

An Epistle from the LWF Global Consultation on Diakonia

Sisters and brothers in faith, especially LWF member churches and their diaconal ministries: we greet you in the name of Jesus Christ, the deacon par excellence, who came to serve and not to be served!

From November 3-7, 2002, under the auspices of the three departments of the Lutheran World Federation, over 80 of us from Lutheran churches throughout the world have gathered in Johannesburg South Africa for a Global Consultation on Diakonia. As we met under the theme, "Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World," we anticipated the 2003 Winnipeg Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, where we expect some of the following concerns to be pursued further, as well as within our own churches and diaconal ministries.

Participants in our consultation are involved in a wide and diverse range of diaconal work: international relief and development work, domestic diaconal or social ministry work, diaconal institutions, deaconesses and deacons, pastors and lay members of local congregations, church-related public policy advocates, and those who teach in educational institutions.

We acknowledge with gratitude the many kinds of diaconal work that the Church has carried out through the centuries, and which necessarily continue in our own day. This work is now challenged to move toward more prophetic forms of diakonia. Inspired by Jesus and the prophets who confronted those in power and called for changes in unjust structures and practices, we pray that God may empower us to help transform all that leads to human greed, violence, injustice and exclusion. *We want to share with you our findings and invite you to consider the implications in your particular context.*

Diakonia and its Prophetic Calling: Theological Perspectives

Diakonia is central to what it means to be the Church. As a core component of the gospel, diakonia is not an option but an essential part of discipleship. Diakonia reaches out to all persons, who are created in God's image. While diakonia begins as unconditional service to the neighbor in need, it leads inevitably to social change that restores, reforms and transforms.

We are shaped to serve others through worship, where we celebrate God's gifts of grace in the Word, in water, in bread and wine, and glimpse the fulfillment of God's promise. In this broken world where sin and injustice abound, God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit shapes us as a gathered community. Thus, we become agents of grace, hands and feet of Christ for the healing of the world.

All Christians are called through baptism to live out diakonia through what they do and how they live in their daily life in the world. This is the first and most fundamental

expression of diakonia. More organized expressions of diakonia occur at the congregational level, as well as through those who are specifically set apart for diaconal ministry. More specialized forms of diaconal work are organized to carry out what individuals or congregations are unable to do on their own.

Because of the holistic mission of God, diakonia is deeply interrelated with kerygma (proclamation of the Word) and koinonia (sharing at the Table). Diakonia is witnessing through deeds. It is rooted in the sharing of the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion. The mutual sharing inherent in the communion of the church can transform the unjust power relations that often are present in diaconal work, such as between “wealthy givers” and “poor recipients.” In diakonia, those served and those serving are both transformed. At the same time, we insist that the purpose of diakonia is not to proselytize.

Diakonia is more than the strong serving the weak, which can lead to paternalistic assumptions and practices, and imply that some churches are unable to engage in diakonia because of their lack of resources or expertise. We challenge this assumption. Diakonia is part of the calling of all churches and all Christians in the world.

We must challenge all theological interpretations that do not take seriously the suffering in the world, a world afflicted with poverty, violence and HIV/AIDS. As Lutheran churches, we are to be shaped by a theology of the cross, which compels us to identify with and for the suffering rather than the successful. A theology of the cross calls things what they really are, moving beyond politeness and pretense, breaking the silence and taking the risk of speaking truth to power, even when this threatens the established order and results in hardship or persecution. This is at the heart of the prophetic diaconal calling.

Poverty, Violence and HIV/AIDS Provoke the Church

Poverty, violence and HIV/AIDS are three of the major issues in our day that churches cannot ignore. They provoke us to move into more prophetic expressions of diakonia. There are many ways in which the LWF, member churches and related organizations, as well as the ecumenical movement as whole have been analyzing and addressing these challenges. Rather than repeating analyses and commitments already set forth in these documents, here we cite a few of the major points we discerned in these areas.

Poverty

The extreme and extensive poverty in our world is a scandal. While recognizing the global structural divide between the rich and the poor, we should address the root causes of poverty wherever they are found. Churches are called to participate in the struggles of the poor to overcome poverty and to pursue alternatives that will lead to greater justice. Those who benefit at the expense and exploitation of the poor must be named, confronted and brought to justice.

The current development paradigm that seeks to “reduce poverty” must be reconsidered to become more justice-oriented. Poverty is a symptom of the deeper problems of injustice, greed and the massive accumulation of wealth, encouraged by the neo-liberal paradigm and implemented through multilateral corporations and institutions.

We recognize that the poor and the rich are among and within us as churches. The Lutheran communion is composed of those who themselves are poor, sick or marginalized. We are invited to name and claim those gifts and possibilities we have for diaconal work, no matter how materially impoverished we might be. Churches in situations of poverty have a truth to share with churches in more affluent situations. As churches, we together are called to renew the hope of those who are poor, to listen and work in partnership with each other so that the full potential of human beings might be realized.

Those of us who are rich materially need to learn how to relinquish power, and realize how radical is God’s grace. Those who live in poverty are far more than recipients of “our” help or service, especially if this is done in order to assuage our guilt or perpetuate paternalistic if not implicitly violent relationships. Those of us who are poor, in turn, should claim our God-given rights to life and livelihood.

Violence

We confess that the church has too often overlooked, tolerated and legitimized patterns and practices of violence such as domestic violence -- including through some of its theology and how power is structured in churches. Some church leaders have been perpetrators of violence inside the churches, or have aligned themselves with the perpetrators rather than the victims.

A culture of silence regarding violence, and the injustices that underlie it, jeopardizes the churches’ prophetic voice and needs to be challenged. An appropriate role of churches is to confront perpetrators of violence, seeking to bring them to repentance, in order to transform and accompany the process of reconciliation and healing.

In situations of violence and in working with victims of violence, churches should plan, implement and accompany processes of conflict management and promote non-violent methods of resolving conflicts. Churches’ proactive efforts to build peace involve working together with other faiths, organizations and movements in the civil society.

Cultural values and practices that propagate or encourage violence must be rejected, and those that can contribute to bridge building and peace encouraged. Tolerance and attitudes that honor cultural differences in a spirit of mutual respect must be nurtured.

We call each other to find ways to resist an imperial culture that invades our world through the media, and spreads consumerism, individualism, worship of those who are young, rich and strong, and tolerates violence as a means of solving problems. This

culture is in open contradiction to Christian values of love, inclusiveness, community and peace-building.

HIV/AIDS

The church is living with HIV/AIDS; there are many living with HIV/AIDS in our midst. We must break the culture of silence that overlooks this painful reality in the body of Christ. Cultural beliefs, practices, and traditions must be challenged whenever they lead to the spread of HIV/AIDS. There is a dynamic interaction between HIV/AIDS, poverty and violence. This includes the structural violence of gender inequality.

Rather than with fearful or moralistic approaches, the church must reach out pastorally, with unqualified acceptance of those affected by HIV/AIDS. We must break out of our comfort-zones to accompany those affected, in ways that constantly safeguard and promote their rights and self-esteem.

Public policy advocacy is important in relation to HIV/AIDS, such as challenging the cost and access to drugs produced by large companies. In doing so, we should work in partnership with other churches and organizations, such as through the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance.

Special attention and sensitivity must be given to how women, youth and children are affected by HIV/AIDS, to all modes of transmission, to the promotion of effective means of prevention (e.g., abstinence, faithfulness, use of condoms, sterilized needles, clean blood supply), and to how to discuss sexuality and sexual ethics among all age groups.

Some Implications for How We Carry Out Diakonia

As agents of transformation, healing and reconciliation, the church must engage with people who are marginalized, such as those who live with HIV/AIDS, live in poverty, or are affected by violence. Our approach should be characterized by compassion, mutuality, and an eagerness to understand and further the struggles of those who seek justice. Christ is the source of the church's hope for abundant life for all, but structures and practices can sometimes impede that hope from being realized. Such cases call for change.

Structures

In order to be effective and credible agents of prophetic diakonia, all levels of the church regularly need to assess internal structures and governance models for the sake of transparency and accountability. Member churches and their diaconal ministries should structure diakonia so that it is effective, visible and credible. Mutual accountability is necessary between church "headquarters" and diaconal organizations. Churches should strengthen the capacity of specialized diaconal ministries to work in areas where there is no member church. International diaconal alliances should create forums where

organizations from the different streams of diakonia can share visions, best practices and priorities, building synergy for diaconal ministry.

Leaders

Leadership at all levels is essential, leaders who equip all Christians to take up their call to serve. Professionals should not use their expertise in ways that treat those they serve as passive recipients or clients. Churches should initiate and strengthen education for diakonia. As a ministry, it should be fully integrated into the church's ordained, consecrated and commissioned ministries, as a reflection of the fundamental significance of diakonia for the being of the Church.

In most local congregational settings, it is women far more than men who have responded to the call to engage in carrying out diaconal work. Attention should be given to how diakonia has become engendered, and how more men and women might be encouraged to become fuller participants in diakonia.

Alliances

Although diakonia has explicitly Christian grounds, we also recognize that God is active throughout creation and not only through the church. Building strategic alliances is crucial. We must work with other partners ecumenically, with those of other faiths, with governments and intergovernmental organizations (e.g., the United Nations), and with others in civil society, especially for the purpose of supporting, encouraging, and advocating for those who are vulnerable. Important civil society partners include community-based organizations, faith-based organizations and other peoples' movements. Churches should acknowledge these potential partners and, whenever appropriate and feasible, work with them for more effective results.

Churches' complex relationships with governments, especially with regard to diaconal work, require careful examination. In some countries, much of the church's diaconal work is financed through government funds. In other countries, governments are either unable or unwilling to provide for the basic needs and rights of their people, and expect churches and other organizations to fill the gap. Furthermore, in some multi-faith or secular contexts, government may discriminate against churches and even openly oppose churches' diaconal work. Attention needs to be given to the decreasing power and resources of governments, especially under the influence of neo-liberal economic globalization.

With regard to governments, churches need to serve as a conscience, challenging patterns of corruption and insisting that governments carry out their appropriate, God-given responsibility to provide for the basic needs and the political, economic, social and cultural rights of their people. Churches should become more proactively involved in challenging, changing and shaping public policies toward these ends. At the same time, churches should keep a critical distance from government so as not to be co-opted.

In partnership with their national and international diaconal organizations, churches need to become better advocates for those living in poverty, misery and oppression. The future lies in networking with and among those affected by poverty, violence and HIV/AIDS, and in organizing advocacy at national and international levels, including through our connections as a communion of churches. Churches should more boldly raise their public voice to advocate for global mechanisms to protect the social, economic, cultural and political rights of the vulnerable in all societies. At the same time, churches need to continue supporting poor communities and marginalized people with all available resources and appropriate professional expertise.

We invite you to join us in these commitments and efforts!



THE DIACONAL MINISTRY COMMUNITY
OF THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

visit www.elca.org/diaconalministry