

# Diakonia

The following article by Teresa Joan White is the entry on *diakonia* from the revised edition of the Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement published jointly by the World Council of Churches and the Wm. Eerdmans in 2002

The term "diakonia" (from the Greek verb *diakonein*, to serve; cf. *diakonos*, male or female servant) refers to service as a permanent activity of the church throughout its history (part I of the entry on Diakonia from the Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement, see below). It is also the name of an international organization networking among those involved in the service ministries of the churches (part II, see print edition). A separate entry is devoted to the diaconate as an order of ministry in the churches (see print edition).

## I. The Diakonia of the church

Diakonia, or the "responsible service of the gospel by deeds and by words performed by Christians in response to the needs of people", is rooted in and modelled on Christ's service and teachings. The intimate link between the service of God and the service of humankind is said by [Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry](#) to be exemplified for the whole church by the ministry of deacons (M31).

The Old Testament law provided a variety of ways to alleviate the sufferings of the poor, and the prophets often spoke as advocates of the widows and orphans. The early Jerusalem church practised a form of communism: those with possessions sold them to benefit those who were in need. Its own subsequent needs were met in part by diakonia from gentile churches (Acts 11:27ff.; 2 Cor. 8).

### Elements of the tradition

In the ancient churches, the funds used for diakonia were collected from the whole congregation at the eucharist. In the Roman church male deacons, and in the Eastern church both men and women in the diaconate, were the key administrators of practical care in the name of the church.

By the 3rd century the church at Rome had over 1500 registered widows and recipients of alms. The city was divided into seven administrative districts, or *diaconiae*, under the care of seven deacons. Instead of the Roman state distributing bread, the deacons looked after it. The apostate Emperor Julian was extremely impressed by the care Christians provided for one another.

In Syria the monk-bishop Rabbula built a hostel and arranged for a female deacon and nuns to provide care for the women in need and a male deacon and monks to care for men. Diakonia as an institution to care for the sick and poor spread from Syria throughout

the Byzantine empire. At the height of their ministry, the deacons of the Eastern churches were involved in social care, liturgical-pastoral care, teaching, administrative-judicial duties and burial diakonia. Emperor Justinian (483-565) stressed philanthropy and promulgated philanthropic legislation which covered not only the capital but also the provinces. He established separate residential institutions to care for the various types of people in need. During his reign institutions were set up to care for poor pilgrims in Jerusalem; through the pilgrims the idea of hospices reached the Western church.

While the diaconal activities of official institutions in both East and West are documented, little is known of the diakonia of the ordinary laity. Both Basil and Benedict expected monks to practise diakonia; each guest was to be received like Christ. The monasteries tended mainly to provide food for the poor at their gates; this feeding of the poor became part of the Maundy Thursday ritual. The name of the Hospitallers, who specialized in their own forms of diakonia, is still attached to ambulance care in Britain. The Beguines cared for orphans and sick women, and when suppressed their houses often became municipal orphanages.

When the diaconate came chiefly to be a transitional office to the priesthood, the duties of deacons became more limited to the formal liturgical ones; and during the middle ages responsibility for the care of the poor shifted from the bishop to the parish clergy, who coped with needs mainly on an ad hoc, local basis. Systematization developed the scheme of the seven corporal and the seven spiritual works of mercy based on Matt. 25:34-46; their illustration in art indicates the widespread diakonia practised by the laity.

The crisis of the black death greatly increased the need for care (and cost the lives of about half the care-givers). Changes in life-style and the economy added to the difficulties. By the 16th century, the diaconal system was no longer able to cope with the needs. In England the breakdown of the medieval provisions resulted in the Poor Law, by which minimal relief was provided to residents through a poor tax levied on all householders.

The reformers recalled the role of deacons in the NT church: Luther recommended that deacons "keep a register of poor people and care for them"; Calvin stressed that the proper function of a deacon was not liturgy but collecting alms from the faithful and distributing them to the poor. This was put into practice in some Reformed churches: male deacons administered the affairs of the poor, the women cared for the poor themselves. The 1662 Ordinal of the Church of England directed the deacon to search out the sick and poor of the parish and inform the curate, so that "by his exhortation they may be relieved with the alms of the parishioners, or others". The most extensive diaconal concern was shown by the radical reformers and institutionalized by the Mennonites and others.

Meanwhile in the Roman Catholic Church new religious orders, especially those inspired by St Vincent de Paul, specialized in various aspects of diakonia.

Under Turkish rule the Greek church found itself severely restricted from public diakonia, as more recently did several other Orthodox churches under various communist governments. A parish-church based diakonia and the restoration of some (formerly deaconess) diaconal houses is now occurring in some Eastern European countries.

### **Social reformers of the 19th century**

With the Industrial Revolution and the rise of laissez-faire capitalism, many people suffered extreme hardship, and a feared "means test" was sometimes used to assess whether one was among the "deserving poor". Both Christian and secular interests tackled these problems in the 19th century. In Hamburg the threat of revolution and social hardship led Wichern to form the Innere (or "Home") Mission and to train deacons. At Kaiserswerth the social conditions of women and children led Fliedner to found a training institution for deaconesses who would serve as nurses and teachers in parishes. The 19th-century deacon and deaconess movement understood evangelization and diakonia as a unity and developed large institutions to care for the sick, epileptic, elderly and people with disabilities, etc.

Secular and Christian social reformers made many people conscious of the plight of their neighbours. Public charities increased, and secular movements produced a philanthropy not tied to any religion or denomination (e.g. the Red Cross). Meanwhile, the idea of the professional social worker began to emerge.

### **Ecumenical diakonia**

While the activities of the ecumenical movement of the 20th century tended at the outset mainly to take the form of conferences, meetings and reflection, a pioneering venture in ecumenical diakonia emerged in 1922 with the founding of the European Central Bureau for Inter-Church Aid under the auspices of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America and the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, later joined by other European churches. Over the next 23 years this agency distributed millions of dollars' worth of relief to churches, Christian institutions and pastors in need both in Europe and elsewhere, before merging in 1945 with the WCC, then in process of formation.

The WCC's direct involvement in diakonia had begun during the years of the second world war in the form of ministry to refugees and prisoners of war, working closely with a variety of other churches and church-related organizations, as well as the Red Cross. Plans for post-war involvement in reconstruction were laid already in 1942. The scope of the refugee service – which focused on the more than 12 million people driven from their homes in Europe – soon extended to work with Palestinians displaced after the founding of the state of Israel in 1948; and from there the WCC broadened its diaconal service to other forms of emergency relief and service worldwide. The first meeting of the WCC central committee after Amsterdam, in Chichester, UK, in 1949, underscored that interchurch aid\* is a permanent obligation of the WCC, not a temporary engagement that would come to an end with the completion of reconstruction after the war, and that this is a spiritual and not just a material task. There was also a widespread agreement that the

most effective diakonia is that which is rendered ecumenically, rather than bilaterally between churches of the same tradition.

Over the years, the WCC has engaged in considerable reflection on the meaning of diakonia. In 1966 a world consultation on interchurch aid, refugee and world service convened by the WCC in Swanwick, UK, added the idea of social advancement or social action to the prevailing concept of social relief work and service. The WCC was seen as playing a major role in the coordination of the help coming from the growing regional and national Christian agencies, especially in Europe. In 1967 the WCC, the International Federation of Innere Mission and Diakonie, and *Diakonia* established a diakonia desk for research and action attached to the WCC's interchurch aid unit, though a subsequent major restructuring of the WCC in 1971 made it more difficult for the members of the diaconates to contribute to international ecumenical discussions about diakonia.

As the Western Christian aid and development agencies grew, often with major government support, criticism of the "new missionaries of the interchurch aid empire" was increasingly heard in some quarters. They were charged with making the same mistakes and putting almost the same pressures on developing nations that international aid does. This viewpoint would prefer a local sharing of resources (P. Gregorios, 3-5). The WCC's sixth assembly re-affirmed that "diakonia as the church's ministry of sharing, healing and reconciliation is of the very nature of the church. It demands of individuals and churches a giving which comes not out of what they have, but what they are." The WCC sought to broaden traditional understandings of diakonia and the ecumenical sharing of resources to go beyond a focus on material transfers from rich to poor and to enable practical partnerships which involved people as well as funds. A global consultation on diakonia in Larnaca, Cyprus, in 1986 discussed such issues as worldwide regression to parochialism, hunger, debt, armaments expenditure, and uprooted people. It noted that diakonia can exist on various levels – emergency, prevention, rehabilitation, development and change – and that the form it takes should be shaped by local needs. For the future, Larnaca suggested (1) renewal of philanthropic diakonia, (2) diakonia and development for justice and human rights and dignity, (3) diakonia for peace between people, (4) diakonia and church unity in the service of society, and (5) diakonia and inter-religious understanding for common involvement in justice and peace.

### **Diakonia and the churches today**

From the 1960s to the 1980s, as governments in Western Europe tended to take on more responsibility for social security, some churches left diakonia in the hands of the social services and welfare and saw their diaconal role as one of only "plugging the gaps". A number of churches established "boards of social responsibility" or similar bodies to influence government policy and thus practise prophetic diakonia. Especially in Eastern Europe, Christians were asking what it means to be a Christian in a socialist and communist state. Others reflected on what it means to be a Christian and to be a church in a capitalist state. Does it mean evangelizing the government as well as those in private companies? In the global village, is diakonia to be exercised only towards the Christian neighbour, or is it for all?

Individual churches in different cultures vary immensely in their degree of articulation of diakonia and in their practice. There is also great variation concerning who has primary responsibility for diakonia: central church offices (bishops or specialized national agencies), local presbyters, deacons, professional social workers or laity.

In Germany, church tax helps to support large evangelical and Catholic diaconal institutions. In January 1998 the many forms of individual and institutional work of Diakonisches Werk of the Evangelical Church in Germany involved more than 419,000 staff in some 30,130 institutions. In the Netherlands, elected lay deacons collect offerings and use them for projects at home and abroad. In some Scandinavian countries each parish is obliged to have a deacon or deaconess authorized by the church to visit those in need.

The theoretical basis for diakonia in the RCC is mainly found in the various papal encyclicals (see *encyclicals, Roman Catholic social*). The restructuring of the religious congregations has greatly affected their diakonia. Fewer religious and more lay professionals are now involved in the diminished institutional work, and religious are taking on new forms of work (e.g. AIDS ministry). Caritas is the largest Catholic aid agency.

The restored permanent diaconate of the RCC and the distinctive diaconate in some of the Anglican churches are becoming more active in advocacy for people in need, working for change which will produce justice for them, as well as continuing to lead in pastoral and emergency care. In many Anglican churches there is stress on studying root causes and trying to influence those in power. In England the *Faith in the City* report (1985) led to an exciting growth in church-based community work projects, but the question remains whether the church's diakonia can keep pace with the changes in the complex societies in which they live and work and whose problems and tensions they themselves share, as the 1988 Lambeth conference pointed out.

By the late 1980s, for reasons of both economic ideology and pragmatism, governmental authorities were increasingly asking voluntary agencies to take on the new tasks, precisely at a time when many churches were facing acute funding difficulties and had fewer staff and less financial resources for diakonia. But government support for church-related diaconal endeavours typically comes with restrictions, conditions and complicated reporting requirements, requiring further professionalization of diakonia.

Meanwhile, old problems increase in scope and new ones arise. What can churches do to ease the plight of the millions of refugees, internally displaced persons and other people living as migrants outside their countries of origin? Ad hoc responses to emergencies vie for money and staff with long-term evaluation and remedying of causes. On the global scale not only catastrophes but also recognized long-term needs seem to be growing more rapidly than the capacity to respond either at the national or international level. Countless questions arise: for example, about the relation of aid to dependency, about reconciling local grassroots people's participation with professionalization, about the allocation of

church resources to emergency aid, prevention, rehabilitation, development and advocacy, about diakonia in the face of the special plight of women and children, and so on.

During the 1990s the challenge of diakonia faced churches in the formerly socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe in dramatic new ways. The collapse of the economic system brought to the surface a wide range of unmet needs in society, but the churches, having been prevented from undertaking diaconal activities for more than 40 years (and in Russia for more than 70 years), had few structures and little experience for this. In the case of the Orthodox churches, significant reflection on diakonia had come from a 1978 consultation in Crete, which had articulated a theological approach linking diakonia with *leitourgia*: "Christian diakonia is not an optional action... but an indispensable expression of that community, which has its source in the eucharistic and liturgical life of the church. It is a 'liturgy after the Liturgy'."

With international ecumenical assistance, churches in Eastern Europe were soon undertaking a variety of major initiatives in diakonia in their own countries. A consultation organized by the Conference of European Churches in Bratislava in 1994 made it evident that the reality of the situation was not one of rebuilding church-based social care in this part of the world but of beginning from scratch. In the conflict around the break-up of the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, Hungarian interchurch aid played a significant role in delivering diaconal services. As the conflict went on, Orthodox emergency aid conducted at an international level came to be extremely important in partnership with church-related agencies and the WCC.

Those involved in diakonia, whether as professionals or volunteers, would view service to the neighbour as half of the church's life, the other half being the worship of God. But in international, national, regional and local church structures diakonia is too often marginalized, and decisions are made by those who give priority to the pastoral care of the gathered church.

### **Recommended reading:**

- "Christianity and the Social Order", in *The Truth Shall Make You Free: The Lambeth Conference 1988*, London, Church House, 1988
- J.N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, New York, Oxford UP, 1990
- D.J. Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare*, 2nd rev. ed., New Rochelle NY, Caratzas, 1992
- W. Liese, *Geschichte der Caritas*, Freiburg, Herder, 1922
- Martin Robra, "Theological and Biblical Reflection on Diakonia: A Survey of Discussion within the World Council of Churches", *ER*, 46, 3, 1994.

