



**CONVIVIALITY**  
diaconal life in diversity

# Conviviality and the Diaconal Church

Seeking Conviviality  
– A Core Concept for Diakonia

Number 1



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LWF

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# Mārtiņš Urdze

27.08.1960 – 23.04.2021

This book is dedicated to the memory of the life and work of Mārtiņš Urdze. Mārtiņš was an important participant in the process: 'Seeking Conviviality, Re-forming Community Diakonia in Europe'. He brought to the group a strong commitment to marginalized people and communities as well as to inclusion in church and society. He lived conviviality and took painful decisions based on his commitment.

During the process of developing the concept he brought his immense experience and deep spirituality to bear on the work. He combined practical engagement, deep learning and the strength arising from his personal experience. He was never strident but always clear and opened time and space for deep reflection.

We share this prayer in the hope that we can work further on all that was important to him:

We give thanks for the life of Mārtiņš Urdze.  
We give thanks for the journey we shared together.

We pray that he may rest in peace,  
safe in God's open arms.

We pray for God's strength, that we may hold  
all that was dear to Mārtiņš sacred to our lives.

Amen

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## Preface

The term “conviviality” is usually associated with something pleasant, amiable, friendly, and festive. This is how the word is most often used in English or French. From an historical perspective, the Spanish word “la convivencia” refers to the “coexistence” of Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities in medieval Spain and thus to the cultural interaction and exchange that proximity promotes. In thinking about development, the concept of “conviviality” is known at least from the beginning of the 1970s, mainly due to Ivan Illich’s book *Tools for Conviviality* (published in 1973) which attracted worldwide attention. In recent years, the term has been gaining in popularity with regard to living with diversity and in education, social work and diakonia. In the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the notion of conviviality has become better known since 2011 with the launch of the European Diaconal Process. Since then, this term has become an integral part of the language used by the churches of the Lutheran communion when describing their diaconal mission.

When the participants in the European Diaconal Process met in Balatonszárszó, Hungary in 2017 to plan the next stage of cooperation, attention was drawn not only to the already existing differences in Europe, but also to the still diversifying situation. This was expressed in the theme of this meeting, “Seeking Conviviality - faithful living in diversifying Europe.” It was clear that we are all on the move, not only because of migration, but also because of the need to be mentally on the move and to seek new ways of living together peacefully. For this reason, the final stage of the process was called “People on the Move”.



*Augustanahof Garden. Photo: Lutheran Diaconie Amsterdam*

It is worth noting that from the very beginning of the diaconal process, the LWF has been talking about “seeking conviviality”. The verb “seeking” in combination with the noun “conviviality” indicates not only the dynamic ten-year process of defining the concept and its characteristic marks, but also the way in which it is practiced. Participants in the process, and in fact all LWF member churches

in Europe, are theologically and practically in the process of seeking. One could say that participation in the European Diaconal Process with its focus on “seeking conviviality” was in its essence a convivial experience.

In trying to list some of the features of this seeking, it is important to emphasize the conviction that the experience and knowledge of each participant is equally valuable, important, and necessary. It was also the conviction that learning must be fully participatory; that the only way to learn about others is with and from others. During the process, participants attached great importance to the principle of reciprocity. Concepts of living together can only be developed together in an interaction in which everyone participates equally.

“Seeking conviviality” means openness for new models of living together, which go beyond the framework of well-known solutions that can be categorized and clearly described. That is why the “seeking conviviality” process referred to art. Living together is not just a theory, a set of rules and principles, but often true art, expressed in creative, unobvious, and often surprising ideas. Creativity and experimentation in shaping a life together among diversity requires mutual trust. Building trust is an essential condition of conviviality and it was very important during the process coordinated by the LWF. In an atmosphere of trust, one can openly share thoughts that may, at first sight, deviate from known standards, but which may be the source of something new, valuable, and beautiful, something that in its essence expresses the word conviviality. Stories from the three European LWF regions offer examples of such unobvious, creative solutions of

living together in diversifying Europe. In most cases, they were written by participants in the European Diaconal Process who implement or participate in these projects themselves.

The stories – published in four booklets and grouped according to the topics they cover – are the fruit of the process that has been underway for almost ten years, and especially of its final stage called “People on the Move.” Each booklet explores a different facet of local diakonia through stories of local engagement, includes a reflection, and points to “marks of conviviality” which the stories reveal. The booklet themes are:

- ▶ Conviviality and the Diaconal Church
- ▶ Conviviality with People on the Move
- ▶ Conviviality, Diakonia, and the Church
- ▶ Convivial Church and Radical Welcome

A fifth booklet brings together an overview of the various facets of convivial life and “seeking conviviality” not only as a concept for diaconal action but as an expression of “marks of conviviality” for a diaconal church in the present context.

The metaphor of journeying is firmly rooted in the history of Christianity, both in the lives of individuals and of larger groups. The Lutheran communion is also on the move. In theology, this thought is sometimes expressed in a Latin sentence *Ecclesia semper reformanda* meaning that the church must always be reformed and continually re-examine itself in order to maintain its doctrine and practice. The churches belonging to the LWF are linked not only by their Reformation roots and agreement on fundamental theological issues, but also by the conviction that God’s mission on the ground is fulfilled in different ways according to

needs and circumstances in different parts of the world. Sharing these experiences is one of the tasks of the LWF.

The stories from different places in Europe that illustrate conviviality and were described by the participants in the most recent stage of the European Diaconal Process have precisely this role. They are a testimony of how God acts among the member churches of the LWF and how the member churches respond to the challenges of fulfilling God's mission in the modern world.

I trust and pray that all stories are an encouragement and inspiration to be a creative diaconal community, constantly seeking the best forms and ways of living together.

**Ireneusz Lukas**  
LWF Regional Secretary for Europe

# Introduction

Tony Addy

## The concept of a diaconal local church

It is often said that diakonia is a mark of the church and that every church must celebrate the liturgy, embody mission, and practice diakonia. It might seem, therefore, that to speak of a diaconal church is a tautology. However, as we worked on the process of “seeking conviviality” and the “re-formation of community diakonia,” we found that the way diakonia is understood on the local level is very diverse. Many local churches see their responsibility as being to encourage their members to do voluntary work or have some other personal social engagement, but there is no common discussion or agreement about priorities nor any process of discernment. In fact, there is some research in different European contexts which reveals that many churches may describe generalized diaconal priorities, but very often there is no reflected strategy. Some churches may have deacons and they may also organize volunteers to support the work and yet others may think that diaconal organizations carry out this function on behalf of the whole church, including the congregation. These remarks are rather stereotypical and local situations are more complex, but the question of diaconal church and convivial congregation invites us to examine and reflect on our life together.

This short book invites you to reflect on the everyday life of the local congregation and to explore the meaning of the terms “conviviality” and “diakonia” in

practice. In order to start this process of reflection, four participants in the European “Seeking Conviviality” process have written stories out of their experience of working as diaconal congregations. They are not meant to be perfect examples, but each one points to some of the key themes which can inform our understanding of the diaconal church. If you want to know more about the basic understanding of “seeking conviviality,” you are invited to explore the fifth booklet in this series.

As you read these stories, please reflect on your own experience of church life and ask yourself in which way your church is diaconal and how it shows convivial life in its own being as a congregation and with the wider society. The stories all exemplify the changes that come about when the church “sees” the reality around it with a certain diaconal perspective. In each case, there is a reflection on the local context from a biblical and theological perspective, and the consequent action is described.

The final chapter brings some of the key ideas from the stories into a framework for a diaconal church which is seeking conviviality!

## The stories and the settings

The four stories in this book arise from very different contexts and each gives a perspective “on the way to a diaconal church,” as the title for the first story puts it. The story of Cross congregation in Liepāja, Latvia, exemplifies some of the main characteristics of a diaconal church because the congregation already understands itself as a diaconal church. It means that the usual mechanism where-

by the church, from out of its human, financial or other resources provides social services through professional or voluntary work is transformed. The Cross congregation gathers both those who are normally thought of as volunteers (church members) or employed diaconal workers with those who are normally thought of as “beneficiaries”, who may also be church members. This changes the whole dynamic as the congregation has to organize itself in an inclusive and convivial way. It also has to engage with civil society and the political structures which cause people to be marginalized or excluded.

The second story comes from Drammen in Norway, a middle-sized Norwegian town which has a history of incoming migration going back several decades. The story describes the impact of migration on Fjell, a suburban church and community. It starts with a situation where the congregation, and the wider society, had the impression that the integration of immigrants had gone well. But it seems that the women immigrants, especially Muslim women, faced many issues and were isolated, and that there were also problems facing children and young people. The recognition of this reality motivated the Lutheran church in one suburb to create a safe space for women, children, and young people. In the Norwegian context, the Lutheran church is the majority faith community and this parish, as many others, had a deacon who could lead the work. The story raises some key issues related to power asymmetry and the position of the church. In working for convivial life together, it is important to consider issues which may prevent mutual respect and recognition. The story shows

how a congregation can create a safe space where conviviality can grow.

The third story relates to the work of three congregations in the area of Nyon, Switzerland, which started working together with young men who were asylum seekers or refugees. The action began with personal relations and small steps such as common gardening and visits to the nearby mountains. It was essentially a person-to-person response. The turning point was due to, on the one hand, a Biblical reflection on the challenge of so many refugees coming to Europe, and, on the other hand, knowledge of the experience of the Refugee Support Network in the United Kingdom. The response led a mixed group of people from different churches, along with others to create a mentoring project. In this case, the project and process itself involved motivated people working across their own boundaries and finding ways to support people across another set of boundaries. This process changed the relationship among the congregations and between the church and society, into a more convivial life together.

The fourth story shows how a church can respond to neighborhood and generational change by repurposing a building and creating new convivial relationships. Augustanakerk, a church in an Amsterdam neighborhood, was built at the same time as the neighborhood in the 1950s. The neighborhood has changed rapidly in recent years and is now more diverse. The congregation was dwindling, and a bold decision was made to repurpose the church building by creating a place where people could live, and which could offer space for the community and a continuing spiritual life. The residents who now live there share a common rule for their life together

and maintain an open space for the neighborhood. The new Augustanahof (the Augustana church and community housing project) is itself an experiment in convivial life together. There are flats, meeting rooms and a kitchen, a small worship room, and a garden. The residential community is building

relationships with the people in the neighborhood and, therefore, in turn supporting convivial life together.

These four experiences show very different faces of being a diaconal church with a focus on convivial life together. You are invited to read the full story!

## The Stories

On the way to a diaconal church:  
Cross congregation, Liepāja, Latvia

The church as a convivial and safe space:  
a story about congregational diaconal practice in Drammen, Norway

Congregations seeking conviviality:  
mentoring refugees in Nyon, Switzerland

Repurposing a church building in Amsterdam  
for convivial life together

## On the way to a diaconal church: Cross congregation, Liepāja, Latvia

Mārtiņš Urdze

### Seeing the reality of everyday life

#### Introduction

It is winter now. As usual, the daylight is just for some hours. I walk to the center of Liepāja and see some old people and some kids who are coming from school. I look again, I'm alone. It's quite a lonely feeling. Sure, during winter there are no tourists here. But that's not the point. Where have all the flowers gone?

#### Emigration and poverty in Latvia

A woman comes to our center asking for help. With tears in her eyes, she tells her story. She has already lived ten years in England and has a family there. But now her parents who have stayed in Liepāja are around ninety years old and they need help. They can't get the home help service from the municipality because they have adult children who should care for them. The woman asks us if we know somebody who can care for her parents. My colleague and I look at each other and say that



The Cross church in Liepāja. Photo: Mārtiņš Urdze

we must think about it. In these times, it is difficult to find medical personal even if you can afford to pay a big salary. There are simply too many people who need care and only a very few who are available to be hired.

Since 1990, the population in Latvia has decreased by 27 percent (about 700,000 people) because of emigration and the fact that more people are dying than being born. This means that there is not only a lack of qualified workers in many fields but there is also a weakening of the non-government sector.

The population that was at risk of poverty in 2017 stood at 23,3 percent, or a total of 446,000 people.<sup>1</sup> The social benefit system is at a level below the minimum that guarantees a life in dignity. The benefits are not based on research into needs and have not been raised for many years.

Many people with disabilities have a monthly income between EUR 80 and EUR 150. Most politicians don't like to be confronted with people's real

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.csb.gov.lv/lv/statistika/statistikas-temas/socialie-procesi/nabadziba/meklet-tema/390-nabadzibas-risks-un-sociala-atstumtiba-latvija>

problems. They don't have any mid- and long-term strategies and are often just reacting to those groups who have many members and are interesting to them as voters.

## The response of the churches

The churches, along with their leadership, are rarely involved in advocacy about the issues facing socially disadvantaged groups. They normally emphasize the contribution of their own diaconal social work.

In our daily work, we saw that diaconal work in the congregations was generally not highly regarded and not at all "essential." Very often, there is no sense of the diaconal responsibility of the whole congregation. The different work fields in the congregation are usually separated and don't connect.

## Diaconal congregation

Until 2016, the Cross congregation in Liepāja was a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia (ELCL). After 2016, when the ELCL synod accepted changes to its constitution that have made it impossible for women to be ordained as pastors, the Cross congregation left the ELCL and joined the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church Abroad (LELCA).

The Cross congregation started to work as a diaconal church in 1999 when it fused with the Diaconal Center of Liepāja and agreed to be a diaconal con-

gregation. In 2006, members of the congregation, as individual persons, founded a non-governmental organization (NGO) called the Diaconal Center Liepāja.

## How the Cross congregation judged the situation

### The meaning of "diakonia"

Diakonia literally means "through dust." In accordance with its use in Greek society, the word diakonia refers to an activity that is connected with a concrete task. These tasks could be very diverse (e.g., to bring somebody a message or parcel, to serve at the table, to wash feet, to bring food, etc.). In order to understand the actual meaning, it is important to see in whose name the task was done.<sup>2</sup> In 1 Corinthians 12:5, the apostle Paul characterizes all gifts of the congregation as equally important tasks of service (diakonia) in the name of the Lord: *"... and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord."*

Diakonia is a term that is rooted in Greek and Roman societies. It was not a specific Christian term. Later Christians used this term in order to describe their response to Jesus' serving, starting from the social work of the church, up to the service in worship. When I use the word diakonia, I generally understand it as the service of a congregation, church, or NGO to people in need, if another meaning is not mentioned.

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<sup>2</sup> Anni Hentschel, Dienen / Diener, December 2008, <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/47853/> and Anni Hentschel, Diakon – Diakonin, May 2011, <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/59458/>

The neglect of the role of diakonia in the church and the congregation is already rooted in the Book of Concord that collects the founding documents of the Lutheran Church. In the Augsburg Confession, the church is defined as “*the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught, and the Sacraments are rightly administered*”.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the main emphasis is laid on the ministry of proclaiming the gospel and on the administration of the sacraments. “Good works” are seen as a consequence of true faith. They cannot be an obligatory request but are a natural response to the gift of God’s grace. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer criticized the proclamation of “cheap grace” that leads Christians to accept sinful behavior and structures. For him, the reason that the organized churches were collapsing during the Nazi era was that the proclamation of grace didn’t include the necessity to follow Christ.<sup>4</sup>

The word has to become flesh, otherwise it’s simply talking. In the Hebrew language, the word for “word” is “dabar” which also means an “event” – a “word that is happening”. Furthermore, the people to whom we have to give account with our theology, work, services, etc. are those who suffer. The main questions for our faith and work also come from them. So, in my opinion we need take an option for those who suffer and have a much stronger focus on those who are living in the margins of society in theological studies and in the work of

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3 Book of Concord, The Augsburg Confession, Article 6: Of the Church, <http://bookofconcord.org/augsburgconfession>

4 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Nachfolge* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1964), 25

congregations and of church institutions. This has to be a deliberate decision or other priorities will determine the agenda.

Therefore, in Liepāja we developed the model of a diaconal congregation that emphasizes diakonia as the responsibility of the whole congregation. In the statutes of the Cross congregation, the following self-understanding is set forth: “The congregation understands itself as a diaconal congregation, that means that diakonia is an essential part of the congregation and is reflected in all work fields of the congregation.”

The Cross congregation has defined the following aims for its work:

- ▶ give witness in words and deeds to the unconditional love of the Triune God for every human being, but especially for those who suffer
- ▶ create in the congregation a safe space where people feel accepted and can develop their gifts, serving each other
- ▶ engage against the forces that overshadow this love – in ourselves, in others, in church and society.<sup>5</sup>

### Jesus and the Kingdom of God

Jesus crossed many boundaries in Jewish society. He went to outsiders, publicans, the unclean, those who were possessed, and poor people who were excluded from the temple. The parable of the Good Samaritan shows that helping the one in need defines what is meant by loving your neighbor. The

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5 See: <https://www.kalpot.lv/par-mums/Liepajas-krusta-draudze/>



*Making candles. Photo: Mārtiņš Urdze*

neighbor who did this act of mercy was despised by the majority of Jewish society. The parable about the last judgement states that Jesus himself is to be found in those who are dependent on the help of others. Therefore, diakonia is a way of discovering your own humanity or the image of God. It is not limited to a special organization, but again and again transcends the borders we have built in our minds. Jesus's death on the cross shows God's solidarity with everyone who suffers. The resurrection of Christ makes his presence universal and encourages his followers to do works of love.

Searching for the Kingdom of God is an invitation to look for God working in the world and engaging in the development of this kingdom. In his letters, the apostle Paul concentrates more on the internal life of the congregations. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11, he sees the congregation in Corinth as the body of Christ where all parts are connected and have the obligation to use their charisms (gifts) for each other and the whole congregation.

In our work in Liepāja, we try to reflect both the Kingdom of God and the body of Christ. It also mir-

rors two important aspects of conviviality. On the one hand, it is important to have ongoing, lasting relationships in an atmosphere of trust where people can develop their gifts and feel acknowledged. On the other hand, the concept of conviviality is also a constant reminder of how narrowly or broadly we set our borders, inviting us to look what happens behind the fences of our fears and prejudices. The task of the Diaconal Center Liepāja, which is connected to the congregation, is more focused on going out into society to support people in need and to give them the possibility to engage in our activities without being a member of our congregation. The congregation itself concentrates more on activities for its members. Although we are not a deliberate missionary church, diaconal work has opened the door to the church, because most members of our congregation have joined us through our diaconal activities.

### **How the Cross congregation is in action**

The congregation has now about one hundred members. It has no deacons because, as a diaconal congregation, it has a different concept. In one way or another, all council members are involved in the diaconal work. As a congregation, we try to have the diaconal focus in mind in all our activities.

In the Sunday service, the collection comprises not only donated money for the needs of the congregation, but people can also donate food or other things that are then distributed to people in need. In a way, the sermons are also diakonia because many of the people who come to Sunday worship

are looking for encouragement and for hope, and that's what the gospel is about. The main prayer is open for all who would like to express their praise, their needs, and prayers for other people. After the church service, we sit together, drink coffee and tea, and share our thoughts about the sermon and our experiences during the week. This is also a place where we can experience conviviality with very different people – homeless persons and guests from abroad, elderly people, and children. Everybody has the opportunity to speak.

Some time ago, I realized that, as the pastor, I was tiring of my responsibility to be a leader and I was thinking that perhaps I'm a hindrance to other people who would like to be responsible. Therefore, I shared my thoughts with the congregation. One result was that many of our meetings are led by other members of the congregation. The diversity of leaders is much wider. It is exciting to see how people who have never led a devotion are growing in confidence.

A group called "Talks about Bible and Life" meets every Wednesday evening. It is important that occasionally the group opens up to other people and tries to focus the talks on some concrete action. For example, we organized the first Way of the Cross in Liepāja on a Good Friday during which we visited different places where people were suffering. Our church music ensemble participates not only during services in the church, but also in the services that happen in a home for elderly people. The congregation also holds services in a long-term social care institution and in a home for elderly people.

The seniors' club has been organized by its members on an ecumenical basis for twenty years.



*Conference "Strengthening cooperation" in Medze.  
Photo: Mārtiņš Urdze*

Amongst their activities, they have, for example, collected money and bought school equipment for children in a refugee camp in Turkey.

At the Apple Festival, an event that happens at the beginning of October every year before Thanksgiving, about eighty farmers donate fruit, vegetables and other things that we are able to offer at a market for donations. This means that poor people can, for example, afford a bag of potatoes. The whole congregation is involved in different activities.

### **The work of the Diaconal Center Liepāja**

The Diaconal Center Liepāja is closely connected to the Cross congregation. Most of the activities happen on the premises of the congregation. In our center, we have four full-time workers, about ten people who work on an honorarium basis in the handicraft groups, and about twenty volunteers.



*Members of the support group for people with disabilities from Rucava plant a “solution tree” as a symbol of hope.  
Photo: Mārtiņš Urdze*

Throughout its history, the Diaconal Center has tried to support people with their basic needs. Our second-hand exchange is ensured by donations by local people. The main focus of our work is people with disabilities. Between eighty and one hundred people, most with physical disabilities, participate in the different groups of our day care center.

We have developed different support groups for younger people with disabilities and for relatives of

people who care for somebody at home. The support groups are a good starting point for experiencing, and developing, conviviality. At the beginning, we invited people with similar problems to our place where they could find friends, get a warm meal and learn something new. Later, the group members got more confident and now many of them take an active role in workshops, seminars, and other activities of the congregation and the Diaconal Center.

Another group is for people who are wheelchair or e-scooter users. They meet in the anteroom of our church because this is accessible and provides enough space to come in with an e-scooter. The group is actively involved in campaigning for more accessible streets and buildings. They demand that they be involved in decisions about city planning. At a roundtable talk in September 2018, documentation of inaccessible streets was presented to representatives of the municipality. One result was the actualization of a plan for accessible roads. Now the group has founded an NGO called “Challenge Fate.” Many members are not used to cooperating in a group, so they have to be patient with each other and forgiving if they want to go on working together.

From 2016 to 2019, the Diaconal Center participated in an international project called SEMPRE (Social Empowerment in Rural Areas). With the help of local social services and other interested organizations and private persons, seven support groups for people with disabilities were founded in the Liepāja region. Since 2018, we have been running a project called “Home – for people with disabilities” where we try to support people with disabilities at home.

## Funding and future of the diaconal work

Financial support for the congregation comes from the donations people give in the church. As our members are mostly poor, we have to look for other ways to ensure we can pay for our salaries and our work. Through diaconal work, we can also help the congregation to meet the costs for electricity and heating and provide income for the main workers, including the pastor and others. The main resource is our involvement in different international projects and support from our partner, Diakonisches Werk Schleswig-Holstein.

For us, the most important need is to come to terms with our legal issues. Since the congregation left the ELCL in 2016, the ELCL has sued the congregation in order to reclaim the church and the parish house. This means that the existence of many of the activities of the congregation is in danger. If we lose the legal case, we will have to look for other ways of working and also to find other facilities. In our opinion, the main focus should be on facing the needs of people, not on the doctrines of faith and the hierarchies of the churches.

## The church as a convivial and safe space: a story about congregational diaconal practice in Drammen, Norway

Kjell Nordstokke

### Introduction – Drammen, Norway – seeing the situation

Drammen is a city with around 70,000 inhabitants, located around forty kilometers west of Oslo, Norway. Over the last decades, it has received many immigrants and refugees from different parts of the world, many of them being Muslims. In general, this has created few social problems because most immigrants are well integrated, due to the fact that the municipality, in close cooperation with civil society including local churches, has been proactive in facilitating such processes.

It is a fact that male immigrants are more easily integrated in Norwegian society than female immigrants, especially when referring to Muslim immigrants. Men learn more Norwegian, they get jobs, they participate in social activities. Women often stay at home and are supposed to take care of the children. In many cases, they feel helpless in dealing with issues related to school and children's behavior.

### Reflecting as a movement into action

This situation has motivated the Lutheran church in Fjell, a congregation located in one of the suburbs



*Deacon Signe Myklebust. Photo: Kjell Arne Norum*

of Drammen where many immigrants live, to initiate a program of providing safe space for Muslim women and youngsters who are seeking conviviality. The program was initiated and led by the local deacon, Signe Myklebust, in close cooperation with the pastor, the church council, and volunteers from the congregation.

Several motivational factors have contributed to the congregation's decision to take this initiative, the first was their observation of the social reality of Muslim families, in particular as it affects women, as mentioned above.



*Fjell Church. Photo: Fjell Church*

Another was the biblical imperative to love the “stranger” (Deut 10:18-19). The congregation interpreted this biblical saying as a call to organize activities with the purpose of establishing safe meeting places. Holding together social analysis and biblical (theological) reflection became pivotal throughout the process of organizing the work. It was conceived as a diaconal initiative, giving the local deacon a key role in preparing and implementing the work, due to her professional competence and work description.

A third motivating factor was found in impulses from the Church of Norway at the national level as expressed, for instance, by its General Synod meeting in 2011. Responding to the challenge of integrating immigrants of other faiths into Norwegian society they declared:

“As the majority church, the Church of Norway must work actively with other Christian churches and with other faith and life-stance communities, to improve contact between people of different cultures and religions, thereby building mutual trust and understanding.”

The synod admits that there are two important challenges in this endeavor. The first is its role as majority church, which may underpin an impression of being the hegemonic religious structure. The other, is the question of power, with the risk that the dominant church may exercise a power of definition when describing the social reality, its problems and possible solutions. A key question for a congregation like the one at Fjell is: How can we establish spaces of encounter that take into consideration asymmetric power relations, in order to create relations of mutual respect and recognition?

The recognition of these challenges, and of inappropriate power relations, affirmed the congregation’s commitment to underscore the diaconal character of the project. Its aim was to create safe space for vulnerable immigrants – in the first place Muslim women and their children – identifying areas of shared action rather than simply being meeting places where people talk with each other and discuss issues. Its working method was more related to what is called diapraxis (diaconal action taken by people from diverse backgrounds) rather than dialogue although, as it turned out, the space of diapraxis empowered participants to develop a respectful dialogue on issues that matter in people’s lives, including matters of faith.

### **Action – Creating a convivial and safe space**

When analyzing the social reality of Muslim immigrant women, two opportunities appeared as



*Fjell aerobic. Photo: Heidi Strand Berg/Drammens Tidende*

possible arenas of diaconal action, both taking the form of conviviality.

The first opportunity that appeared was related to the Neighborhood Café that the congregation had already established in 2008 as a regular event on Thursdays in the premises of the church. In the first place, the aim was to offer a hospitable space for adults who were staying at home during the day with the purpose of overcoming loneliness and building a sense of belonging to the community. It then happened that some of the students from the public school just across the street started to drop in. Some of them were attending the confirmation class, and they knew about the café and that they could get something to eat for a reasonable price there. Observing this opportunity, the pastor wanted to ensure that the café would be open for pupils from different religious backgrounds, so he invited a local imam and a leader of the Sikh community to the café. They, in turn, informed young people from their community about the café, and soon

more people were coming, both to enjoy a meal and to spend time together.

Today the café is well established as a meeting place where young people gather – up to 120 may attend on one day. They talk about their problems and have activities together. Adult volunteers collaborate. As time passed, some of the pupils joined the team of volunteers, bringing together both immigrant and ethnic Norwegians in a common action, thus making the Neighborhood Café a vibrant example of conviviality.

In the early phase of the project, the pastor and the deacon of the congregation would invite the imam from the local mosque to visit the café. Together, they would walk through the room and greet the children. Their presence would legitimize the room as a safe meeting place for all: if the leaders demonstrate that they are able to walk and talk together, it signals that the young people should be able to do the same. On special occasions, as for instance on United Nations Day (October 24), both the imam and the pastor are present and talk about the importance of peaceful coexistence not only in the wider world, but in the local community as well.

It also happens that local police stroll through the room on their way for a cup of coffee. Their friendly presence is another significant opportunity to break down images of distrust, and of addressing issues related to the life in the neighborhood.

The second opportunity was presented by a Muslim woman in her fifties, originally from Pakistan, who mentioned in a conversation with the deacon that too many immigrant women stayed at home the whole day. They did not exercise and seldom got out



*Neighborhood Café. Photo: Signe Myklebust*

into nature. Normally, they would not attend fitness centers due to their cultural and religious traditions.

The deacon contacted the local imam, asking him if he could indicate people that would like to participate in such an activity. The response was positive, and the church offered a room where the windows were covered by curtains so that the women could exercise and at the same time be sure they would not be watched by men. Ethnic Norwegian women would exercise together with them. In addition to exercising, they would talk and laugh together – good both for their physical and mental health.

This activity has been running for many years now with participants ranging in age from 35 to 70. It is organized by volunteers, both ethnic Norwegians and immigrants.

After some time, these women decided to take trips into nature together. As they walked, they commented on what they were seeing, using their limited language knowledge, although they were able to express their feelings, including about religion, in a natural way.

One day, as they were climbing a hill and a beautiful view appeared in front of them, one of the participants exclaimed: “Wow, now we have to stop and say our thanks to God”. So, they did – in their different ways.

The conviviality of exercising and walking together opened new forms of conviviality – talking about things that matter in life and eating together. When sharing dishes from different cultures, one Norwegian woman said with a smile: “Now I know what to order next time we are on vacation in Turkey; I even know the Turkish name!”

## Conclusion

These are stories of diakonia in practice. They are stories about ordinary people who seek conviviality across ethnic and religious borders. Some would not even consider themselves as ordinary, rather as marginal or invisible, ignored in many contexts. In these stories, they are recognized as subjects, persons able to construct bonds of mutual trust and understanding in a multicultural and multi-religious society.



*Neighborhood Café. Photo: Christoffer Tjelle*

They experience conviviality in a space where they are empowered to develop new skills and attitudes. They engage in practices that energize them as agents of transformation, in the sense that everyone involved, including ethnic Norwegians, gets new insights and perspectives on being a person of faith and on being a neighbor.

The congregation offers safe space, without hiding its own identity as a Christian community. The cross and other Christian symbols are seen on the walls, both in the Neighborhood Café and in the room where the women exercise. Conviviality does not require a so-called neutral space, but a space which is safe and acknowledges the diversity of traditions and spiritual points of reference, without forcing their significance on others.

Diapraxis begins with practical activities that engage and empower people. This starting point involves all participants in a process that liberates them to overcome prejudice and fear. It requires a safe space, which in some cases may imply closed doors and windows. In due time, however, this process may open other doors and windows in the move towards a healthy conviviality in church and society.

*Note: This story about diapraxis is presented and analyzed in a dissertation written by Eleanor Brenna for a Master's degree in diakonia at VID Oslo, "Hva kan diakonien tilføre religionsmøte mellom kristne og muslimer i Norge?" ("What is the contribution of diakonia to the encounter between Christians and Muslims in Norway?").*

## Congregations seeking conviviality: mentoring refugees in Nyon, Switzerland

**Monika Rawcliffe**

### Seeing the context

The early 2000s saw increasing numbers of refugees and migrants arrive in Europe, desperate for safety, peace, and a better life. Some of them found their way to Switzerland. Those identified as migrants were usually sent back immediately. People whose fingerprints had been taken in another country (usually Greece), were often returned to that country. The other asylum seekers received a temporary residence permit and were dispersed across Switzerland. In the region of Nyon, on Lake Geneva, they were “housed” in underground nuclear fallout shelters.

They then faced interviews that would determine whether they obtained refugee status or remained asylum seekers with little chance of being admitted to Switzerland long-term. They had accommodation and a monthly allowance, but many waited years before being allowed to work.

It was a tough life for these young men. They had to leave their shelters every morning and were only allowed to return at nightfall. The local authority set up a day center for them, with computers, table tennis, table football, and a cafeteria, but many still



*A friendly welcome. Photo: Vivienne A. Tardieu*

spent their days hanging around wherever they had access to the internet, with nothing to do because they were forbidden to work. The (obligatory) French courses provided their only distraction.

A group working under the guidance of an art therapist and the pastor of the local Reformed Church tried to convince the authorities not to send people back to their countries of entry and advocated for the building of proper shelters above ground, largely without success.

Several people from my Anglican congregation, including the chaplain, started collecting clothes, setting up a garden and organizing hikes in the nearby Jura Mountains for the asylum seekers. They offered to take them to church on Sundays. Some took an active part in services, and eventually asked to be baptized and confirmed, while others just attended and stayed on the fringes.

Westlake, a non-denominational church in Nyon, started monthly friendship dinners. A Muslim couple prepared the food, and people from the congrega-

tion and asylum seekers sat down together to share a meal and get to know each other. Westlake also opened their youth club facilities to volunteers from other churches who were teaching English to asylum seekers.

When the shelters in the area closed down, members of the various congregations offered accommodation.

## Reflecting on the motivation

In Lent 2016, my congregation held a seminar on how Christians and Christian communities should respond to what was being called “Europe’s migration crisis.” This seminar proved to be a critical step towards working actively with asylum seekers and refugees. The speaker explained that there had always been a biblical ambivalence between exodus and freedom on the one hand, and captivity and slavery on the other, and that many patriarchs had been migrants. He quoted a number of Bible verses that speak of caring for the stranger (Deut 26: 11-13); of being inclusive, just, loving and kind (Zech 7: 9-10). He pointed out that Peter characterizes Christians as “aliens and exiles” (1 Pet 2: 11) and that Jesus himself – who had to flee his country as a baby (Mt 2:13-15) – was always willing to talk to foreigners and outcasts (Jn 4; Mk 7), breaking down the barriers between people with his body and making it clear that the gospel is for all. The listeners were also greatly inspired by passages in the New Testament that describe the importance of Christian love, such as 1 Corinthians 13 and 1 John 4:18.

The second decisive influence was the mentorship program of the Refugee Support Network (RSN), a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in the United Kingdom which focusses on educational support for refugee children, and advocacy at national and international levels. A talk and a training session given by the RSN Senior Program Manager prompted a group of people from different parishes to look at developing something similar for adults. The idea for the Mentorship for Integration project was born.

## Action – The Mentorship for Integration (MINT) project

### Developing MINT

Everyone involved in setting up the MINT project was motivated by a desire to help others, to learn from them, and to ensure that justice and peace reign in our society. The Christians among them saw the initiative as part of the missional perspective of their congregations and as an opportunity for them personally to live out the gospel, particularly in the sense of seeing Jesus in the stranger, helping those in need, feeding and clothing them, and inviting them into our communities.

The underlying values of the project though – caring for others, respecting them, and listening to them – are values to which both Christians and non-Christians can subscribe.

A pilot project led to the realization that volunteers themselves need support, information, and governance if a project is to succeed. So, a mixed group of church members and others decided to

revive a dormant Swiss association called Le Coup de Main (The Helping Hand) to establish a clear structure for MINT.

MINT is an independent interfaith structure, but with extensive support from Anglican, Reformed, and non-denominational pastors and churches. The pastors provide help with networking and refer people to MINT; the churches provide safeguarding training for mentors; and the congregations are a major source of mentors and volunteers. Other volunteers may not have a church connection, or they may be connected to a different faith community.

### So how does MINT work?

A team was assembled under the guidance of a therapist to support mentors and mentees and to coordinate the mentors. Each new mentor receives a handbook and is paired up with one asylum seeker. Mentor and mentee begin by drawing up an agreement, setting out the aims and limits of the mentorship, the timeframe they can commit to, and their expectations. Initially, they meet up once a week: Later, they meet once a fortnight or once a month. The mentor helps the mentee integrate into Swiss society, navigate the administrative system, obtain internships or apprenticeships and, finally, find a job. Mentorship is a “focused friendship” and continues until the mentee says that they no longer need that level of support.

The mentors have their handbook for guidance and meet regularly with each other and the support group. Things do not always work out; sometimes the expectations of the mentors are not met, sometimes those of the mentee. There are personality clashes and there is the constant danger of burnout

for the mentor. The support group is there to listen, to help, and to provide the mentors with information on administrative and legal matters.

At the initiative of a volunteer human resources specialist, MINT also holds regular training sessions on how to write a CV or an application letter and teaches refugees the right vocabulary for interviews.

MINT is the primary program of Coup de Main, but the association also runs art, sewing, and language classes, and organizes friendship meals, hikes, barbecues, and cultural events. In addition, it has website and social media groups, and an advocacy unit that represents all asylum seekers to the Swiss authorities.

Refugee numbers are currently dropping, and most mentees have found an internship, an apprenticeship, or even a job. Until a new need arises, MINT is concentrating more on training sessions than active mentoring. However, there are rumors that Switzerland might soon be willing to open its borders again, so watch this space ...

### Conclusion – Seeking conviviality: the art and practice of living together

Seeking conviviality means working for change and thereby influencing the story people tell.

This whole process exemplifies convivial thinking; it brought together people from different backgrounds who discovered a common vocation that changed them, empowered them, and altered their view of themselves and of other people. Working for justice and dignity gave them purpose.

Motivated individuals came together across denominational and faith boundaries, finding ways of helping asylum seekers and refugees integrate into Swiss society and overcome isolation and powerlessness. In doing so, they have built personal relationships, friendships, and a communion with a new understanding of what society can be today: multifaith, multicultural, and free. Moreover, by creating these new relationships, they are themselves transformed, changed forever.

The MINT mentors soon realized that they were not the only ones giving; it was a two-way process. Mentors and mentees shared their knowledge, learned from each other and developed great friendships.

The process also changed our mostly white, middle-class, well-off expat congregation – not only on the outside, but also on the inside, as parishioners came to care deeply for the asylum seekers and refugees in their midst.

The process enhanced relations among the churches of our area, revealing a common interest and a common ground for action, and strengthening relationships among their pastors and members of their congregations.

The structure that was revived to house the MINT project provided the stable framework that was necessary for this local, self-organized group to achieve true convivial life. It built a bridge between the churches and the Swiss authorities, and was the basis for interaction between Christians and people of other faiths – and none. The relationships and trust that were built, and the structure of Coup de Main, remain in place. As soon as a new need arises, an immediate response will be possible.

*With thanks for contributions to this story from Rev. Canon Carolyn Cooke, Chris Talbot, Vincent Tardieu, Vivienne Tardieu, Andrea Goovaerts, Eileen Wiley and Chris Potter.*

# Repurposing a church building in Amsterdam for convivial life together

Hanne Wilzing



*Augustanahof square and entrance. Photo: Lutheran Diaconie Amsterdam*

## Introduction – Responding to Change

When church attendance and resources decline as neighborhoods change, there is a temptation to close our churches and withdraw “behind the dikes”. However, we can also investigate the possibilities for giving our church buildings new religious and diaconal purposes. We can research three things: whether we can “repurpose” our church property; how we might be able to literally, and figuratively, guard the “treasures” that are entrusted to us (2 Tim 1:14); and whether we can continue to be of service in our neighborhoods by being present and meaningful for the people (conviviality). Maybe we

can do this in a way that is economically feasible and organize the repurposing so that these projects can finance themselves. As an example, we share below the story of how Augustanakerk (Augustan church) in Amsterdam-West was converted into the Augustanahof of today.

## The vision: from Augustanakerk to Augustanahof

In September 2017, the Augustanakerk in the Amsterdam neighborhood Bos en Lommer, which had been converted into a space for community living, was inaugurated by Laurens Ivens, an Amsterdam alderman. Ivens called the Augustanahof a “gift” presented by the Lutheran community to the city in the Lutheran Reformation Anniversary year, 2017. The transformation of the Augustanakerk to the Augustanahof gives room (in the broadest sense of the word) to commune and to live in community. The thinking behind this stems from age-long experience, fits in with our present-day society, and has adaptive capacity for the future.

## Looking back: The founding of a new church for a new neighborhood (1957)

In 1955 the first foundation pile for the Lutheran Augustanakerk was driven into the ground. The church board of the Lutheran congregation commissioned the architect F. B. Jantzen, who previously designed the Maarten Luther Kerk (1937) in the Rivierenbuurt, to design it. Insights learned from a study tour to the United States by Rev. C. Pel were incorporated. Thus, the meeting room was created

directly inside the entrance with a glass partitioning wall creating a passageway to the liturgical church hall and a large kitchen. The idea behind all this was that the church begins with meeting each other. Apart from the church building, a sacristan's house and a parsonage were incorporated in the plans.

It took some time before the actual building process could be started because the first plans were too expensive. In those years Lutheran Amsterdam campaigned extensively to collect the remaining EUR 82,000 of the total building costs (EUR 268,000). The campaign was successful, and the congregation even succeeded in collecting the necessary EUR 81,000 for the organ (Van Vulpen) and the church bells. The church bells, cast by Concordia in Midwolda, bear the names *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fide*, and *Sola Scriptura* – the well-known triad of the Reformation: by grace alone, by faith alone, and by Scripture (Bible) alone.

The church name derives from the Augsburg Confession (1530), the *Confessio Augustana*.

The church was finished in early 1957 and was dedicated on February 10 amid great interest: 1000 people attended.

### Repurposing for a new generation (2015)

Until early 2014, the Augustanakerk was used as a church building for the Lutheran congregation and the Reformed Pniël congregation in west Amsterdam. The congregations shrank due to the changing neighborhood and the church wardens of Lutheran Amsterdam had to cut back drastically: they had to give up both the ministers and the church buildings.



*First group of residents, Augustanahof. Photo: Lutheran Diaconie Amsterdam*



*Augustanahof, former church hall. Photo: Lutheran Diaconie Amsterdam*

After intensive discussions with the church board, the Evangelical-Lutheran Diaconia Amsterdam decided to buy the church building in order to change it into communal living apartments. This fits with the policy of Diaconia, which is to invest in communities where people live in sustainable communal housing complexes, and it is in line with LWF's concept of seeking conviviality. Diaconia considers communal living to be a good model

in answering the need for new connections in an individualizing society. It is also a well-tried model, because in this initiative Diakonia continues the church's long-standing social tradition of living in the courtyards of alms-houses. This started in 1670 with the Konijnenhofje, and after that the Zwaardvegershofje (1739), the Van Brants Rus Hof (1733), the Anna Maria Stichting (1894), and the Lutherhof at the Staringplein, built in 1909.

### Looking after each other: the central idea

The central idea behind transforming the Augustanakerk into the Augustanahof was to look after each other and the community in the neighborhood. Diakonia built sixteen rental homes (mainly social rental housing), largely intended for elderly people. In doing so, Diakonia wanted to anticipate developments in the Dutch healthcare system, which mean that elderly people will live independently for a longer time at home, but at the same time will need forms of neighborly support. Apart from elderly people, there were young people who felt challenged to commit themselves and – together with all the other residents – to dedicate their spare time to the Augustanahof and the community. Local residents were involved in the plans by means of “sounding board” meetings.

The residents come from various Christian backgrounds – (Calvinistic) Protestant, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical. One of the houses is available as a guest house for young refugees for temporary stays. The present-day meeting room



*Concert in the meeting, Augustanahof. Photo: Lutheran Diaconie Amsterdam*

continues to be used for activities of the church and the community such as meals, theme meetings, and walk-in activities. Residents of the Augustanahof, together with church and community members, support these activities with the aid of a diaconical worker.

Although the church hall was mainly converted into housing, the liturgical center has been preserved as a chapel. It is a place for small-scale services, and it is a place for people who look for silence or who would like to burn a candle in front of the icon representing the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor (Mt 17). The quiet garden next to the chapel, a place where visitors and passers-by are welcome, remains part of the Augustana as well. Four future residents acted as the pioneers and helped think about the concept. And all residents – young and old – subscribed to the Rule of the Augustanahof in which they committed themselves to the Augustanahof and the community, just as the members of a monastic community subscribed to a rule. This rule makes clear the personal commitment and disposition that are expected. (See the box at the end of this story.)

## Planning and design for Augustanahof

BIND, a joint venture of Ponec de Winter and Wolters Vastgoed, joined Diakonia with sketch pad and calculator. BIND combines expert knowledge in the field of spatial design, real estate consultancy and strategy, process management, and building technique. For BIND, integrating the building with the neighborhood context is important. After all, the living environment is the most complex combined action of interests that we know. Changes in the living environment call for collective wisdom. Working towards a really sustainable living environment involves people, communities, culture, connections, and relations – social, environmental, economic, and ecological.

Running through a number of scenarios (demolition and building anew, adding floors, enlarging, renovating) made clear that remaining as true as possible to the original structure of the church, and working with the aspects the building had to offer, was the optimal answer to the Diakonia dream. What is more, it fits with the organization's existing functions of being a congregation related to everyday life and society which was shortened to "church, social, and living," and it was financially feasible. The existing structure determined the housing typologies; the access to halls and passageways enabled connectivity. Where possible, loving details were maintained, and elements were re-used. Additions (for outdoor areas and for more daylight) were modest and functional, completely in line with the fresh optimism of the original building.

Building the cooperative of the future residents went hand in hand with designing and building



*Caring for the silence garden, Augustanahof, Amsterdam. Photos: Lutheran Diaconie Amsterdam*

the physical space. People and space found, and influenced, each other.

The entrance hall, kitchen, and quiet garden remained, and still give space for neighborhood activities. The original liturgical center has been transformed into an intimate chapel – a place for contemplation – for the residents and the community.

### “Try all things and keep the good”

Lutheran Amsterdam has as its motto, “Try all things and keep the good,” derived from the words of the apostle Paul (1 Thess 5:21). By repurposing the Augustana, Diakonia wants to safeguard – literally and figuratively – the “entrusted treasure.”

Figuratively, the three original functions of the Augustana – namely *church, social, and living* will be preserved, but are given a new meaning with root words such as:

- ▶ living together
- ▶ looking after each other and after the community
- ▶ hospitality
- ▶ silence and inspiration

Literally, Diakonia thinks it is important to preserve heritage. While rebuilding the church, the original character of the building was left intact, as far as possible. The stained-glass windows in the chapel – designed by the architect, F. B. Jantzen – were preserved and equipped with a protective cover. The stained-glass windows in the wall between the meeting room and the former church

hall were placed elsewhere. These windows, made by Rev. P. H. G. C. Kok, originally came from the Maarten Lutherhuis in Osdorp. The built-in Luther seal and the (stained-glass) swan – originally from the former Lutheran community center at the Van Boetzelaerstraat – were re-used. The floorboards from the church hall were used for the floor and chapel furniture and in the new kitchenette.

### The current situation

Today, the Augustanahof is occupied and has come alive. The sixteen houses are inhabited by nineteen permanent residents – ten elderly people (60+) and nine younger people. The oldest resident, who now lives in the church hall in which she used to attend the services, is 96; the youngest is 22. The guest house’s first inhabitant was an 18-year-old Eritrean refugee. In June she gave birth to a daughter. At the moment, a young Ghanaian refugee is living in the house. The permanent residents of the Augustanahof take turns in acting as mentors.

The residents devote themselves to activities in the Augustanahof and the community, and to the garden committee, and hold the weekly evensong in the chapel. Of course, people also look after each other spontaneously. When one of the elderly residents passed away in December, his coffin was placed in the chapel of silence and the residents conducted the memorial service themselves in the meeting room. When the funeral director drove up, the residents rang the bells and formed a line.

The Augustanahof has a continuing program of activities. For example, every Thursday the cook

Leo and his team prepare a meal for some forty neighbors and residents. One of the residents is a talented pianist and both gives, and coordinates, concerts, at times such as Christmas and Easter. Another resident bakes cakes with local residents. A number of activities are carried out together with the Wachterliedpaviljoen, a nearby community center and children's farm. Residents are gradually getting to know the neighborhood and the people who live there, and connecting the neighborhood's everyday life to the Augustanahof.

### The economy of the project

During the renovation, the project stayed within the estimated budget of 3 million euros (EUR). Diakonia was able to partly finance the project from its own resources. Some EUR 200,000 were raised by means of activities in and around the church community, and by means of fundraising. Diakonia got low-interest loans of EUR 1.5 million from a bank and from a foundation (EUR 100,000). The bank loan will be paid off in five years. This is possible thanks to revenues received after having renovated our "old men's and old women's home" (built in 1772) where we built short-stay apartments. Diakonia calls this the "Robin Hood strategy." In 2019, we opened part of this former home for elderly people as the Luther Museum Amsterdam because the Lutheran community is aware that it belongs to a long tradition. The church came into existence in 1588 because of the arrival of refugees from Antwerp who had to leave their city after its capture by Parma in 1585. Through the work of the

museum, the story of our extraordinary history is told: It also demonstrates that, as a congregation and in our diaconal work, we are fully alive.

In 2018, the operation of the Augustanahof broke even financially, due in part to quickly reducing financing costs. Possibly we will be able to use the modest return to finance the diaconal worker. This person works for the Augustanahof and supports outreach activities. A number of years ago, we also received a substantial bequest. This was a surprising gift from a non-member of our congregation who nevertheless valued the diaconal work. This money was entirely used for an operations fund for Augustanahof – to respect the spirit of the person's will.

Thus, the Augustanahof has been repurposed in line with the intent of its original functions: "church, social, and living". The building's character, as a landmark in the neighborhood, has been maintained and, from an economic viewpoint, we worked out a sustainable future.



*Neighborhood party, the Square, Augustanahof. Photo: Lutheran Diaconie Amsterdam*

## **Rule of the Augustanahof**

The Augustanahof is meant to be a nice place where people look after each other. The Augustanahof is a diaconal initiative that is part of Lutheran Amsterdam. Residents identify with the Lutheran tradition: knowing that grace comes first, freely and joyfully, caring for each other without judging each other, and with an open view to the whole world.

### **Looking after each other in the Augustanahof and the community**

‘Looking after each other in the Augustanahof and the community’ plays a central role in the Augustanahof. We expect the residents to commit themselves to do so and to participate, of course according to each one’s abilities and talents.

Residents of the Augustanahof choose to live communally and are motivated to fill this in together. This takes shape in living together, looking after each other in the Augustanahof and the community, hospitality, silence and inspiration, joint responsibility for the common rooms, and participating in the annual rhythm of the Augustanahof.

### **Annual rhythm**

According to their abilities the residents participate in the basic rhythm of the Augustanahof:

- ▶ Weekly: participation in moment of prayer in the chapel of silence
- ▶ Monthly: residents’ meal
- ▶ Monthly: consideration and reflection with all residents
- ▶ On average 1 shift/4 hours per week volunteering/participating in other activities – already existing or newly developed by the residents – (in the Augustanahof and the community)
- ▶ Yearly Augustanahof Day with all the residents
- ▶ Care for the common rooms (meeting room, kitchen, chapel, storeroom, and garden)

Where applicable the rhythm will be indicated by ringing the bell.

This basic rhythm is a principle we are allowed to remind each other of. It will be evaluated on a regular basis and revised, if necessary, by the residents and the residents’ committee, after consultation with Diakonia.

## Reflection on the Stories

Tony Addy

### Introduction

The four stories shared in this book are all examples of work in progress towards a diaconal church which understands its task in the light of “seeking conviviality.” When we speak of conviviality, we are not just thinking about the fact that people live together in a common place nor that, in fact, in one common place there may be many different communities or networks. Conviviality does not simply point to cohabitation, but to respectful and caring living together in solidarity. Conviviality takes “relational being together” as its starting point: this is one link to a diaconal church, which does not categorize people in advance, but looks for the ways in which relatedness can be expressed among people with their intrinsic dignity, made in the image of God. One commonplace meaning of conviviality is to enjoy meeting together, perhaps sharing a meal: This can lead to celebration, but the celebration depends on active living together. The rituals around celebration may, in turn, support living together. In this chapter, we gather together some of the key themes which emerge from the four stories. These will help us to create some of the marks of a diaconal congregation – of a congregation seeking conviviality.

In two of the stories, from Liepāja and Amsterdam, we gain an insight into local congregations which have, in very different ways, reconstructed

their lives with a diaconal sense of conviviality. The stories from Norway and Switzerland are related to congregations gaining increased sensitivity to the context in which they are set: we read how this also leads to transformation. What the stories have in common is the experience that the church shows a sensitivity to its own identity and to how that supports, or hinders, convivial life together.

Each story shows an openness to respond to change, and to challenge the thinking of divided communities. These may be divisions based on age, gender or disability, or divisions based on population change. We are reminded that, because of migration and uprootedness, populations are placed by the political processes in categories such as “refugee” or “third country migrant”, or given an ascribed, rather than chosen, identity. In each of the stories, however, there is an aspect of disruption which comes from outside the congregation – through diverse people, through recognizing that an apparent success actually ignored an important issue, and through demographic and population change. There is, in fact, a “shaking moment” when a decision for change has to be made.

*Jesus crossed many boundaries in Jewish society. He went to outsiders, publicans, the unclean, those who were possessed, and poor people who were excluded from the temple.*

*Cross congregation, Liepāja*

This already tells us something about conviviality because it adjusts the lens through which a context is seen. Cultural and administrative boundaries have to be transcended in some way to work towards convivial life together. This is also true for the church on a local level because churches, as other communities, build up their lives by sharing stories and supportive rituals (not only the classical Christian rituals) which become a narrative-defined identity and so create a “boundary.” In each story, boundaries had to be crossed. If we looked a little more deeply into the congregations, we would also find that they are not as homogenous as they look from outside: the distinctions may have many background reasons but will also usually relate to who holds power and is involved in decision making. This is true for all groups which appear from the outside to be community-like and homogenous.

The initiatives described in the stories were developed by asking the question of what these congregations saw in their local contexts and the relationships they already had. Those relationships could be with people in all their diversity, with the environment, and with institutions. The process of seeing is complex because someone coming, for example, from a church may have problems with creating a “horizontal” eye-to-eye relation with people who are, in some way, marginalized and excluded. This is true whether the church has a minority or majority position in society, because churches are often seen as having “normative” power. In these stories, we see efforts to transcend this viewpoint.

The second question which was addressed was: “how do you judge this situation?” When you reflect on the situation, what biblical, theological, or other

sources help you to make sense of it? With whom, and how, do you reflect on the issues? The final step is to ask: what kind of action is consequent on seeing, and judging, the situation, and with whom will you act? The action has two aspects. The first is action in, and by, the congregation and raises the question of how this process affects congregational life. The second aspect is how this process affects life and work in society.

### Conviviality is context-sensitive

The starting point, and foundation, for the four stories was a process of what we could call “active seeing” with a purpose which is already informed with a theological perspective. Active seeing, from the convivial perspective, involves, first of all, thinking about the habits which we have adopted from the wider society, and dominant narratives which prevent us from having a critical view on what we see. For example, in one story we read that the church and the town had a fairly positive attitude towards what they called “the integration of immigrants and refugees,” but a more careful look led to the realization that there were hidden issues which had not been dealt with. This implies that we need to have a process of continuously going out – not only out of buildings, but out of our comfortable relationships and understanding of the situation. This is very difficult because our self-understanding is shaped by our socialization and by our participation (if we are members) in a specific church. In this process of going out, we have to find ways to be attentive to the diversity of the situation, and to be slow to categorize people or diagnose the

issues they face. This going-out process can be personal, but it can also be organized by groups. It is very creative and powerful to notice how, because of their background and relation to “place,” people see the same situation very differently. Reflection on what is seen is therefore very important.

Of course, such “seeing” can be complemented by analyzing the way in which different authorities in a given context also see, and analyze, the situation. But the important point is to keep a critical eye on this, because it may be that this official view misses important issues or overlooks important differences compared to what you find when you are close to people’s everyday lives. Seeing involves crossing boundaries and entering into relationships with different “others” because people also bring their life stories into the “place”. This means they see the place and their life in it differently. Their experiences of faith and religion, and the place of these in their lives, will also be different. This has implications for churches, which also differ, depending on their own identity. If a church is made up of the traditional inhabitants of an area, or a subset of traditional inhabitants, they will view religion differently to people who newly move into an area and who express their faith and religious identity in diverse ways. The function of religion in migrant communities is also different because faith identity is one aspect people can take with them: perhaps it also gives them a springboard into civil society. These boundaries of meaning also have to be crossed; some churches may be closely identified with traditional power structures, which can prevent open communication. Broadly speaking, we can see that a convivial approach means that we need the different “other” to see ourselves and our own church anew.

In the stories shared in this booklet, we see the results of discerning different situations through the approach of going out to see. In one case, the result was to work with migrant women and, in another, with refugee men. We also see in these stories how the encounter with the different “other” changed the churches themselves. In the story from Liepāja, we read how the work with people in poverty, or living with disabilities, transformed the nature of the church itself as it tried to develop an inclusive life which does not divide people into the categories of beneficiary, pastoral or social worker, or volunteer. This reflects a different way of seeing the “other” than we find in classical social work. The story of Augustanahof could have been simply a story of congregational decline and closure, but implicit in the situation was the idea that we have to see things differently, and, through this process, a new convivial space was created. In a sense, this was the start of a new story: the people of that space are gradually going out and seeing the place in which they are set with new eyes. The tradition of the place is being reworked and renewed, and the function and the symbolism of the building is marked by continuity and change. The interesting question is: What do the diverse people of the neighborhood see, and what meaning do they give to the new Augustanahof?

### Conviviality in theology and practice

If we take seeking conviviality – the art and practice of living together – as a concept for diakonia in our diverse, and diversifying, European context, it points toward the notion of the Christian life as a pilgrimage and, in particular, a pilgrimage that

continues the incarnation, as we see it in the ministry of Jesus. It also implies the idea that the pilgrim people of God have no abiding city here on earth. On the other hand, as Christians, we are called to seek the Kingdom of God in our context through active discipleship. Convivial life together is one perspective on the life of Christians on this pilgrimage, which includes the building and sustaining of relationships with each other and with God – and with the created order. This was expressed by Ivan Illich as “freedom in interdependence,” which is contradictory to the dominant idea that we find freedom as we are able to be autonomous. In this way, we could describe the Christian life as “nomadic rootedness” – pilgrim people, rooted in the gospel and searching for the Kingdom of God. The searching for the Kingdom of God becomes active by looking for the points where there is suffering or oppression, and working with God, and with people, for transformation.

Seeking conviviality means working for change and thereby influencing the story people tell. This whole process exemplifies convivial thinking; it brought together people from different backgrounds who discovered a common vocation that changed them, empowered them, and altered their view of themselves and of other people. Working for justice and dignity gave them purpose.

*Conviviality in Nyon*

Each of the four stories echoes these ideas in the different processes of social analysis and theological reflection which are recounted. It is important to notice several dimensions of this process of reflection. First and foremost, it is analysis and reflection that is motivated by certain values, which are in themselves rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition – for instance, the search for justice as the basis of an inclusive peace. This could be contrasted with the Pax Romana which was an attempt to create peace, but with exclusion and injustice and under structure of Empire and Emperor. Another aspect of the reflection is that it is not undertaken simply to create an analysis or a theological reflection. As one case study mentions, in the Hebrew self-understanding, word and action are linked so that a word given implies an action as a consequence. It means that our sharing may have some aspects of conviviality related to having an open conversation, and even to working through conflict, but it must result in action. Conversely of course, it may also be a reflection on action. At the moment, we are thinking of the life of the Christian community; however, as convivial life together expands, such a process can be developed with people of different faiths and worldviews. Indeed, this is of the essence of conviviality. One of the case studies alludes to the concept of diapraxis, which unites action and dialogue. This is to draw a distinction between diaconal action and related dialogical processes, and interreligious dialogue which has no necessary consequence in social action. Diapraxis is complementary to seeking conviviality because it implies the effort to reveal and transform a particular reality. This engagement could be either a struggle for survival or work for justice, peace, and reconciliation.

A key element which runs through these stories is the idea that diakonia is not one specialism of a church professional, nor simply the personal choice of some individual congregational members, but that it is an essential mark of congregational or parish life – in fact, of the life of the church as the Body of Christ. It implies that in order to seek convivial life together, the church itself has to experience conviviality and to live it with the different “others.”

If we turn to the specific biblical reflections in the stories, we find the following themes which also resonate with the previous discussion of conviviality in relation to the stories themselves.

The first theme which recurs is the discussion of who is neighbor to the next, and what kind of action should follow. There are references to the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament insistence on love of neighbor, referring particularly to those who are strangers or, in present-day terms, “people on the move” for whatever reason. We can imagine that the reasons people were uprooted were very similar to those experienced nowadays. However, widows and orphans are also mentioned because these groups represented those who were forced to live in poverty as they were outside the normal extended family structure. There were also people who were destitute for other reasons, and they are also mentioned. What is interesting is the reference to various episodes in the gospels such as the story usually known as the Good Samaritan, where an unexpected person becomes neighbor to an unidentified vulnerable and injured man. The narrative defines neighbor as the one who acts as a neighbor to someone in need, regardless of their own identity and interests as conventionally understood. This is

an aspect of “everyday lived conviviality” which does not equate diakonia with a profession or even see it as structured voluntary action.

Another was the biblical imperative to love the “stranger” (Deut 10:18-19). The congregation interpreted this biblical saying as a call to organize activities with the purpose of establishing safe meeting places. Holding together social analysis and biblical (theological) reflection became pivotal throughout the process of organizing the work. It was conceived as a diaconal initiative, giving the local deacon a key role in preparing and implementing the work, due to her professional competence and work description.

### *Fjell Lutheran Church, Drammen*

A second theme which stands out is the idea that we meet Jesus in those whom we meet and who are in need. This is linked to the idea that Jesus identified with poor and marginalized people. The implication is that we find our humanity in the other and that the relation is reciprocal. This is a different approach to classical systems which have been established to meet people’s needs. It raises the question of why, in our societies, we have developed different categories for people in need – for people who are marginalized and for those who are uprooted. They are people in need. The approach of Jesus was most often to be in the midst of people; when he met a person in need,

he started with a questioning approach, not defining the person and what they needed beforehand. Our search for convivial life together raises questions about the service model we use and where that comes from. There is a need for professionalism and training for volunteers and activists, but this aspect of Jesus's ministry needs further reflection. What is clear from the stories and the reflection in the Bible is that diaconal action for convivial life together implies being with people who are marginalized for different reasons. It means sharing life together and that the church has to find new ways of managing boundaries. Convivial life together implies, for example, that the accountability for the work which is done with marginalized people is to the people who are served. In diaconal work, there is often a clearly defined structure for accountability of persons and for finances to those who manage resources but no clear structure for accountability to the marginalized people who are the subject of the work.

Thirdly, conviviality implies freedom from oppression and captivity: this aspect becomes clearer in working with refugees and asylum seekers because uprooted people are often escaping from oppressive, and even deadly, structures and from some form of captivity. This reminds us, however, of the central theme in the Hebrew Bible which is that justice has to be sought. It reminds us, as we see in one of the stories, that not only persons can be sinful, destructive, and dehumanizing, but that structures can also be sinful and can break down relationships and prevent convivial life together. Therefore, to seek conviviality is to hold political, economic, and cultural structures accountable where

they do not support convivial life together. This includes structures which exclude people, or which push people into poverty amidst a hugely unequal, rich society. It can also include media and opinion leaders who foster hate of particular groups and create a blame culture.

*A key question for a congregation like the one at Fjell is: How can we establish spaces of encounter that take into consideration asymmetric power relations, in order to create relations of mutual respect and recognition?*

...

*They experience conviviality in a space where they are empowered to develop new skills and attitudes. They engage in practices that energize them as agents of transformation, in the sense that everyone involved, including ethnic Norwegians, gets new insights and perspectives on being a person of faith and on being a neighbor.*

*Fjell Lutheran Church, Drammen*

### **Conviviality and church life in action**

Choosing conviviality as the core concept for the diaconal church, we immediately have to focus on the relationships between people, and this brings

into focus the idea of the church as the Body of Christ. It is critical of the present individualistic ideas prevalent in the wider society and provides a view of diakonia which is grounded in everyday life together. It reflects a participatory approach to decision making and action in all aspects of church life. It also affects the liturgy because it opens up a space for the participation of marginalized people and groups. They are not further marginalized in the liturgy by being represented by others but are actively present. This, of course, raises many questions about the liturgy and about moments where people of different faiths, and no specific religious faith, can be present and active. This collective approach to a diaconal church breaks down the distinction between givers and receivers and changes all aspects of church life as they take their shape around those on the margins.

As we have seen in the stories, convivial congregational diakonia becomes a mark of the whole congregation as a transformative potential when responsibility is shared, and new people participate. Such a diaconal church is a learning community and supports many groups of people. In some places, the church also has a specific identity as a guarantor and can, in that way, act as a protector of vulnerable people. The most well-known example in recent years is of the church offering sanctuary to people who may be vulnerable to deportation. In this way, the church is a safe space for people to meet: safety may be important because of gender or sexual identity, race or religious identity, and other aspects of plurality where people may be under threat or feel unsafe.

Figuratively, the three original functions of the Augustana – namely “church, social, and living” will be preserved, but are given a new meaning with root words such as:

- living together
- looking after each other and after the community
- hospitality
- silence and inspiration

...

Residents of the Augustanahof choose to live communally and are motivated to fill this in together. This takes shape in living together, looking after each other in the Augustanahof and the community, hospitality, silence and inspiration, joint responsibility for the common rooms, and participating in the annual rhythm of the Augustanahof.

*Augustanahof, Amsterdam*

However, thinking from the position of the church as a safe space reminds us that space, or place, is actually an “actor”. This is clearly revealed in the case study from Amsterdam. A space is a living reality because it is, in part, defined by what has already happened there, by the relationships it has or hasn’t fostered, by what has happened, by what has

been endured, and by what has been enacted. Places are planned and shaped by events. We can easily say the church is people – not a building – but, in the stories, we see the importance of buildings which in themselves embody personal story, common narrative, and important values. We catch a glimpse of the process of creating spaces which are open to the other, which are open to the future. It is possible to say the church is people, but they inhabit a space and a tradition, and the space communicates important messages. It is important to reflect on this whether the church is a part of a national majority of Lutherans, a small minority, or a congregation made up of people with a different cultural, or national, background to the majority. It is even more complex because it depends on the actual context in which the church is set as the other part of the relationship. In thinking about a convivial church, we need to reflect on how the place we use – the church – communicates convivial life together with the “different others.”

This brings us to the question of power in the church, because there is an asymmetry of power related to the history of the local church and there is a legitimation of power which may be given by church structures, by culture and by personality. When the church relates to different other groups, the question of power comes to the fore. Convivial life together is more than tolerance because it infers a relational approach where all are invited to share responsibility and learn from each other. It may start with sharing some activities – typically, eating together – and specific activities related to a pressing issue. However, convivial life together implies not only developing good and respectful relationships,

but also sharing understanding about life together in a specific place, and visions for the future. It envisions common action but not complete agreement about everything. Seeking conviviality may include conflict about different ideas, but it implies working through conflict and finding a common way forward, in action. Therefore, the processes learnt in the congregation’s decision making should be convivial so that the wider conviviality can be supported in practice. Finding a common vocation amongst diverse actors is a part of building convivial life together, and includes ways of being open to, and in connectivity with, the wider community, including ecumenical and interfaith dimensions.

### Conviviality and working for change

Supporting convivial life together is the core of diakonia: it includes the diakonia of people normally thought of as marginalized or as service users. In this way, diakonia is transformative for people because it changes their position and possibilities to act. It recognizes the agency and voice of all participants, especially of those who are marginalized. Previously, the understanding that there is a need not only for personal change but for structural change was mentioned. This means that diakonia has to work for change for the sake of convivial life together. As well as developing supportive structures within which people can experience relationships of support and trust, there is a need to work for change in most contexts.

This means that those involved in diakonia as workers, volunteers, or participants (who may also

be active volunteers) need to develop the skills of working for change. This is sometimes called empowerment, referring not only to personal life but to political change. The precise approach will vary according to the context and the group, but may include awareness raising in the wider society, advocacy, and campaigning. As far as possible, these activities should be carried out with the people affected, recognizing, however, that in some cases it may be dangerous for the people themselves to be visibly involved. The specific context of the church itself may also make a difference; if the church is recognized and has a voice, or if the church itself is a minority which may be under suspicion, makes a difference to the scope and style of actions which are possible. People from the church may also have a different evaluation of authorities, and their policy and practice, than

marginalized people. It is important to recognize these nuances.

## Conclusion

Seeking conviviality has implications for the life of local churches and congregations as we have shared in these four stories. It is transformative for the church's own life and also for its relationship to society. It promotes an understanding of diakonia which is inclusive of all church members and provides an understanding of the need to transform the relationships with the people who are normally seen as service users or beneficiaries. In fact, it blurs the lines because it insists on reciprocity – that all may give and all may receive, and that all may learn through living together.

# Marks of Conviviality

Tony Addy

## Introduction

After reading the stories and reflecting on them, we now want to gather together some of the key elements, which form the framework for the next steps in the process towards ‘conviviality – diaconal life in diversity’. The chapter brings together some of the more important ‘headlines’ that will form the basis of a new document which will be called ‘Marks of Conviviality’. They are necessarily brief statements because the European Solidarity Group has worked on these ideas in detail. For those who want to dig further, the bibliography at the end of the book references the key sources.

The chapter is divided into:

- ▶ Conviviality as a Core Concept
- ▶ A Convivial Approach to Diaconal Practice
- ▶ Conviviality and a Diaconal Local Church

Three other books in this series will elaborate on aspects of conviviality particularly related to:

- ▶ Conviviality, Diakonia, and the Church
- ▶ Conviviality with People on the Move
- ▶ Convivial Church and Radical Welcome

The fifth volume will draw the whole concept together by integrating the thinking reflected in the European Diaconal Process and expressed in the various publications so far. The whole series is intended to be a learning resource, which can be used by different groups as they seek to implement conviviality as diaconal life in diversity.

## Conviviality as a Core Concept

### Three Dimensions of Conviviality - Vocation, Dignity and Justice

There are three dimensions of conviviality, which were identified as important elements in the process. The first can be summarized in this way:

*‘Diakonia is the faithful response to God’s call through the other’*

This is an important foundation because it recognizes that the ‘other’ is the bearer of God’s call whatever their situation. The core text is probably the story of the man who fell among thieves and was perceived in his need by a passing Samaritan. But this implies the second important foundational element, which is the recognition that the ‘other’ is made in the image of God and therefore has intrinsic dignity, regardless of performance or ability. This dignity can also be partially expressed in the notion of human rights. So, the second dimension is:

*‘Every person is made in the image of God and represents a challenge to our understanding of inclusivity’*

However, there is a need for a third dimension, because a personal and relational approach is not adequate on its own. In so many cases, human dignity and flourishing are marred by the impact of social, economic, political and even church structures and policies. It is not enough to express personal care, because we are all situated in contexts shaped by powerful structures. Therefore, to promote convivial life together we have to focus on those structures, which shape and, in many cases, disfigure life together. It means a concern for economic and political

structures, for work and employment, welfare and other aspects of common life. It implies a commitment to equality and justice, and this should be linked to advocacy with the people affected. Summarizing this, we could say:

*‘Diakonia seeks convivial life together by working for justice, participation and equality’*

### **Conviviality, Borders and Boundaries**

Convivial life together implies working on the borders between people, whether they be political borders or cultural and religious borders, or borders connected to personal identity. Recalling that all are made in the image of God and that Jesus in his ministry was always crossing the important borders and boundaries of his day, we could summarize this attitude and practice as follows:

*‘Convivial life together means crossing the borders that divide us from other people’*

This means going out of our own enclosed spaces, which is sometimes difficult for churches to achieve. It means giving up the idea that as Christians in each context we express a normative religious and cultural framework. This becomes clear when we consider the virtue of hospitality, which shapes a great deal of Christian social practice. We notice that the one who offers hospitality retains the power to define the relationship and the power to decide when it is time for the one offered hospitality to leave. A hospitable approach is certainly to be preferred to rejection, but conviviality pushes us to ask how we can live together and what the contribution of each to ‘life together’ in fullness could be. So, we could formulate it like this:

*‘Convivial life together implies that all have a contribution to make, and all may need the ‘gift’ of the other’*

### **Conviviality Overcoming Fear**

One of the factors, which destroys conviviality, is fear, and there are many fears in the present context. As well as fear of the ‘different other’, there is the fear of economic insecurity and even food insecurity, the fear of losing a place to live, of losing access to health care or education. Such fear is made worse by the feeling that the ‘other’ places one’s identity in jeopardy. By building on relationships and conversation, convivial life together breaks down the boundaries and lessens the fear by encouraging trust and openness. Gradually we can learn to act without fear. We could therefore express this as follows:

*‘Convivial relationships based on open sharing and trust can overcome fear and empower people to act’*

In order to overcome fear through such open sharing there is the necessity to construct safe and convivial spaces. Safety or ‘safeguarding’ is not only an attitude of respect and care related to dignity and equality, but can also be expressed in the design of a space, or in the design of a building which may encourage access and express safety and inclusion. It also means a space, which respects different moments in life – intense sharing in a group, small conversations and even silence and being alone. This implies that:

*‘Conviviality is nurtured by ensuring that spaces are accessible, open to sharing everyday life and profound thought, and also that they are relationally safe’*

### Conviviality instead of Tolerance

Tolerance is very often seen as a virtue, but even if we can agree on this, from the perspective of conviviality it has some limitations. In particular, it can be expressed in the form of disregard for what the 'other' does or thinks, so long as it doesn't affect 'me or my group' or even 'my church'. It can lead towards a closed communitarianism. Therefore, in our thinking and practice we have to go beyond tolerance. One approach, which moves thinking and practice in this direction, is Diapraxis, a concept that was developed by the Danish theologian Lissi Rasmussen. She proposed a living dialogical process, which accompanies or may lead to common praxis. Diapraxis implies talking together across diversities and seeking a 'horizon of possibilities' towards the transformation of the shared reality or wider context.

*'Convivial life together involves people of diverse identities talking and acting together in order to work for change in their everyday reality and also in the wider context'*

Mainstream cultures very often ascribe an identity to the 'different other' and start to relate to them on the basis of that identity. However, we know that 'naming' someone or some situation is an act of power – of taking power in defining the other. A convivial approach allows space for the other person to affirm and name their own identity. What we 'see' as the main identity (e.g., being female, being poor, being a person of color, living with a disability etc.) may not be the identity, which is chosen by the person, and it may in fact 'trap' them in that identity. The combination of different aspects of identity is specific to the person because different dimensions

of identity intersect in each person with different consequences. This has consequences for the way in which the church and diakonia respond to diversity.

*'Seeking conviviality overcomes the power of 'naming the other' by adopting an open attitude to receive the specific way the "other" describes themselves'*

### Convivial Relationships

People relate to each other by being receptive to each other's particular story. In fact, when you meet another person it is habitual to make an unconscious assessment of 'who' the other person is, particularly if they seem to be different in some way. One's personal story is very important because our biography and socialization are the basis for practice, whether it be professional practice, the practice of volunteering or the practice of everyday life. People 'embody' their biography so when you meet another person it is a meeting of stories. These stories change over time and, through working together for empowerment and transformation, stories also change. It is important to create a space where stories can be safely shared.

*'Convivial life together is supported by having a safe context where stories can be shared and the consequences for practice worked on personally and collectively'*

Creating the 'space' where conviviality can flourish requires an openness to the 'other', which is non-judgmental, and without the patronizing attitude, which closes off the possibilities for common action and reflection among equals. This is a critical question for diakonia and for the church because very often, generalized negative attitudes towards certain 'other' people or groups in society affect,

consciously or sub-consciously, the attitudes and practice of diakonia, whether diaconal practice is carried out by volunteers or paid workers.

*‘Conviviality is possible when there is open communication between people in all their diversity and when there is open reflection on socially constructed negative attitudes towards different “others”’*

## A Convivial Approach to Diaconal Practice

### A Convivial Approach to Time

In modern society, the approach to time is mediated by money and the search for efficiency and a higher rate of return on investments. This is very often a form of oppression. When people are unemployed or receive social assistance, it is also the case that the use of time is defined by the authorities and breaking this agreement leads to loss of benefit. This is also oppressive. Many diaconal projects are constructed within a similar framework and this brings about many difficulties in reality. If outcomes are defined quantitatively and time is limited to the ‘project time’, this can also be damaging to the effectiveness of the project or process. Therefore, diaconal work by a church or diaconal organization should reflect critically on time frames so that the time needed for work with people respects their time concept and changing needs and issues.

*‘Building life in conviviality takes time and must not be a pre-planned or linear process, and therefore diaconal work towards convivial life together should be based on long-term relationships where people have the time to ‘own the process’ and implement common praxis which is sustainable’*

### A Convivial Approach to Diaconal Work

Diaconal work is very often based on a so-called needs analysis and very often, this analysis misses a couple of important points. To start with needs implies the basis on a kind of ‘deficit’ model of the person or situation, and such a negative approach places people and groups in a position where they can simply be the recipients of a service to meet those needs. This deficit-based viewpoint often neglects the implicit knowledge, skills and experience of the people affected and situates diaconal work as possessing the ‘answer’.

*‘Convivial life in diversity is built on the knowledge, skills and gifts of people, including those usually defined as ‘beneficiaries’! Reciprocity is the key and sharing stories is the approach.’*

The development of diaconal work involves collaboration, which is inclusive in its approach. It aims for co-creation and co-responsibility. Partnership is too often considered at an institutional level, but the primary partnership and accountability is with and to those who are participants, normally thought of as ‘service users’. This requires an understanding of the fundamental equality of people as made in the image of God and a resistance to stereotyped labelling.

*‘Conviviality is based on a partnership between all actors and the promotion of co-production, co-responsibility and mutual accountability’*

### A Convivial Approach to Practice

The basic starting point towards building convivial life together is what has been termed the ‘going out model’, which implies that diaconal work is strongly related to the diverse life worlds of people

and recognizes that systems are very often excluding factors because of the diversity of values, norms and standards as well as different cultures of communication.

*‘Seeking convivial life together implies a willingness to ‘go out’ concretely and figuratively to be with people in their everyday-life world reality and not to create barriers which prevent sharing life together’*

Because of the commitment to being close to everyday life and not arriving with pre-formed ‘answers’, diaconal work involves dealing with power gaps and perceptions and the creation of space, where compassion and socially sensitive listening express empathy. This implies an inductive approach, which starts with people’s everyday life and the issues they confront and builds trust, innovation and accountability.

*‘Conviviality as a basis for diaconal work recognizes that pre-formed models of work with people may express imposed ideas and it should therefore be based on a reciprocal and inductive approach to working for change’*

### **A Convivial Approach to Advocacy & Campaigning**

Advocacy is a central aspect of building convivial life together. As the process of work develops, the issues people face with existing power holders and present policies become clear and are expressed in the language of the people affected. Because diaconal work is close to people and is based on trust, advocacy also has to be built on a partnership. It is not a question of becoming ‘the voice of marginalized people’ but of people expressing their own views on the basis of reflected experience. This is a process of empowerment and transformation. Conviviality

may result in alternatives, but it may also support the work for much needed changes in politics, policy and practice.

*‘Conviviality may be impeded by the actions of decision-makers, and diaconal work and the diaconal church working for convivial life together support advocacy with and sometimes on behalf of marginalized groups’*

In some situations where there is a need for political change in order to support convivial life together, it is important to organize with people - those affected and others - to press for changes. This is a different approach to advocacy because it recognizes that the changes needed will not just be related to present policies and practices but require a more fundamental shift in the systemic approach. This may be on the local level, or more widely. It may be in order to remedy an injustice or to prevent action, which would further disadvantage people.

*‘Convivial life together cannot be built on injustice and the maltreatment of particular groups of marginalized people. Therefore, based on praxis with people and working towards conviviality, diaconal actors will work with people to protest an unjust situation at present or to stop a negative development’*

## **Conviviality and a Diaconal Local Church**

### **Introduction - Diakonia as a Mark of the Church**

The marks of conviviality can be applied to every church and diaconal organization, but when we come to look at the marks of a convivial local church there

are some considerations which have to be taken into account and we would like to draw them to your attention. From the perspective of convivial life together, when we see diakonia as a mark of the church it means that diakonia can no longer be seen simply as a matter of personal responsibility but has to be reflected in the culture and everyday life and worship of the church itself.

### Conviviality and the Culture of a Congregation

In the experience of those involved in the seeking conviviality process, very often local churches are expressions of a particular culture or linguistic group. This may be perceived as a 'majority' or 'minority' culture, shaped by the particular history. The position of the church congregation in the surrounding context may enable or hinder convivial life together. This is a factor which has to be explored by the congregation as it seeks to be convivial and diaconal. It means exploring life together as well as the local and even wider context.

*'A convivial and diaconal church creates a space and relationships which support reflection on life together and the local and wider context in which the church is set'*

Churches may see themselves as having 'open doors', but this may not be the case, especially in contexts where there is a demographic change or

population change due to migration and at a time when there is increasing marginalization and vulnerability. There may be hidden barriers between congregation members, diaconal and pastoral workers and the local population. These barriers may be related to historical factors, social position, inherited ideas about 'the different other' and inherited understandings of diakonia.

*'A convivial and diaconal church is open to diverse people, based on mutual respect and fosters a culture of welcome'*

In terms of priorities for diakonia, there is a core concern for people who are vulnerable or marginalized and for those suffering or who are disadvantaged, especially those 'hidden' from mainstream society. The approach to working with people in this wider context needs to develop from a culture of welcome into a process where a diversity of people can find their place in the life of the church and where they may become part of the congregation.

*'A convivial and diaconal church will create space and relationships where all can feel safe and where the classical division between diaconal work and beneficiaries is broken down in a mutual approach to the issues which people face in their everyday life'*

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The Rev. Mārtiņš Urdze passed away after a short but severe illness between the writing of the text and the publication of this story book. The book is dedicated to him, in his memory.

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# Resources and Links

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## Links

LWF Website: [www.lutheranworld.org](http://www.lutheranworld.org)  
interdiac on-line space: [www.online-space.eu](http://www.online-space.eu)





## Conviviality and the Diaconal Church

This book invites you to reflect on the everyday life of the local congregation and to explore the meaning of the terms “conviviality” and “diakonia” in practice. In order to start this process of reflection, four members of the European group involved in the “Seeking Conviviality” process have written stories out of their experience of working as diaconal congregations. They are not meant to be perfect examples, but each one points to some of the key themes which can inform our understanding of the diaconal church.

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