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Diaconal Ministry in the Diaconal Church

Reflections on the Interrelationship between
Ministerial Theology and Ecclesiology

STEPHANIE DIETRICH

Introduction

MANY ECUMENICAL DIALOGUES DURING the last centuries have achieved far-reaching agreements on core aspects of Christian doctrine. Ecumenical agreements, like the Porvoo Common Statement between churches belonging to the Anglican and the Lutheran tradition in Northern Europe (1992), or the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine on Justification (1999), between the Lutheran and the Roman Catholic tradition, show a basic theological agreement on core doctrinal issues between different denominational traditions. Nevertheless, when it comes to *ministerial* theology, i.e. the concrete understanding and practice of ordained ministries, there are still profound differences between the traditions. This concerns all forms of ordained ministries, but especially the *diaconal ministry* or so called *diaconate*, which will be the main subject for this article.

In 1982, the ecumenical statement *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, noted:

In many churches there is today considerable uncertainty about the need, the rationale, the status and the functions of deacons . . . Today, there is a strong tendency in many churches to restore

the diaconate as an ordained ministry with its own dignity and meant to be exercised for life.¹

The BEM document viewed the question of the understanding of the diaconate mainly to be a question of church order and the organization of ordained ministry, not to the understanding of *diakonia* in general, or diaconal ecclesiology. Nevertheless, the questions raised in 1982 in the framework of the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission are still relevant today and have influenced most of the debate on the diaconate ever since.

While *diakonia* in the framework of an ecumenical theological discourse is dealt with as a matter of social ethics, and mostly related to Inter-Church-Aid, the *diaconate*, i.e. *diaconal ministry*, is discussed as a doctrinal matter, within the framework of Faith and Order, as rightly pointed out by Kjell Nordstokke.² Thus, this article seeks to contribute in overcoming the strict distinction between *diakonia* as social work, humble service and Inter-Church-Aid on the one hand, and *diaconal ministry* as merely a question of ministerial orders and dogmatics on the other hand. This will be done by emphasizing that ministries and ministerial structures of the Church need to mirror and correspond with the Church's identity as diaconal Church, and vice versa.

In the author's opinion, the understanding of ordained ministries in the Church needs to be discussed on the background of the Church's identity. The ministries of the Church can only be understood and shaped in an adequate way if they are developed and described as signs and instruments of what the Christian Church is. Thus, this article focuses on the diaconate in its relation to a diaconal ecclesiology. Much attention in the theological and ecumenical discourse has been given to episcopal and pastoral ministry, while diaconal ministry has often not received the attention it deserves. Institutional and conceptual change in relation to the diaconate and diaconal ministry might be used as an opportunity to explore new forms of ecclesial self-understanding and common mission. Thus, the diaconate and diaconal ministry can be considered as an ecumenical opportunity both within and between the Churches.³ This article attempts to show in which

1 World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 24–25.

2 Nordstokke, "Diakonia and Diaconate in the World Council of Churches."

3. This was underlined within the context of the Anglican-Lutheran dialogue, which resulted in the so-called Hanover Report, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*. The report stated that the diaconate should not be understood as a problem, but rather as an opportunity to overcome utilitarian approaches to ecclesiology and ministerial theology. According to the Hanover Report, the diaconate makes visible the fundamental integrity of all ordained ministries as a key to understanding the identity of the Church as being sent to the world, placed in the world through living out and

way ministerial theology, especially diaconal ministry, can be understood and developed on the background of a diaconal ecclesiology.

The author's hypothesis is that differences within ministerial theology need to be explored both through biblical, historical, contextual and ecclesiological studies and studies on power imbalances and gender discrepancies, in order to achieve a more agreed approach towards the understanding *and* practice of the diaconate. However, this article cannot cover all these approaches, and addresses mainly the ecclesiological framework for the understanding of the diaconate. Coming from a Norwegian, Lutheran background, the author tries to outline the core aspects of the understanding of the diaconal Church and diaconal ministry in a Norwegian Lutheran context. This will be exemplified by discussing the relationship between the understanding of the ministry of the deacon and a theological and ecclesiological understanding of *diakonia*, mainly within a Church of Norway context. Within the author's context, Church of Norway, there has been a long lasting discussion on the understanding of diaconal ministry. The discussion is shaped by both internal Norwegian disagreements⁴ on ministerial theology and a Lutheran self-understanding. At the same time the understanding has been influenced by ecumenical and international agreements and developments.

Furthermore, the author will take into account parts of the ecumenical discourse on diaconal ministry within the Porvoo Communion context. The main sources for the discussion here are selected ecumenical documents

communicating the gospel in a holistic way.

4. Turid Karlsen Seim, as a member of the Committee on ordained ministry which prepared the background paper for Church of Norway (CoN) General Synod in 2001 (Kirkerrådet, *Embetet i Den norske kirke*), played a decisive role in pointing to the ecumenical dimension and implications in the development of the understanding of the diaconate in CoN. Her inputs played an important role in leading the Synod to decide on further deliberations concerning the threefold ministry, instead of following the former approaches to consider only the presbyteral ministry as ordained ministry within CoN. While the majority of the Committee argued for an understanding of the diaconate "outside the ministerium ecclesiasticum," as a "realization of the commandment of love" and "a consequence of the justifying faith" (*Embetet*, 107; my translation), a minority in the Committee (Karlsen Seim and Tjernæs) disagreed and asked for further work on the issue. They underlined: "The question is if- and eventually how- we can consider a permanent and caritative diaconate as a part of the ordained ministry instituted by God, as a steward of the means of grace from which the Church gets its power of life" (*Embetet*, 107; my trans.). Karlsen Seim and Tjernæs also emphasized that *diakonia* does not need to be understood in a consecutive way, and that introducing the diaconate as a function of the ordained ministry of the church should not mean confusing the distinction between Gospel and Law. The Synod decided that Church of Norway should look for "new ways to think about the diaconate" (Synod decision, *Embetet*), hereby following Karlsen Seim's and Tjernæs's recommendation.

related to the Porvoo agreement context (mainly Anglican Churches in Great Britain and Ireland and Lutheran Churches in Nordic and Baltic countries), developed during the last two decades.

The author will first look at terminological clarifications, since the different terminologies deserve close attention and contribute to the clarification of the discussion. Secondly, the author will focus on theological assumptions describing diaconal ecclesiology and focusing on the Christological foundation of *diakonia*. Furthermore, the “diaconate of all baptized” and specific challenges within Lutheran theology will be discussed as a background for considerations on ecumenical developments within the understanding of the diaconate. These reflections will form the background for the discussion of the specific situation within Church of Norway concerning the development of the diaconate as an ordained ministry and the concluding remarks, emphasizing the un-negotiable relatedness of ecclesiology and ministerial theology.

Terminological Clarifications

Terminologically, the terms diaconal ministry, deacon’s ministry and diaconate are overlapping, describing a personally exercised service or ministry within a church framework. When discussing ministerial theology and questions that have emerged within Faith and Order, one often uses the term diaconate or diaconal ministry. Thus, all the three terms are used in this article, as they are all used in a corresponding manner in the ecumenical discourse. The *diaconate* is closely related to the term *diakonia*. *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,’ (and) is rooted in and modelled on Christ’s service and teachings.”⁵ Terminological and semantic differences become relevant when discussing the understanding of *diakonia* and the *diaconate*. A terminological problem might also reveal substantial differences in the understanding of what it means to be church, to communicate the gospel and to practice *diakonia*, understood as service for humankind and the whole creation.

The understanding of *diakonia* as Christian social service is dominating, especially within churches shaped by the Reformation era, like the Protestant churches. Nevertheless, different Christian traditions do not share a unique understanding of *diakonia*. Some traditions, like the European Protestant tradition, have used it frequently, especially during the last 200

5. White, “Diakonia.”

years, against the background of what may be called a “diaconal revival,” as a term for the Church’s or Christian social action or involvement in our societies. Others, like the Anglican or Roman Catholic traditions are not as used to this connotation of *diakonia* and would prefer terms like *caritas* in the Roman Catholic tradition, or they associate *diakonia* mostly with the deacon’s ministry as a first stage on the way to priesthood, as in the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions, with mere liturgical functions. Social service within an Anglican tradition is usually not called *diakonia*. Within the Orthodox tradition, *diakonia* has been characterized as “liturgy after the liturgy,”⁶ thus indicating that the Church’s social action and responsibility cannot be separated from its worship and celebration of the Eucharist. Still, *diakonia* is not a widespread terminology in the Orthodox context. Based on such a varying understanding of *diakonia*, also the understanding of *diaconal ministry* is shaped differently in different Church traditions.

In the New Testament, *diakonia* and the deacon’s ministry have a broad range of connotations.⁷ John N. Collins criticized the narrow interpretation of these terms as related to mere humble service through providing a semantic and linguistic interpretation of *diak*-words in a survey of Greek literature, papyri and inscriptions for the period 400 BC to around 400 AC. He showed that this interpretation, to a large degree influenced by the German theological New Testament dictionary of Gerhard Kittel,⁸ led to the misunderstanding that *diakonia* and the *deacon’s ministry* were mainly about humble and lowly service to the needy. Collins underlined that these terms, both in the New Testament and its surrounding Hellenistic context, had a much broader connotation, and often related to being a messenger with an authoritative message, as a go-between minister carrying out an authoritative task. Collins’ interpretations are highly discussed, both amongst New Testament scholars

6. Bria, “Liturgy after the Liturgy.”

7. *Diakonia* is associated with central aspects of the church’s identity as service, outreach, humility, concern for human needs. While there is no ecumenical consensus on the nature and form of the diaconate and diaconal ministry, there seems to be a reinvigoration of *diakonia* within many churches caused by a strong consciousness that the church has a mission in today’s world. The renewed emphasis on *diakonia* has been heightened by a fresh exegetical look on its New Testament use, showing that *diakonia* in the New Testament does not primarily mean waiting at the table and humble service, but far more needs to be related to the mission of the church as the church’s outreaching ministry. There has been an ongoing discussion on the understanding of *diakonia* based on the interpretation of the terms *diakonia*, *diakonein* and *diakonos* on the New Testament and the New Testament context, mainly inspired by the Australian theologian John Collins. See Collins, *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*.

8. Beyer, “*diakoneo, diakonia, diakonos*.”

and among scholars in the field of *diakonia* research and education.⁹ Notwithstanding the results of this discussion on biblical interpretation and semantics, Collins' findings on the broad connotation of the *diak*-words in the New Testament have encouraged theologians to explore in which way one may have a fresh look at *diakonia* and *diaconal ministry*. Collins' research contributed thus to a fundamental reform within the understanding of *diakonia* and the *diaconate*. He highlighted the fact that a former understanding of *diakonia* and the *diaconate* as mere humble service was very much based on the narrow interpretation of *diakonia* which shaped the diaconal movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Central Europe and its respective historical context, and not by a biblical understanding.

In the author's opinion, it should be underlined that today's understanding of *diakonia* cannot only be based on a narrow interpretation of the semantic connotation of the *diak*-words in the New Testament, but has to be interpreted much broader, in light of biblical theology in general, and in particular in the light of modern multidisciplinary and hermeneutical studies. Based on a biblical and epistemological interpretation, and taking into account the development of the Church's involvement in social service throughout history, one should take a fresh look at the understanding of *diakonia*. The mission and ministry of the church should be based on a holistic view on a New Testament perspective on Christian social service as determinative for the ministry and ministries of the church.

The author wants to argue that the starting point for discussing diaconal ministry, its understanding and its function, should be the diaconal mission and ministry of the church. Diaconal ministry is important for the understanding of what the nature of the Church is, not simply *functionally* and as a matter of practical theology, but *ecclesiologically*, concerning the nature and identity of the Church. Vice versa, the Church's diaconal identity forms the understanding for and shapes diaconal ministry. Therefore, it is necessary to elaborate on the understanding of the church as a diaconal church firstly before discussing diaconal ministry.

The Diaconal Church

The Lutheran World Federation published in 2009 the report *Diakonia in Context*, where the specific link between ecclesiology and *diakonia* is emphasized: "Diakonia . . . is related to the congregation's ethos and structures. In other words, it is both an expression of what the Church is by its very nature,

9. See Dunderberg, "Vermittlung statt karitativer Tätigkeit?," 177. See also Hentschel, *Diakonie im Neuen Testament*.

and what is manifested in its daily life, plans and projects.”¹⁰ *Diakonia*, as Christian social action, both individually and corporately, both in the name of the church and unofficially, is about the serving identity of the church and the church’s presence in civil society. This includes becoming agents for the transformation of worldly structures and institutions. The church’s *diakonia* serves as a practical expression of God’s redeeming love in concrete acts of justice, reconciliation and healing. Therefore, this practice of *diakonia* belongs to the identity of the church and participates in the communication of the Gospel. When speaking ecclesologically, understanding *diakonia* as one of the marks of the church has fundamental consequences for the self-understanding of the church and the development of ecclesiologies which are relevant in a theological context today.

The necessary correspondence between the *practice* and the *origin* of the church has been emphasized within the framework of European protestant churches (CPCE: Community of Protestant Churches in Europe). According to their main study document on ecclesiology, *The Church of Jesus Christ*, witness and service should be held together in a way that shows that they both belong to the identity of the church. “Since the church as community of people sanctified by God is holy, the ecclesial practice of witnessing must be measured by how far it corresponds to this in its praxis of proclamation and celebration of the sacraments and in service to people.”¹¹ The study also points to the fact that the Reformers within different protestant churches from the right beginning during the Reformation era, understood Christian life and Christian service as marks of the Church, though related to the second table of Commandments. As marks of the Christian life they correspond and are interrelated to the marks of the true Church (i.e. word and sacrament), even though they are not identical with them.

The Christian life comprises the entire living witness of all believers. It extends beyond the realm of the visible church into the whole everyday life of Christians and therefore far into the life of society. Of course, it also includes keeping the Commandments of the first table: witnessing to the gospel by word and sacrament. In this way, the visible church takes shape within the Christian life. In this respect the Christian life is itself fundamental for the concrete shape of the church.¹²

The understanding of diaconal ministry can only be developed in close relation to the understanding of the church as a diaconal church. Therefore, an

10. Lutheran World Federation, *Diakonia in Context*, 29.

11. Bünker and Friedrich, eds., *The Church of Jesus Christ*, 121.

12. Ibid., 115.

understanding and practice of *diakonia* closely linked to the church, and an understanding of the church which need to fully include *diakonia* in its self-understanding needs to be developed; *diakonia* understood as a constitutive part of being church. In order to develop a diaconal ecclesiology, specific attention should be given to a Christological foundation of diaconal ministry.

A Christological Foundation of the Diaconate

A Christological basis is widely accepted for the understanding of diaconal ministry. Therefore, it is important to outline some of the basic aspects within Christology, which should be kept in mind when discussing the diaconate. As T.Pädam underlines:

The ministry of the deacon in the interpretation of the churches is always related to Jesus Christ and to his ministry: this ministry has catechetical, liturgical and caritative responsibilities; it participates in the Church's prophetic *diakonia* and all-round care for those in need.¹³

All of the church's members have, in baptism, been consecrated to ministry for Christ and their fellow human beings. The church's *diakonia* is a call to ministry that has its foundation in Christ's office as representative of the Father to the world, to serve. Christ's own call to ministry for the world and the call to the baptized to serve are inseparable. Therefore, to be a servant does not primarily imply selfless humility, but a call to ministry as Christ's coworker and follower.

Within the Church's tradition, Jesus Christ himself is understood and believed as the basis for the church in its worship and witness and service. According to Mark, 10:45, Christ is *diakonos*, servant, as an agent and image of the one who sent him, mediating the Father's will to the world. When practicing *diakonia*, the church does so as an agent of Christ's salvation. At the same time, Christ's own way to communicate the gospel becomes the core aspect of the understanding of *diaonal ministry*. According to the New Testament Gospel stories, Jesus did not only tell people he met what they ought to do and what was right, or preach to them, but took care of them in a holistic way, healing their diseases, offering forgiveness and inclusion into his fellowship, turning traditional values in society upside down and having table fellowship with sinners. Healing the sick and showing solidarity with the weak were integrated parts of Jesus' life and Messianic service. Therefore, the church needs to take a fresh look at how it understands its

¹³ Pädam "The Diaconate."

communication of the gospel. In a protestant context, this Christological basis for the understanding of *diakonia* is described as follows: “In dealing with us . . . Jesus Christ also at the same time grants us insights into what he alone can and will do and into what we can and ought to do. Thus the experience of Christ is always also the experience of the freedom and responsibility of faith.”¹⁴

The church is not just that which passes on the means of grace, in a mere functional manner, the church itself is constituted by the means of grace and would not exist without them. The church is primarily a *receiver* of God’s grace. In other words: The church is not the giver of the means of grace, but passes on the means of grace. In the same way, the church’s diaconal actions are not the church’s “merit,” but through the church and its servants, Christ is present as the one who sympathizes with and stands beside those who need it and suffers with them. The church, according to its ecclesiological self-understanding “dressed in Christ” (cf. Col 3:12–17), as “Christ’s body” (1 Cor 12:27), is present in people’s lives. In the final analysis, it is not the church or people who act, but Christ himself through his body, the church. Thus, understanding *diakonia* as a non-negotiable aspect of the identity of the Church and Christian life does not contradict the basic Lutheran understanding of salvation by grace alone, but is an aspect or mark of the Church.

In a Protestant tradition, emphasis is given to the people of God and the local congregation gathering around the Word and Sacraments as the decisive and constitutive element of the Church. In this connection, there is an emphasis on everybody’s responsibility to follow their consciousness, read the Bible, gather in community and live out their lives as Christians and act according to God’s will, in mutual service for each other and all humankind. It is therefore important to reflect on this “responsibility of all the baptized,” also related to the specific service of Church ministers, when discussing diaconal ministry.

The Diaconate of All the Baptized

In a Lutheran tradition, there has been a strong emphasis on the priesthood of all the baptized. According to Luther, “priest,” in the original and strict sense of the Word, is Christ alone. Christians are priests only by sharing in Christ in faith, according to the logic of the 1. Pet 2:9. Christians become priests not through ordination, but through a new birth, the spiritual birth of baptism. Accordingly, we are all consecrated priests through baptism.

14. Bünker and Friedrich, eds., *The Church of Jesus Christ*, 108.

The difference between a pastor and a Christian who is not a pastor is a difference of office. All Christians are priests, but not all Christians are pastors.

In the same way, one can distinguish between the diaconal ministry of all the baptized and the church's ordained diaconal ministry. Similar to the priest's administration of the sacraments, the ministry of deacons is carried by Christ's commissioning and call, where people become "Christ for their neighbor." This goes for all the baptized who take part in the priesthood of all believers, at the same time as some are called to this task as a special ministry and function—who carry out this task and their call as representatives and servants for Christ. It is meaningful to speak of a "diaconate of all believers"¹⁵, all the Christian's diaconal responsibility in the world, which makes up the foundation for "the special diaconate," an ordained diaconal ministry.

Even so, the question whether diaconal ministry should be a part of the Church's ordained orders, is not easily answered for many Churches belonging to the Protestant tradition. The reason for this lies both in a skeptical attitude towards hierarchical ministerial clerical structures, discussions on the relation between word and deed, Gospel and Law, and on the identity of the Church. Especially Lutheran theology, with its strong emphasis on salvation by grace alone, has struggled with the integration of *diakonia* in its dogmatic principles, being afraid of confusing the Reformation "*sola*"-principles through an emphasis on good deeds as an integrated part of a Christian life.

Challenges within Lutheran Theology

Within Lutheranism there has been a strong tradition to emphasize that the Church is present "wherever the gospel is preached in its truth and purity and the sacraments are administered according to the gospel" (Augsburg Confession §7).¹⁶ Ecumenical and ecclesiological debates within Lutheran theological discourse during the last decenniums have emphasized the importance of avoiding a reductionistic reading of §7. This article should be read in the context of §§4–6, emphasizing that Christians are justified by

15. See Kirkemøtet 2004: KM 8.2./04, 21.

16. This understanding dominated the majority position in the Report from the Commission on ministry (*Embetet*) in CoN, as described in footnote 4. "This includes that *diakonia* is understood as a fruit of faith. Therefore, *diakonia* is understood as consecutive, not constitutive, i.e. as a consequence of the gospel. Including *diakonia*, according to this understanding, in the structure of the ordained ministry (understood as the ministry which creates faith with the means of grace), means according to the understanding of the Committee's majority a danger in making *diakonia* necessary for faith, and thus mixing up Gospel and Law." (*Embetet*, 107; my translation).

faith and through this empowered to act rightly as participants in God's mission and sending, in service to the world.

The separation between justification and sanctification, which after the Reformation era resulted in an *ordo salutis* thinking within Lutheran orthodoxy, was not intended by Luther himself, who clearly linked the forensic and the ontological understanding of justification and salvation in his writings. Good works within Luther's theology are neither instruments of salvation, giving merit before God, nor a necessary consequence of salvation, as in the pietist revivalist tradition. Good works are seen as a visible and necessary expression of the new life in Christ given in faith, as the Augsburg Confession §6 underlines:

Also they teach that this faith is bound to bring forth good fruits, and that it is necessary to do good works commanded by God, because of God's will, but that we should not rely on those works to merit justification before God.

Analyzing the latest documents from the Lutheran World Federation, one can see a move from interpreting the Church's *diakonia* as a possible *consequence* of the Church's interaction with the world towards integrating it into its ecclesiology as a *mark* of the Church in continuation from the Early Church and throughout history until today. Speaking in reformatory terms, the Word and sacraments are not mere vehicles for *favor Dei*, in a forensic sense, but also vehicles for *donum Dei*, ontologically transforming the Christians and shaping their lives. This development within Lutheran theology also contributes to integrate *diakonia* as a necessary part of the Church's life, without overloading it theologically or making it a means of Christianizing the world. Concerning the concept of *diakonia* "as a theological imperative," Kjell Nordstokke underlines that

it's hermeneutical strength lies in its ability to relate the identity of the church to its mission, of integrating different perspectives and connecting to central Christological motifs. This has contributed to a better understanding of the holistic nature of mission, and of renewing the reflection of how to be relevant in the world when responding to today's challenges.¹⁷

This specific Lutheran challenges concerning the understanding of ordained ministries have also played an important role within the Norwegian discussion. Within Church of Norway, in the Committee's Report to the General Synod 2001 on the understanding of ordained ministry, the minority

17. Nordstokke, *Liberating Diakonia*, 27.

position (Karlsen Seim and Tjernæs) gave a short outline why such a traditional understanding of *diakonia* and the diaconate should be revised:

The minority of the committee wants to underline that *diakonia* not only should be understood as the Church's care for people in need, but bears witness of life that offers itself for others, as God's voice in the world. As Jesus, the incarnated Word, did, God's reign is brought close through word and deed, and through this communication faith is created when God's charity is expressed through care for spirit, body and soul.¹⁸

The inputs given to the General Synod then, together with an ecumenical awakening within Church of Norway in general and a growing consciousness about the necessity of *diakonia* as an expression of the Church's being present in and for the societies within confessional bodies like the Lutheran World Federation, formed the background for all further work on the diaconate and *diakonia* within Church of Norway.

Within the context of Church of Norway, the definition of *diakonia* as "Gospel in action" in the *Plan for diakonia* (2007) reflects this move in the understanding of Lutheran theology. *Diakonia* as Christian social service is not a mere consequence of the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments, but *diakonia* witnesses about and participates in the sharing and communicating of the Gospel. This implies consequences for the understanding of diaconal ministry, since ministerial structures should reflect the church's self-understanding and needs.

Ecumenical Developments within the Understanding of the Diaconate

In the Western church, the diaconate always existed as a grade of ordination, but only in a stunted form as a transitional stage to the presbyterate. It had already lost its function as an independent ministry before the end of the first millennium. In some western churches, the diaconate as permanent diaconate has been revived. In the Roman Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council used a formulation from the Early Church and says that they receive the laying-on hands "not for the priesthood but for a ministry of service (*non ad sacerdotium sed ad ministerium*)" (LG 29). This led to a re-discovery of the ordained diaconal ministry in the Roman Catholic Church as a quite "open" ministry, employed in various services in the church. For

18. Kirkerådet, *Embetet*, 107; my trans.

several years, the diaconal ministry has been a topic of theological research and discussion, also in Roman Catholic and Anglican churches.¹⁹

The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches has focused on the nature of the ordained ministry and its role for many decades. Without going into depth concerning all the publications on this issue, one should mention that Faith and Order already in 1963/1964 at the Montreal Conference located the discussion on the understanding of ordained ministry within its work on ecclesiology. It was then recognized that *diakonia* belongs to the whole life of the Church and is concretely expressed and embodied in a particular ministry, which can serve as a sign of what the Church essentially is. This was followed up in the BEM study from 1982, where the ecumenically sensitive question of the ordained ministry is approached via “the calling of the whole people of God.” One could therefore say that BEM was breaking the ground for the understanding of ordained ministry as deeply grounded in the nature and mission of the Church. This approach has since then dominated both multilateral and bilateral dialogues, including the Porvoo Common Statement (Porvoo) from 1993.²⁰ Since the Nordic Lutheran churches and the Anglican churches are in communion through the Porvoo agreement, specific notice should be given to the ongoing processes within this context. One may note that the need for a distinctive diaconate is being recognized and worked on increasingly. The Porvoo Joint Declaration, which all signatory-churches signed, commits the churches “to work towards a common understanding of diaconal ministry.”²¹ Since its first signing, a number of consultations have been arranged, discussing the understanding and development of the diaconate in the Porvoo communion.

The *Hanover report* underlined its understanding of diaconal ministry by saying: “Diaconal ministers are called to be agents of the church in interpreting and meeting needs, hopes and concerns within church and society” (48). Irrespective of which area of work diaconal ministers are involved in, diaconal ministry is carried out based on Christian faith. Thus, diaconal ministers and the Church stand in a relation of mutual accountability. Through their work, diaconal ministers interpret the needs, hopes and concerns of the people to the Church, and they operate and mediate at the same time the service of the church to the world.

19. Cf. Church of England, *For Such a Time as This*.

20. For an overview of the ongoing work on the understanding of the diaconate in the Porvoo Communion, see Pädam, “The Diaconate,” 2014.

21. *The Porvoo Common Statement*, 85b (vii).

Many of the diaconal ministries within the churches shaped by the Reformation era arose in response to specific needs in different contexts and societies. Therefore, one might say that the dominant factor in the diversity of diaconal ministries has been the various needs, which they have sought to meet, and the historical contexts in which they arose and which shaped their character. The church at various times needed different forms of diaconal ministry. Diaconal ministry managed to a large degree to adapt and transform itself according to the needs of the changing times.

One of the challenges concerning a renewed understanding of *the diaconate* is the fear for clericalization and institutionalization. This might also be one of the reasons, why the threefold ministry has not been an attractive choice for many in Lutheran churches. There is a fear that *diakonia* might lose its identity which lies in its focus on *caritas* and *justitia* in church and society.

From a Lutheran point of view, one might ask in how far the transitional diaconate as practiced in the Anglican churches really deals with *diakonia* in the broad sense, as the church's ministry in the world. Does diaconal ministry in the Anglican Churches actually relate to *diakonia* and a diaconal understanding of the Church, or which understanding of *diakonia* is the basis for its diaconal ministry? On the other hand, one might ask in which ways the Lutheran diaconal ministry and the different areas of diaconal work the church is involved in, are carried by a self-understanding as the *church's* ministries.

The Deacon's Ministry in the Latest Decisions within the Church of Norway

In the context of the Church of Norway, *diakonia* embraces “everybody's *diakonia*” (“the diaconate of all believers”), congregational *diakonia* (including the deacon's ministry), institutional *diakonia* and international *diakonia*. The diaconal revival in Germany in the 19th century inspired church leaders in Norway to establish diaconal institutions very much alike the institutions we know from Wichern, Fliedner and Löhe. These institutions focused on caritative work and education, especially within social sciences and nursing. Over the years, this also contributed to the rise of a specific congregational *diakonia* which is based on both diaconal ministers' and volunteer work. After World War II, the church reform movement focused on a differentiation of ministries within the church. This also brought about a new emphasis on diaconal work in the church's governing structures. It involved the establishing of positions for congregational deacons and an extended work

on the understanding of diaconal ministry. Until the reformation time, the ministerial structure which was developed was a mono-presbyteral system, while the Church's social service was gradually transferred to the state and municipal authorities.²²

As already mentioned the understanding of *diakonia* in Norway and in the Nordic countries has been strongly related to the diaconal revival in Central Europe in the nineteenth century. According to that tradition, *diakonia* is mostly understood as the church's social work and care for the needy. *Diakonia* was understood as duty of every Christian. Following Christ's example, it is seen as an obligation for every Christian to help other people who are suffering, ill or in need. For many years, the understanding of *diakonia* was mainly based on stories like the parable of the Good Samaritan and understood as humble service for people in need.

This understanding was very much influenced by the "Mutterhaus-tradition" coming from Germany. The ideal was that people through their service should offer themselves by serving the others. The whole idea of *diakonia* as humble service was thought to be the understanding of *diakonia* deriving directly from the New Testament. As mentioned above, there has been a move in the understanding of *diakonia* in recent years.²³ This move is reflected in different ways in the understanding of *diakonia*. Church of Norway decided in 2007 on a new *Plan for diakonia*. The plan has its main focus on diaconal work practised on a congregational level, but it also relates to institutional and international *diakonia*.

The General Synod approved the following definition of *diakonia*:

Diakonia is the caring ministry of the Church. It is the Gospel in action and is expressed through loving your neighbour, creating inclusive communities, caring for creation and struggling for justice.²⁴

There are several aspects in this new understanding of *diakonia* which need to be underlined. The fundamental move from a Lutheran perspective is that *diakonia* is understood as a part of being church. It is not an appendix to being the church, which according to Confessio Augustana VII is constituted through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. By defining *diakonia* as the acting out of the Gospel, *diakonia* itself participates in the proclamation of the Gospel. Three aspects of this definition of *diakonia* should be considered:

22. For more information about the development in Norway, cf. Fanuelsen, "A Distinct and Independent Ministry."

23. See paragraph on terminological clarifications.

24. Church of Norway, *Plan for Diakonia*, 2007.

First: The communication of the Gospel is not only proclamation by words, but also by deeds and humankind's whole way of living. The church is only church if it is a diaconal church. This has been an important move in ecclesiology, since this approach seeks to bring together the Church's liturgical life and the Church's and Christians' life in civil society. *Diakonia* as the acting out of the Gospel refers to Jesus' proclamation of the Gospel through words and deeds. The imparting of the gospel happens through the proclaimed Word, and the Word's proclamation, the liberating message about Jesus Christ, is brought to life both with and without words. Care for the whole person is thus a part of the church's nature, and not an "optional arrangement."

Secondly, the new definition of *diakonia* reveals a move from the subject-object relation to a relation of mutuality and empowerment. Serving each other in a diaconal way does not mean that one person or institution is the giver, while the other one is the receiver. The new definition of *diakonia* is inspired by the understanding of humankind as a fellowship and community of people who rely on each other. For *diakonia* as social service, this includes the basic realization that all those involved in the act of *diakonia* are actors in interdependency, and not mere subjects or objects or helpers or recipients of help.

Thirdly, the new understanding of *diakonia* shows a broadened perspective on how *diakonia* is understood today. It is not only humble service and caretaking of those who are in need, but includes a focus on community and inclusiveness, and a broader, pro-active role as engaging in issues of justice and care for creation, as part of the church's diaconal engagement. This also includes a move from the focus on the individual in need to a wider focus on community and care for the whole creation. *Diakonia* implies an empowerment of the people to cope with their lives and an encouragement to get involved in the struggle of humankind and the whole creation. As Johannes Degen underlines: "The former diaconal ethos of care has come to an end. The former 'for' needs to be transformed to a 'together-with' culture in care relations. A new conception of diaconal care needs to understand itself as a means of assistance towards a self-governed life."²⁵

After decades of deliberation and discussion, the Church of Norway General Synod made a decision in April 2011 on its understanding of the diaconate. The decision clearly shows a development in the understanding of the diaconate since 2001. At the same time, there is still some unclarity. The Synod decision reads as follows (author's translation):

25. Degen, *Freiheit und Profil*, 37; my translation.

1. The ministry of the deacon is an independent and necessary ministry within the framework of the fellowship of ministries of the Church of Norway.
2. The ministry of the deacon is based on an independent theological foundation and is primarily understood as a caring ministry.
3. The ministry of the deacon presupposes consecration/ordination. The Synod supports the Bishops' Conference's recommendation that the consecrated/ordained deacon should wear a stole in the liturgy, and has asked for the subject of the introduction of the stole to be brought to the Synod for decision as soon as possible.
4. Consecration/ordination in the Church of Norway is a consecration/ordination to a specific ministry. Moving from one ministry to another implies a new consecration/ordination to the new ministry.

In addition, the Synod asked that the number of positions for deacons be increased, and that steps be taken to ensure that every congregation has access to "diaconal competence" within 2015.

By emphasizing that the ministry is independent, the Synod wanted to highlight that the diaconate is not to be understood as an introductory ministry to the presbyterate, but that it is a distinct and permanent ministry with its own identity. The Synod also distanced itself from a threefold understanding of ordained ministry. At the same time, it is underlined that the diaconate is an important and un-negotiable ministry in Church of Norway. When saying that it is a "caring ministry," the Synod refers to the main tasks and duties of diaconal ministry according to the Church regulations, underlining that the deacon's ministry firstly is related to care or social ministry, and not to liturgical ministry, even if the deacons within Church of Norway have a number of liturgical functions, like intercession during Sunday worship or celebration of the Eucharist in relation to certain diaconally defined circumstances.

Concerning terminology, the Synod decided that consecration to diaconal ministry, as all other consecrations to specific ministries, should be termed "vigsling," which means consecration, *not* "ordination." The term "ordination" should, according to the Synod's decision, be reserved for consecration to the priesthood, due to so called "historical reasons." In this way, the Synod tried on the one hand to avoid a threefold ordained structure of ministry, but on the other hand emphasize that there are several consecrated ministries in the church which are separate and have their own distinct identity.

The decision might be seen as wise from a pragmatic view, since it seems to eliminate the division lines and thus theological and professional disagreements between the different ministries. On the other hand this decision results in terminological, and thus also theological, ambiguities, which makes it difficult to translate and transfer the Church of Norway decisions precisely and in an ecumenically accountable manner. The decision emphasizes the distinctiveness and necessity of the diaconate for Church of Norway, based on the Church's diaconal self-understanding, but leaves open in which way the connectedness of all the consecrated/ordained ministries should be understood and what are the implications concerning interchangeability of ministries between churches who are in communion.

Conclusion

Diakonia and the diaconal ministry are not optional for the church, nor is the foundation of *diakonia* and diaconal ministry in the mission and ministry of the church optional for the actors of *diakonia*. Especially in the Lutheran context, *diakonia* has sometimes had a tendency to be isolated from the official church, and vice versa. Therefore, the challenge lies in finding an identity of *diakonia* which places diaconal work in the framework of the mission and ministry of the church and through this to enrich both the diaconal work and the church's proclamation of the Gospel in its different forms.

The move in the understanding of *diakonia* can be seen together with a move in the understanding of ecclesiology in general and diaconal ministry in particular. Through their structures of ministry, churches elucidate their self-understanding as diaconal churches, where diaconal activities are an interrelated, necessary and obvious part of the churches' mission. Diaconal ministry, both of ordained and non-ordained people, the church's bridge-building and serving attitude and action, contribute towards making the church's holistic care for human beings visible and creating plausibility for the church. Diaconal ministry acts as a bridge and connection point by making visible the fact that the church in fact has a holistic care for people. This includes also struggle for justice and pro-active work.

The ongoing work on the understanding of diaconal ministry has made it obvious that outer structures of church organization and theological discussions on the understanding of ordained ministry should be closely interrelated with the self-understanding of the Church as a whole.

Faith in the triune God—Creator who meets us in everything that is created and challenges humankind to take care of creation; Savior, who in solidarity with the suffering, suffers with and for all people and frees them

to a new life; and the Life Giver, the Spirit, who carries and nurtures humankind and renews the congregation by blowing life into it—all these dimensions of faith in God make up the framework or the understanding of the identity of the church as a diaconal church in the world. *Diakonia* is anchored in belief in creation, salvation and renewal; it is anchored in the world and in the congregation. Thus, it is important to emphasize a trinitarian approach to the understanding of *diakonia* in order to reflect its broad meaning. The church's self-understanding as a diaconal church is, according to the Study "The Church of Jesus Christ," rooted in the commission to all Christians to serve: "In being directed not only to members of the church but to all people in need, the diaconate of Christians corresponds to the universality of salvation."²⁶

The starting point for the understanding of diaconal ministry lies in God's mission that is given to the church, followed by the specific task the church is faced with in the world.

Irrespective of the different forms and structures diaconal ministry has taken throughout history, the diaconate needs to define itself with a starting point in the mission and ministry of the church. At the same time, the mission and ministry of the church need to be redefined and adapted according to the concrete circumstances, needs, and conditions in its specific context. Diaconal ministry might therefore play a specific role in the act of bridge building and communicating the Gospel to the world, in our societies, with and without words.

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