

# The Diaconal Ministry in the Lutheran Churches<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Under the auspices of the Department for Theology and Studies (DTS) we, representatives of sixteen member churches of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), gathered in São Leopoldo, Brazil, under the theme “The Diaconal Ministry in the Lutheran Churches.” We discussed our varying experiences with the diaconal ministry, challenged each other’s concepts, and struggled with different theological perspectives. Thus the voices from the member churches were heard. As mandated by the LWF Council, we sought to identify theological parameters for demarcating a space in which an understanding of diaconal ministry can be located that is (a) solidly grounded in the Bible; (b) informed by the Lutheran Reformation; and (c) open to contextual variations in both church and society.

## The context

In line with a widely shared ecumenical conviction, diakonia has always been at the heart of the LWF’s identity. Taking into account recent developments and insights, a global LWF consultation held in 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa, on the topic “Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World,” defined diakonia in light of today’s challenges. It “recognize[s] diakonia as a core element of what the church is all about”<sup>2</sup> and reaffirms diakonia as essential to the church’s being and mission. At the same time, the traditional understanding of diakonia as the humble service to those in need, carried out in a spirit of self-denial was challenged and further developed. It lifted up diakonia as the prophetic critique of economic, political and cultural structures that produce and perpetuate suffering and violence, and as advocating for societal conditions conducive to a life of respect and dignity.

Building on the Johannesburg consultation, it was our objective to reflect on how the basic conviction that diakonia is central to the life and mission of the church can be adequately expressed in its public ministry through the diaconate. Thus we undertook to carry out a task which “Johannesburg” left open:

As a ministry, it should be fully integrated into the church’s ordained, consecrated and commissioned ministries, as a reflection of the fundamental significance of diakonia for the being of the church.<sup>3</sup>

We are convinced that, for a number of reasons, the importance of diakonia within the church’s witness has grown in recent years. Most LWF member churches find themselves in diverse socio-political and multifaith contexts and sometimes in minority situations. The effects of economic globalization, which in many communities erode the very basis of life, and the need to

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<sup>1</sup> Final Statement, LWF global consultation on “The Diaconal Ministry in the Lutheran Churches,” São Leopoldo, Brazil, 2–7 November, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> *Prophetic Diakonia: “For the Healing of the World,”* Report, Johannesburg, South Africa, November 2002 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2003), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

give account of their Christian faith in the face of growing secularism and neo-liberalism, pose new challenges to the church's witness. In addition, the church's credibility can no longer be taken for granted. In the age of mass communication, where societies are inundated with words and images, diakonia might assume a new credibility. Under these conditions diaconal ministry can be an especially effective way of expressing the love of God.

## **Terminology**

Discussing terminology is complicated by the fact that different key terms are being used in different ways, carrying different meanings in different contexts. The problem is further aggravated by the need to translate these terms. Therefore, we will briefly set out in what sense we are using these terms, being aware that they might be used elsewhere in a different way.

We understand *diakonia* as referring to a core component of the essence of the church and its mission in the world. *Diaconal witness* is the manifestation of diakonia in the life of the church in which every Christian is called to participate through baptism in daily life as an expression of the priesthood of all believers. *Diaconal ministry* is a specific expression of the one ministry of the church (*ministerium ecclesiasticum*, Confessio Augustana, article 5). The one ministry of the church is given by God (*iure divino*) charged with proclaiming and teaching the gospel publicly in word and deed (*public ministry*). *Deacons and deaconesses/diaconal ministers* are individual Christians called, trained and recognized by the church to serve its mission through the diaconal ministry. *Pastors* are individual Christians called, trained and recognized by the church to serve its mission through the *pastoral ministry* of publicly preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. In some churches the administering of the sacraments is part of the diaconal ministry. *Commission and consecration* are the liturgical acts through which the church, praying for and trusting in the Holy Spirit, recognizes individual Christians as bearers of an office carried out on its behalf. *Ordination* is the liturgical act through which the church, praying for and trusting in the Holy Spirit, recognizes individual Christians as bearers of the one ministry of the church (*ministerium ecclesiasticum*, Confessio Augustana, article 14).

## **The diaconal ministry in the Bible and church history**

God is present in the world as Creator, Savior and Life-giver. The church mirrors God's presence in its ministerial structures and through its ministry to the world. Diakonia and diaconal ministry make visible the Triune God's presence in the world. Faith in the Triune God is the basis for our understanding of the public ministry of the church.

As Lutheran churches we base our understanding of diaconal ministry on the Scriptures. The ultimate point of reference is Jesus Christ himself. The canon of diaconal ministry is Jesus' self-designation as a "deacon": "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). Notwithstanding the categorical difference between Jesus' redeeming self-giving and the church's witness to it, diaconal witness and diaconal ministry are called to embody God's love for the world acted out in Jesus' life, witness, death and resurrection.

Jesus' ministry was to bear witness to the kingdom of God on earth that sought to give the world life in its abundance. This constitutes the core of his mission (Jn 10:10). He did so in various ways: he preached and taught God's grace and called to repentance; he healed the sick and cast out demons and evil forces that inflicted suffering on human beings; he reached out and identified with those who were marginalized and excluded. His healing and liberating ministry provoked the

opposition of those who had a vested interest in maintaining the *status quo*—to the point of suffering and death.

In testifying to God’s kingdom, diaconal witness and ministry are informed and shaped by Jesus’ ministry. Participants shared how diaconal witness and ministry can render Christ present among those who struggle for dignity and survival.

In studying the history of the diaconal ministry starting in the Bible through the Early Church and throughout the church’s history, it is clear that there has not been one unilateral understanding of this ministry. The New Testament does not describe a single ministerial structure that is a suitable pattern or norm for all times. Paul’s letters and the Acts of the Apostles refer to a vast variety of functions within the church (1 Cor 12:7ff). Even the later writings of the New Testament do not clearly distinguish between offices and keep ministerial structures flexible (1 Tim 3:1ff.). Clearer patterns emerge only in post-apostolic times. As of the second century, a threefold model of ministry (deacon, bishop, presbyter/pastor) gradually became the dominant model in many regions where the church had been established. In the Early Church and the church of the Middle Ages, church ministry in general, and diaconal ministry in particular, underwent profound changes. To a large extent, the latter degenerated into a transition to the priesthood and many diaconal services were carried out by religious orders.

### **The diaconal ministry and the Lutheran Reformation**

There are a number of reasons why the Lutheran Reformation did not result in establishing a full-fledged diaconal ministry. Among others, good works had to be protected against the misunderstanding of being meritorious. The (Lutheran) Reformation strove to rediscover and reaffirm that God has saved humankind in Jesus Christ by grace through faith alone. The dynamic of salvation is rooted solely in God’s activity. At the same time, human activity, liberated from the power of sin through Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit, can be appreciated as bringing forth good works albeit without any meritorious character (see Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, as well as Confessio Augustana, articles 6 and 20). Secondly, while Luther had intended to establish the diaconal ministry in the congregations, he refrained from doing so since there were no “adequate people for carrying out this ministry.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in sixteenth-century Germany, diaconal activities were largely carried out under the auspices of the secular authorities in the understanding that doing so was their Christian duty. Nevertheless, in some parts of northern Germany, as well as for example in Strasbourg, attempts were made to establish a full-fledged diaconal ministry alongside the pastoral ministry.

We assume that the potential of our Lutheran tradition has not yet been fully exhausted. The one (public) ministry of the church (Confessio Augustana, articles 5 and 14) is divinely instituted. Nonetheless, in light of ever changing historical realities, the church must address the task of ordering it anew. As we have seen, the biblical witness itself as well as the history of the church, the Lutheran included, reveal that there is no uniform or universal pattern of ordering the public ministry. In carrying out its mission, the church has had to face contextual challenges which, in turn, have shaped its (public) ministry.

Traditionally, the understanding of “teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments,” the distinct responsibility of the church’s ministry (Confessio Augustana, articles 5 and 14, has been

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *WA* 12, p.693.

restricted to preaching and administering the sacraments as undertaken by the (public) pastoral ministry. At the same time, too often diaconal witness and service to one's neighbor have been ignored. We have heard with great interest and joy that some LWF member churches acknowledge that the gospel is being preached, taught and witnessed to also in other ways, including through the diaconal witness. Hence, they have included the diaconal ministry in the one (public) ministry of the church. We are aware that different models are in place according to the church's respective historical, societal and ecumenical contexts. Some member churches have introduced the threefold ministry of deacon, pastor and bishop while others have established a shared ministry. In both, the one ecclesial ministry unfolds in different ways. Some member churches perceive the former model as having hierarchical connotations, while others regard it as an appropriate way of structuring their ministry. In the latter model, both expressions of the one public ministry are perceived as being equally recognized.

While those churches that have some form of diaconal ministry generally consecrate or commission their diaconal ministers in one way or another, most of them deliberately fall short of ordaining them; ordination is reserved for pastors. In light of the striking similarity between the rituals and liturgical elements involved it is unclear what distinguishes ordination from other forms of commissioning. We believe that ordaining diaconal ministers would reflect that the diaconal ministry is an integral part of the one ecclesial ministry. Through the act of ordination the church recognizes the ministry of the deacon and prays to God for the gift of the Holy Spirit. In some contexts, secular society acknowledges and recognizes this spiritual authority. Resistance against ordaining diaconal ministers may not only be inspired by theological reasoning, but also by the determination to defend dominant power structures and gender inequalities.

### **The diaconal ministry and the priesthood/deaconhood of all believers**

Through baptism persons are initiated into the priesthood of Christ and thus into the mission of the whole church. All the baptized are called to participate in, and share responsibility for worship (*leitourgia*), witness (*martyria*), and service (*diakonia*) [...] Ordained servants of the church carry out a specific task in the service of the mission and ministry of the whole people of God.”<sup>5</sup>

Just as the pastoral ministry does not exempt the communion of baptized believers from sharing the gospel in their daily lives, so the diaconal ministry does not exempt Christians from the call to diaconal witness. On the contrary, diaconal ministers are not responsible alone for carrying out diaconal witness. Rather, it is their responsibility as leaders to inspire, equip, train and guide congregations and the church as a whole to carry out their diaconal witness. As one participant put it, “The diaconal ministry is called to lead the church to become a diaconal church.” Thus we can legitimately speak of the “deaconhood of all believers”—an analogy to the priesthood of all believers.

### **The diaconal and the pastoral ministries**

Ordering the (public) ministry of the church implies being conscious of the commonalities as well as the differences between the pastoral and diaconal ministries. Both serve to teach, share, communicate and bear witness to the gospel. Whereas the pastoral ministry proclaims God's saving

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<sup>5</sup> *The Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church*. A Lutheran Statement, 2002 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2003), p. 12, para. 13.

grace in Christ and announces God's coming kingdom, the diaconal ministry bears witness to the gospel by expressing God's love for the world by caring for those in physical, social and spiritual need and advocating for societal structures which promote justice and human dignity. While preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments render Christ present in Word and sacrament, the diaconal ministry represents Christ in his reaching out in love to those who are vulnerable and excluded. Rather than striving for superiority, the bearers of both ministries ought to perceive their ministries as being complementary.

### **The diaconal ministry and the Eucharist**

Diakonia is deeply integrated with proclamation of the Word and sharing at the table. Thus it is rooted in the sharing of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. Fully incorporating the diaconal ministry in the worship service, in particular in the celebration of the Eucharist, without relegating it to an inferior position, might be an appropriate way of symbolizing the interrelatedness of the two expressions of the one ministry.

If diaconal ministry is carried out in the name of the church, then it is only rightly carried out in the name of Christ and to the praise and glory of God. The revival of a specific liturgical role for deacons in some churches points to the witness and worship which occur throughout their ministry.<sup>6</sup>

### **The diaconal ministry between church and "world" and the issue of power**

God calls the church to share the gospel with the world. Therefore, the church and its mission are not self-sustaining, but founded in the Triune God and find their aim in the world. In this sense, the church in general and its public ministry in particular are "go-betweens." The diaconal ministers/deacons/deaconesses reach out to the excluded and marginalized on behalf of the church and bring their experiences into the midst of the community of faith. Thus the church and its mission are solidly grounded in the world, its hopes and fears, its joy and suffering.

Although the church and its ministry are a creation of God's Word and Spirit, they are also part of the world whose dynamics permeate the church in painful ways. Asymmetrical power structures, domination, the misuse of power and corruption plague also the church. Some participants shared how those in high positions within the church try to defend their ministerial monopoly by downplaying the contribution of diaconal ministry and relegating it to an inferior service. The fact that in most churches the (public) pastoral ministry is still a "male" domain while diaconal witness and service is predominantly "female," raises fundamental questions about the equal recognition and participation of women and men in the public ministry.

Commissioned by Jesus Christ, the Servant-Lord, the Diakonos (Mk 10:45), the healer of the vulnerable, the liberator of the marginalized and excluded, the diaconal ministry is particularly sensitive to these dynamics. Moreover, the diaconal ministry is responsible for empowering the disadvantaged, enabling them to use their own potential, helping them to stand on their own feet and meaningfully to contribute to the mission of the church.

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<sup>6</sup> "The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity. The Hanover Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission," in *Anglican Lutheran Agreements. Regional and International Agreements 1972-2002*, LWF Documentation 49/2004 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2004), p. 190, para. 52.

## **Conclusion**

We call upon the member churches to reexamine the ways in which they have ordered the ecclesial ministry and, in particular, to do so in such a way that the diaconal responsibility of their mission is adequately expressed. We are convinced that establishing or strengthening the diaconal ministry and providing training and formation that would facilitate its equal recognition with the pastoral ministry would be an appropriate way of acknowledging and meeting this challenge. This might imply raising the awareness of congregations and pastors regarding the importance of the diaconal ministry and its implications for cooperation in the one ministry of the church.

In many contexts the church is in crisis and in need of reexamining its mission. We do not consider establishing a diaconal ministry to be a universal remedy. Nonetheless, since the one ministry of the church is key for carrying out its mission we are convinced that the diaconal ministry can make a distinct contribution to making it more credible and effective, being aware that God, through the power of the Spirit, will have to guide and authenticate the church's mission and witness.