

# An Overview on the Imperative of Diakonia for the Church

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## 1. Introduction

Thank you very much for inviting me to be part of this very important All Africa Conference of Churches 11<sup>th</sup> Assembly with the theme *'Respecting The Dignity and God's Image in Every Human Being'* (Genesis 1:26-27). When I was invited by the general secretary of AACC, Rev Dr Karamaga, to give *An Overview on the Imperative of Diakonia for the Church* at this assembly, I was excited because at that time the World Council of Churches<sup>2</sup> together with Action for The Churches Together (ACT) Alliance and Lutheran World Federation were in the final stages of writing a joint document entitled: *Called To Transformative Action: Ecumenical Diakonia*. Motivated by this work, my presentation this morning aims to make a contribution towards the assembly theme and the theme of this morning in five stages. First, I will argue that *Diakonia* is an imperative for the Church be it at a local, national, regional and global level. Second, I will demonstrate that as the World Council of Churches celebrate seventy years of existence, *Diakonia* has been one aspect of its

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<sup>2</sup> The World Council of Churches (WCC) is a fellowship of 348 Orthodox, Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Reformed, many United and Uniting Churches, Mennonites, Friends, Congregationalists, Disciples and African Indigenous Churches. It is broadest, most inclusive Christian organization in the world. It represents 560 million Christians in over 120 countries. The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe (WCC Constitution, Article III).

identity. The struggle of *diakonia* and development within the fellowship and ecumenical partners will be highlighted. Third, I will draw from *Called to Transformative Action: Ecumenical Diakonia* as the most recent attempt to reflect on who we are and what we do as Church. Lastly I will conclude by looking at the way forward.

## **2. *Diakonia* – an imperative for the Church**

*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10)*

John 10:10 together with Luke 4: 16 – 21 and Matthew 25:31-46 point to a vision and practice of *diakonia* as the churches' embodiment of God's reign to come with its promise of life, justice and peace and God's preferential option for the poor as theological and ethical criteria for the way forward.

John chapter 10 speaks of Jesus as the good shepherd who is ready to lay down his life for the sheep in contrast to the thief who comes to steal, kill and destroy. Reading this text together with chapter 34 of the book of the prophet Ezekiel, we understand the powerful political meaning of the image of the good shepherd. Ezekiel is accusing the false shepherds of Israel who are prioritizing their own self-interests at the expense of the poor and marginalized and destroy the basis of life. The good shepherd is another image for the Messiah who will come to gather and feed the sheep. Life will blossom and grow and they shall be secure on their land.

The texts of the Hebrew Bible give context and meaning to the teaching and practice of Jesus who stands in the Biblical tradition and refers frequently to Biblical texts. Therefore, it has been problematic that the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, does not use the words of the *diakonia* root. But when Jesus speaks of himself as the *diakonos*, the servant of the Lord, and Paul refers to *diakonia* as an expression of his apostolate, we can see behind these text the reference to the suffering servant of God, the *ebed adonai* in Isaiah 53, who gives his life for his people. The word *obed* appears in Genesis 2 for the human being who is not to sit idle in paradise but to water the garden, to care for life and to worship and praise God and the beauty of creation. The Hebrew Bible speaks of *abodah* when it refers to the temple worship.

The servant here is not the slave, but the one who acts faithfully on behalf of the one who has entrusted her or him with a task and sent to carry it out. This includes the sharing of food and of financial means, but it is not reduced to. It is significant that Acts 6 speaks of the *diakonia* or ministry of the word in parallel to the *diakonia* of the table. These are two dimensions of a holistic ministry. The word table - or *trapeza* - still refers in modern Greek to the banks and money changers.

*Diakonia* is thus an essential dimension of being church. The Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement defines *diakonia* as “the responsible service of the gospel by deeds and by words performed by Christians in response to the needs of people.”

The title of the ecumenical *diakonia* document that was presented and discussed at the recent Central Committee of the World Council of Churches speaks of the “Call to transformative action” as an expression of Christian discipleship. *Diakonia* according to the document is a mandate “given to all churches, at local and national level, and to every Christian as an integral part of discipleship. As all baptized are called to be “a holy priesthood” (1 Peter 2:5), they are called to participate in God’s mission of healing and reconciliation, to serve one’s neighbour and be committed to causes of justice and peace.”

When Pope Francis visited the World Council of Churches on the 21st June 2018, he said:

“...the work of our Christian communities is rightly defined by the word *diakonia*. It is our way of following the Master who came “not to be served but to serve” (Mk 10:45). The broad gamut of services provided by the member churches of the World Council finds emblematic expression in the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. The credibility of the Gospel is put to the test by the way Christians respond to the cry of all those, in every part of the world, who suffer unjustly from the baleful spread of an exclusion that, by generating poverty, foments conflicts. The more vulnerable are increasingly marginalized, lacking their daily bread, employment and a future, while the rich are fewer and ever more-wealthy. Let us be challenged to compassion by the cry of those who suffer...”

In summary: *Diakonia* is embodied practice of discipleship as we can see in the stories of the Acts of the Apostles. Churches continue to engage in diaconal action over the centuries.

Understanding and practice differ from time to time and from context to context. For

example, in most of the churches and theological institutions in Africa do not use the word *diakonia* but social ministry. Whatever the case *diakonia* carries always the marks of *kenotic* service and embodied practice for justice and peace. This theological and biblical understanding of *diakonia* is well articulated in the seventy years work on *diakonia* by the World Council of Churches, to which I now turn.

### **3. The World Council of Churches and Ecumenical Diakonia – more than 70 years of work**

The World Council of Churches is celebrating this year its 70th anniversary. Remembering the first assembly 1948 in Amsterdam, at its foundation, the World Council of Churches brought together the Faith and Order movement, the Life and Work movement, the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs and the Office for Inter-Church Aid and Service to Refugees. The first General Secretary, Willem A. Visser't Hooft insisted on integrating the Office for Inter-Church Aid and Service to Refugees into the World Council of Churches because he was convinced that it needed a strong diaconal arm.

Much has changed since then. World Service became an important dimension of the work of the World Council of Churches in addition to Inter-Church Aid and Support for Refugees. The United Nations development decades motivated many churches to strengthen their own ministries for *diakonia* and development, often with a strong emphasis on human rights. With the recognition of the environmental crisis, the term sustainable development came to underline that the social and ecological dimensions of development cannot be separated and played against each other.

With the Commission on Inter-Church Aid, Refugees and World Service (CICARWS) and the Commission on the Churches' Participation in Development (CCPD) that was formed after the 1968 Uppsala assembly, the World Council of Churches criticized strongly the prevailing development paradigm of the World Bank and other international agencies. The World Council of Churches distinguished itself by concentrating on people centred development, participation, and the care for creation and by speaking of the guiding vision of a “just,

participatory and sustainable society.” Many insisted in dropping the use of sustainable development and favoured the use of sustainable communities.

The member churches of the World Council of Churches and their specialized ministries have continued to struggle to overcome the growth oriented prevailing development paradigm and the reductionist economic theory supporting it. It has also continued to focus on the care for people and the earth, who come first.

In many ways, the success of this work, posed new challenges. The specialized ministries became ever more financially powerful actors developing their own practice and approach in competition with other similar agencies. Bi-lateral relationships often became the preferred option instead of multi-lateral relationships brokered by the World Council of Churches. These and related challenges were addressed in 1986 with a conference on prophetic diakonia in Larnaca Cyprus and in 1987 with a conference on the sharing of resources in El Escorial, Spain.

Both continued to be important milestones and marks on the way. However, as time went by, the specialized ministries developed their own cooperation at all levels, challenging more and more an operational role of the World Council of Churches. Action of Churches Together (ACT) Alliance started with a focus on humanitarian aid, but soon moved to development and advocacy. These changes were challenged and put into question by a number of churches and National Council of Churches. More and more voices called for an intense dialogue between churches and specialized ministries, the World Council of Churches and confessional bodies and ACT Alliance. The 2014 Malawi consultation responded to these calls, beginning a new dialogue between the different actors and requesting a *diakonia* document that could help to articulate a shared vision and common ground for action.

#### **4. Called to Transformative Action: The Ecumenical *Diakonia* Working Document**

Following on from the 2014 Malawi consultation, the World Council of Churches, ACT Alliance and Lutheran World Federation have produced a working document on Ecumenical *Diakonia*: “Called to Transformative Action”. Discussions at the recent meeting of the World Council of Churches’ Central Committee have shown that further consultation and discussion will be necessary before this document can be finalised. This opportunity for further dialogue is significant and useful; this document needs further engagement with the World Council of Churches members and ecumenical partners followed by further refinement. The fate of many publications is to sit on a shelf and gather dust; here instead is an important opportunity to critically evaluate what Ecumenical *Diakonia* means for the Church as we read the signs of our times. This AACC assembly is an opportune moment: you can help with this consultation process and your feedback will be important in shaping this area of work.

Even once it will be finalised, I must, however, emphasise that it is not intended to be a convergence document, nor a policy document, nor in any way binding on the member churches of the World Council of Churches and its ecumenical partners. It is intended to help stimulate debate; this global document will only be of relevance when it is discerned in a local context. The African understanding and experience of ecumenical diakonia has to be included.

Being of a global nature, the document cannot offer a prescription from any one tradition or continent. There has to be a full recognition of the diversity of the Church.

The strongest point of the working *document Called to Transformative Action: The Ecumenical Diakonia* is that it works on the premise that faith and human rights are not mutually exclusive – indeed quite the opposite. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” says Jesus Christ (John 10:10). A faith-based approach means that, through *diakonia*, the Church has a distinctive, authentic and unique voice in dialogue with civil society actors.

The second strongest point of the working document *Called to Transformative Action: The Ecumenical Diakonia* Respect for the dignity of every woman and man is central to a Christian understanding of life in all its fullness. A holistic approach, including justice on grounds of gender, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation is necessary. I find this point, which connects *diakonia* to the theme of this assembly, well-articulated in the *Ecumenical Diakonia*

*document* of 2002 written by Chris Fergusson and Ofelia Ortega. In their Ecumenical Diakonia Document, they identify nine theological and biblical affirmations.<sup>3</sup> one of which is *Ecumenical Diakonia is Global Diakonia and is for all people and all of Creation.*

They quote from the El Escorial guidelines which affirmed: “Recognizing that all God’s children are made in God’s own image, which we see in Genesis 1:26 as a plural image, we acknowledge that there is neither Jew or Greek, slave nor free, male or female.” But that we “are all one in Christ (Gal. 3:28) ... A call to *koinonia* calls us to re-examine ... theological understandings that eliminate women or other groups from sharing the life of Christ in all its fullness in all aspects of church and community life.” (SLpg42).

Fergusson and Ortega then points out that ‘the biblical vision based on the *Missio Dei* leads us to affirm that Ecumenical *Diakonia* is global in that it is called to respond to the reality of globalised injustice. It is global because it calls for the whole ecumenical community to join together in diaconal action world-wide as part of one body. The vision includes the whole inhabited earth, that is to say respect and love for all of creation. The *diakonia* is service with and to all. Living out the vision that God loves the whole world and all the people of the world are God’s people. The urgency of the situation calls us to form alliances with whoever also seeks justice, peace and the integrity of creation.”

This leads me to the third most important point of the working document *Called to Transformative Action: The Ecumenical Diakonia* which is in Chapter 5. The chapter begins by describing the changing landscape of diaconal action and the new faces of poverty in today’s world. It presents the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as a relevant platform for diaconal engagement. The chapter indicates some specific themes as priority areas for diaconal action, such as migration and refugees, economic justice, climate justice, gender justice and health justice. Let me draw your attention to gender justice and health justice in the diaconal work of the World Council of Churches.

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<sup>3</sup> The nine affirmations are:

Ecumenical Diakonia must respond to our contexts: Global and local.

Ecumenical Diakonia is a call to participate in God’s mission.

Ecumenical Diakonia is Prophetic Diakonia.

Ecumenical Diakonia is Transformative and Justice- seeking

Ecumenical Diakonia is inseparable from Koinonia

Ecumenical Diakonia is Global Diakonia and is for all people and all of Creation.

Ecumenical Diakonia is about Healing, Reconciliation and Reconstruction

Ecumenical Diakonia is about building Just Relationships, Mutuality and Sharing.

We are called to be United in God’s Mission in Compassionate, Reconciling, Transformative, Justice-Seeking, and Prophetic Diakonia.

The WCC has a long tradition of and strong commitment to gender justice for a just community of women and men in church and society. Already in 1953, it began the Programme of Women in Church and Society, stating that the renewal of a dignified life after World War II was only possible if women were an active part of every initiative of justice and peace by the churches in society. It had a leading role in organizing the WCC Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998) and in focusing on violence against women as a key to the WCC Decade for Overcoming Violence (2000-2010). As part of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the WCC, this year 1-6 October we celebrate 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of organizing the WCC Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women and the relaunch of Thursdays in Black campaign. Thursdays in Black grew out of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998), in which the stories of rape as a weapon of war, gender injustice, abuse, violence, and many tragedies that grow outward from such violence became all the more visible. But what also became visible was women's resilience, agency and personal efforts to resist such violations. You too can become part of the Thursdays in Black campaign by wearing black on Thursdays; Wear a pin to declare you are part of the global movement resisting attitudes and practices that permit rape and violence; Show your respect for women who are resilient in the face of injustice and violence and encourage others to join you.

On health justice, Churches in Africa have been pioneers of health care, mainly due to their missionary heritage. Churches currently provide 40 – 70% of health services in Sub-Saharan Africa. These range from small rural health centres to big hospitals providing specialist health care, as well as from diploma- to specialist degree-training institutions.

Mission health facilities are resilient, provide compassionate care and are usually valued and appreciated by the communities. They provide services mainly to rural poor populations, thereby being effective witnesses to the gospel of Christ. There are various working arrangements with the respective governments.

However, several challenges exist requiring concerted efforts and renewed commitment of the churches. Dwindling overseas support and growing poverty in rural African communities are new realities that threaten viability/sustainability of the churches' health in serving the

poor masses. In addition, there is an acknowledged gap between the church congregation/parish and the church hospital.

Cognisant of the noble history and prevailing challenges, the WCC Health and Healing programme has developed an ambitious but necessary strategy to promote biblical and ethical reflections on health matters, promote the “health-promoting churches” initiative, support documentation of church health work, and strengthen networking, capacity building and advocacy.

There are several countries without a national Christian health association with church hospitals cooperating only along denominational lines. These are encouraged to learn from those that have umbrella ecumenical health associations and the WCC stands ready to provide accompaniment in establishing ecumenical Christian health associations. In addition, we have some ecumenical institutions working at the regional level that deserve mention here and the support of the churches. The Africa Christian Health Associations’ Platform (ACHAP) is a continental network and an important tool to promote the health work of churches at a continental scale and the Ecumenical Pharmaceutical Network (EPN), which is multi-continental but based in Nairobi, Kenya.

On the other hand, from the 1980s WCC has provided leadership among faith-inspired organizations to address the enormous medical and pastoral challenges presented by the HIV and AIDS Pandemic to minister to those living with HIV or dying from AIDS related causes but also to their families and other care-givers. Through Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy (EHAIA), WCC has reached out to churches, theological institutions, councils of churches and networks of people living with HIV to stimulate and promote an ecumenical HIV response to ensure comprehensive, faith inspired HIV interventions that overcome stigma, discrimination and sexual and gender base violence and to address the root causes of vulnerability and marginalization. EHAIA has generated manuals and life-giving theologies and ethics that foster healing and healthy relationships between girls and boys, women and men which are made available in churches and theological institutions.

All in all, we need to broaden and strengthen our cooperation and collaboration. We need strong partnerships to build on our strengths and overcome the challenges that we face so that

as churches and theological institutions can be the vehicle for health and healing for this continent and its great potentials and possibilities.

The point being made here is that Ecumenical Diakonia cannot just be a dialogue within the Church. Following Christ's teaching in John 10:10, the message of abundant life is one intended for all. On this basis, the Church has to engage with civil society, including secular civil society. A consequence of this at a global level is the necessity for the Church to enter constructive engagement with the UN's seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Aspects of the SDGs are open to criticism, such as the lack of emphasis of the rights of indigenous peoples, but nevertheless the overall aims are ambitious and, if implemented, have the potential to improve the quality of life for hundreds of millions of people. If the Church fails to engage, we will fail to make a faith-based case for abundant life.

Chapter 8 of the working document *Called to Transformative Action: The Ecumenical Diakonia* also calls for our attention as it looks at the way forward. The significance of this chapter is that it aims at indicating some key areas of strategic planning and innovative action in *Diakonia* where churches, agencies and ecumenical bodies work together. It points at some crucial issues that require attention and that represent opportunities for strategizing ecumenical *diakonia* in view of "the signs of our times" (Matthew 16:3). There are eight affirmations which are described in detail in the chapter. Here I will quote three. Churches, agencies and ecumenical bodies are challenged to:

1. Affirm *Diakonia* as a shared vision and mandate to act together in strategic planning, working documents and communication work; Articulate the distinctiveness of *diakonia* as faith-based and rights-based action; Recognize initiatives that enhance the coordination of diaconal work, such as the ACT Alliance and other ecumenical bodies, as an integral dimension of the ecumenical movement and as an expression of the shared mandate to engage in *diakonia*; Enhance mutual recognition of roles and mandates, seeking coordination and cooperation whenever possible.
2. Affirm Justice as a priority by including advocacy and public witness in all diaconal action and activities; building competence and share experiences related to working

for justice; deepen interdisciplinary reflection on justice and prophetic *diakonia*; Strengthen coordinated efforts of advocacy and public witness; join forces in ecumenical campaigns related to justice issues; Accompany local churches in their efforts to strengthen public witness and advocacy competence.

3. Affirm Strengthening diaconal capacity by including capacity building in *diakonia* in their strategic and programmatic plans; Offer training opportunities for joint training and learning for employees and leaders, strengthening their diaconal competence; Elaborate and provide relevant training material; Encourage theological seminaries and other relevant institutions to include *diakonia* in their curricula and training programmes.

## **5. Future plans and Lesson learnt**

Looking to the future, the World Council of Churches will hold a joint day with ACT Alliance on 1st November 2018. This day, in Uppsala, Sweden, will be both the final day of ACT Alliance's assembly and the first day of the World Council of Churches' Executive Committee. Ecumenical Diakonia will be a core part of the day's discussions. Although the day is not intended to be centred on the discussion of papers, the opportunity to input into the Ecumenical Diakonia document "Call to Transformative Action" will be useful. This work needs to be followed with consultation with World Council of Churches member churches and ecumenical partners. Since *Diakonia* continues to be a pillar of ecumenism, let us work together to make the table of *diakonia* as a table of inclusion and transformation. The churches in Africa are therefore invited to engage the working document *Called to Transformative Action: The Ecumenical Diakonia* and prayerfully to discern the direction for ecumenical *diakonia* in Africa.