and exploitative powers by covering up their complicity. If it does not challenge injustice and abuse of power, it ceases to be authentic diakonia.
19. Diakonia also does not settle for superficial expressions of peace and good will. Resonating with the indignation of prophet Jeremiah, “They have healed the brokenness of my people superficially, saying, ‘Peace, peace’, when there is no peace.” (Jer.6:14), diakonia exposes such attempts of the powerful and privileged, often done to sustain the unjust and oppressive status quo. Diakonia is prophetic action which also involves speaking truth to powers.
20. In today’s world, diakonia may also imply political action, confronting unjust military and economic powers; questioning the state policies that seem to invest more on defence rather than on people’s basic needs and human development; challenging anti-immigration laws that deny the dispossessed and the displaced their right to live; opposing development policies that destroy the earth and its people; and in working with and advocating for the rights of people who have been made vulnerable by social and economic structures.
21. Diakonia may also imply social action, aimed at dismantling oppressive cultures such as patriarchy, racism, casteism, xenophobia, and other discriminatory and exclusionary practices. The churches too need to repent for the presence and practice of these cultures right within and for their derisive attitudes and theological constructions that stigmatize certain sections of society.
22. However, diakonia does not merely resist and confront evil but also proposes alternatives to the ways in which human beings relate with one another and with nature. To that extent, diakonia is transformative. (Rom.12:2) Jesus, our Servant Lord, called those who followed him to be the salt of the earth, the light, and the leaven of the world (Matt. 5:13, 14); in other words to be agents of change and transformation. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the diakonia of the early Christian community resisted the power of the Empire by proposing alternative values and visions of the world. Diakonia, then, besides being an expression of support and help to those in need, is essentially a creative action meant to bring about the world God so desires.

IV. Challenges and Opportunities

"I am about to do a new thing!" (Isa. 43:19)

21. As well as the challenges, the context of the Twenty First century also presents numerous initiatives and struggles of people for freedom, justice, dignity and life in many parts of the world. Here lie new opportunities for churches to attempt diakonia in many creative ways while rediscovering themselves afresh in the process. There may be many other opportunities and possibilities, specific to each context. The following insights shared during the conference, may be considered for further reflection and action:

a. Diakonia of the local congregations

1. Become aware of the social, political and economic realities of life and people within which they exist as diaconal communities. Christian education must aim at cultivating a sense of social responsibility.
2. Strive to discover the diaconal dimension of worship and proclamation. Church needs to be a training ground for creative engagement with the world.
3. Initiate people's-level action on environmental issues.
4. Firmly respond to the reality of abuse and violence against women at home, community and church.
5. Educate people against alcoholism and substance abuse, and enabling the victims to overcome the same.
6. Be and become open, just, hospitable and inclusive communities. Churches must strive to become discrimination-free zones and sanctuaries of safety and hope.
7. Build capacities among members, especially in areas of counselling, de-addiction programmes, educational and employment opportunities, gender sensitivity, etc.
8. Seek cooperation and collaboration with other churches, other faith communities, and people's initiatives on relevant issues of people and life in each specific context. This may also include affirming diaconal actions as well as sharing of resources.

b. Diakonia of the larger church bodies

1. Encourage, support and accompany local churches as they respond to their own issues by developing and implementing diaconal work.
2. Encourage expressions of solidarity and mutual responsibility, especially by bridging the divide between urban and rural, and affluent and poor congregations.
3. Address issues of discrimination and exclusion right within the church and launch campaigns to end the same both within and outside.
4. Develop policies and programmes around issues of HIV/AIDS, disability, and environmental stewardship.

5. Recognise, strengthen and support prophetic voices and initiatives that strive to uphold the causes of human rights, justice, and rights of the marginalised communities.
6. Build partnerships with regional and national level churches and organisations with a view to encourage grassroots, people-based initiatives.
7. Encourage theological institutions to introduce diakonia as a discipline wherever necessary, and also to initiate advanced study and research on relevant diaconal practices.
8. Develop easily readable Bible study materials for pastors and lay people.
9. Engage in diaconal actions with people from different faith communities.

c. Diakonia of the WCC and similar international organisations

1. Recognise diakonia as an essential ecclesial expression and that their primary calling is not only to attempt certain diaconal actions on the behalf of churches but necessarily to accompany the initiatives of the churches. This may also include capacity building, fostering partnerships, and mobilisation of resources, wherever necessary.
 2. Journey with the people, communities and congregations in their struggles against discrimination and marginalisation.
 3. Advocate for the causes of justice, dignity and peace and for the victims of aggression, displacement and dispossession.
 4. Support and accompany grassroots level people's initiatives for change. Some of these may not have the needed visibility and infrastructural presence to attract support.
 5. Facilitate dialogue with international diaconal agencies to encourage patterns of church cooperation and to foster more connectedness.
 6. Prepare resources and facilitate processes for inter-church exchange of theological support for creative diaconal engagement in different contexts.
 7. Recognise the power of solidarity in struggle for transformation and therefore, enable, encourage and nurture such expressions of solidarity at all levels.
22. Understood this way at this moment in time, Diakonia may sometimes involve confrontation with powers vested in the status quo. Risk may be inevitable at times, requiring an attitude of love, humility, courage and commitment. Jesus insists that discipleship seeks expression always under the shadow of the cross (Mt.16: 24). Therefore, as communities called together to a vocation of service in the way of Christ, who laid down his life while serving, the churches may encourage one another in the words of the First Letter of Peter: "Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make the defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence." (I Pet.3: 13-16)
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