

## **Communities in Diaconate and Diaconal Profile**

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The following article by Dr. Martin Zentgraf, Chairman of the Zehlendorf Association for Protestant Diakonia, constitutes a sort of theological-diaconal foil for the activity profiles hitherto described. It displays prominently and comprehensively their relevancy with respect to other topical themes in church and diakonia.

## COMMUNITIES IN DIACONATE AND DIACONAL PROFILE

Within the Diakonisches Werk of the EKD, a project group engaged in the subject of "Characteristics of Diaconal Culture"<sup>12</sup> and published its outcome. In view of the subject matter of our present concern, it signifies that *in the field of diakonia, last few years have seen a whole range of suggestions for further developing and strengthening the profile of diakonia:*

- *the Corporate Governance Code to achieve an adequate transparency of financial conduct,*
- *the loyalty guidelines,*
- *incentives through crown cross and diakonia CD,*
- *maintenance and promotion of ecological standard as a sign for safeguarding the creation,*
- *development and maintenance of quality standard in various diaconal action fields,*
- *model examples of successful practices.*

*Furthermore, diaconal culture covers broader spiritual, communicative, collective and organizational dimensions.*

In this respect, mention should also be made of the 'training courses in diaconate'.<sup>13</sup>

### Background of the Quest for Profile

The challenge is not new. Can we still tell diaconal institutions and their employees from other social agencies, for instance those run at communal or private level? This question is raised by local churches which have child care facilities as well as by bigger diaconal establishments with big hospitals, homes for the elderly or the handicapped, or youth aid agencies.

Alongside the welfare State, diakonia expanded by leaps and bounds after the Second World War, and with the marketization of social services, there has emerged 'entrepreneurial diakonia'. This brings the question of profile into a new perspective: how can the diaconal profile be maintained and continue to develop under the market conditions and the constraints imposed by numerous legal and bureaucratic obligations? How can social work be economic and Christianly at the same time? How can we harmonize ethics and efficiency?

From the perspective of those working in diakonia, too, the question arises as to how diakonia can maintain its Protestant character. The build-up of the German Federal Welfare State in the seventies and eighties brought about the

increase of workforce engaged in welfare associations, and hence in diakonia. This entailed a loosened confessional tie its employees. After the fall of inner-German border in 1989, more and more people without confessions applied for jobs in diakonia, and some diaconal agencies came to loosen the employment requirement of a membership of one of the churches belonging to the ACK (Confederation of Christian Churches) and employed also persons without confessions (in response to personnel shortage). The impact of this deconfessionalization of the personnel on the Protestant diaconal profile was intensified through the dwindling number of the members of Protestant sisterhoods and diaconal communities within the staff of diaconal institutions. In the face of the deficit of church tradition for motivating the employees and giving orientation to diaconal facilities, discussions are again going on about Church's 'distinguishing mark' (Luther).

### **Church and Diakonia**

Beginning with fundamentals, we may examine the old teaching about the attributes of the church (*notae ecclesiae*). According to the basic order of the EKD (§ 15,1), diakonia is not only an essential expression of the church, but also its indispensable way of life.

It is a well-acknowledged fact that most church members value diakonia as a way of life of vital importance.

This has been repeatedly confirmed by surveys, for instance by the study 'Perspectives Germany 2002 - on church's situation and prospect'. Whereas the church was given the shocking response of "interest lost", Diakonie (Protestant social service) and Caritas (Catholic social service) enjoyed a "markedly increased interest". This is an occasion to examine the possibility of an image transfer from diakonia to church. Initiatives of promoting a stronger mutual recognition of diaconal institutions and churches are trend-setting measures.

Along with *martyria* (witness), *leiturgia* (worship) and *koinonia* (community), *diakonia* (service) is traditionally one of the basic functions of the church. These basic functions are not juxtaposed as independent fields of church actions, but mutually conditioning and inter-penetrating. No single basic function can maintain its identity without the others.

The Reformers did not denounce these four attributes of the church. However, they defined the church in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession as an assembly of the faithful in which the pure (i.e. true to the Scripture) Gospel proclamation and the right administration of sacraments are practised. Speaking in a nutshell, a church in which the gospel is proclaimed in a pure manner and sacraments administered in a right manner, is one, holy, universal and apostolic church in which the four inter-permeable basic functions of diakonia, proclamation, worship and community are fulfilled. From an 'evangelical' viewpoint, the prior condition of all church proclamation cannot be understood in any other ways than in accordance with the Reformation insight that "Jesus is the only way of salvation, revealed to us in the Holy Scripture

of Old and New Testaments alone, given by grace alone, received through faith alone.” Proclamation whose content is to win as many as possible changes in every conceivable form and method (1 Cor. 9:19ff). Not only the spoken word, not only sermons or artistic expressions are its proper forms. A particularly valuable form of proclamation can be an act done out of love of neighbours, it can be diakonia: as a ‘sermon without words’, ‘biblical work with hands’ or ‘forefront pulpit of good tidings’ in the world.

### **Diakonia and Sacraments**

As is well known, Reformers described the sacraments, especially the Holy Communion, as a form of Divine Word. Mainly in the Word, but in the Holy Communion, too, and according to Mathew 25 in the neediest, we meet Jesus Christ face to face and with a decisive significance towards salvation. It is not a coincidence that diaconal conduct of providing help for the needy is closely related to the Holy Communion and thus has an unsurpassable value from an ecclesiastical viewpoint. Luther’s description that Christ’s body and blood is present ‘in, with, and under’ the bread and wine may also unfold towards a profiled understanding of diaconal actions: diaconal actions arise ‘in, with, and under’ caring and helping activities when this happens in compliance with God’s Word, i.e. if it is accompanied by a biblically-founded communication. This is the reason why specific diaconal-theological continuing and permanent education is constructive for diaconal organizations; their personnel can be equipped with adequate communicative skills, with their work meeting the standard set by the service-providing agencies. This is one of the points of the activity profiles as described in the present booklet. In this spirit, we cannot value too highly diaconal communities which are, as part of staff and representative group of an institution, concerned with their identification with diaconal tasks, insofar as they are capable of acting properly and shaping social sphere in organizations of church and diakonia. This is not possible unless they can communicate the Gospel and assist people in their vital existential questions.<sup>14</sup>

### **Self-Secularization of Diakonia and the Task of Church Reintegration**

The affirmation that diakonia and proclamation belong together is laid down in almost all statutes of diaconal bodies and communities, and it constitutes one of their central founding principles. Nevertheless, their self-secularization has often taken place over the past decades:

A founding stage motivated by a theological-ethical principle was followed by:

1. Institutionalization (‘diaconal institution’)
2. Professionalization (one-sided emphasis on job performance)
3. Secularization.

In the face of this reality, the church sees its task of reintegration in the form of its basic function of diakonia. Well aware of this task, the Chairman of the EKD Council, Bishop Wolfgang Huber, called for a ‘Wichern III’ as a new

diaconal dawn. After the venture of the diaconal foundation era around 1848 ('Wichern I') and the new beginning following WWII ('Wichern II'), Wichern III should now be taken up: combining modernity and profile, competition and churchliness, profitability and diakonia imbedded in Christian ethics. Wichern III aims to reformulate church's 'trademark' in the form of diakonia and to render it tangible in practicable measures.

### **Employment law of diakonia**

Churches' diaconal activities draw upon two constitutional guaranties:

1. Guarantee of the fundamental right of religious freedom (§ 4, para. 1.2 of the Basic Law)
2. Guarantee of church autonomy for church matters within the range of all applicable laws (§ 140 of the Basic Law coupled with § 137,3 of the Weimar Constitution)

The Federal Constitutional Court (BVerfGe: Bundesverfassungsgericht) has always recognized that churches' diaconal activities are an unambiguous part of Christian religious practice (e.g. BVerfGe 24, 236, 248).

Since independent diaconal agencies operate without any link to the church with respect to organization and legal form, the decisive question for them to be recognized the right to church autonomy is whether they pursue "the aim and task in compliance with church's self-understanding, fulfilling a part of the mission of the church in this world" (BVerfGe 46, 73).

The three essential attributes which serve as criteria for the classification of independent diaconal agencies to the church were set up by the Federal Constitutional Court in the so-called 'Goch Decision', which determines the church character of such an agency according to the following criteria:

1. Sharing church's mission in the spirit of Christian religiousness
2. Incorporating church's confession of faith
3. Being linked to its office bearers (BVerfGe 46, 73)

An independent diaconal establishment or community can de facto fall under the category of church by becoming members of its regional church. In the statutes of official diaconal agencies (Diakonisches Werk), the membership is laid down as one of the prior conditions of satisfying classification criteria. These criteria do not necessarily include a common collective pay scheme for all members. Therefore, the responsible boards of the official diaconal agencies may exempt their members from collective pay commitment.

An essential point of church's autonomous administrative right regarding diaconal establishments is the option for its own labour and remuneration concept which also enables the exemption from the prescriptions of the Works Constitution Act (BetrVG). BetrVG § 118,2 expressly exempts diaconal institutions from the obligation of electing a works council.

Most regional churches and their official diaconal agencies opt therefore for the so-called the third way; instead of negotiating collective wage agreements with trade unions (the second way), they have their employment law commissions made up in equal measure fix their labour and remuneration conditions in joint responsibility. This third way reflects the spirit of church and diakonia not only for the reason that it excludes conflict for the benefit of needy neighbours, but also because it is consistent with the overall concept of a 'service community' which<sup>15</sup> is more than the polar opposition of employers and employees. Whereas the paradigm of the second way centres on the rights and interests of both parties of collective pay schemes, that of the third way deviates essentially from this model by placing the main emphasis on the needy neighbours whom all parties involved have to help together.

This does not automatically exclude conflicts in a service community. On the contrary: such communities, too, must bear conflicts and apply regulations adequate for diakonia. A service community engages not only the management of non-commercial establishments, members of diaconal communities and other employees, but also volunteers, pastors and employees of commercial companies supplying services. In this context, it is important not to avoid defining the service community not so much by member-centred criteria as in the spirit of mandated service and its recipients, i.e. our needy neighbours, as imbedded in the bible. Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, in its concentration on pure preaching of Gospel and right administration of sacraments, loses its significance for a service community unless it is at the same time an 'assembly of the faithful' which is a constitutional condition of a worship service, and the fundamental functions of the church, which were never challenged by the Reformers, are duly considered and maintained.

### **Core concept building, quality management, ethics**

In almost all diaconal establishments and many other communal entities with different degrees of service community character, a basic overall concept has been built by adopting a practice introduced in the commercial economy some 25 years ago. These succinct texts describing aims, values, origin and modus operandi of the entities concerned are an essential instrument for entrepreneurial self-affirmation and serve as a cornerstone for the inner-diaconal continuing education and quality justification or definition.

At a time when many employees of diaconal establishments no longer have biblical and confessional knowledge, nor are familiar with a church-centred lifestyle, core concepts with up-to-date formulation may serve as initial and basic texts for an upgradable elementary training in the establishments concerned. In the context of educational settings, such identity texts can be easily revitalized and updated.

Nowadays, legal quality security systems and required in almost all fields of work in social and health-care sectors. In the diaconal sector, it was soon recognized that its own

quality concept went beyond the usual commercial target of 'client satisfaction'. Diaconal work on addicts, for example, does not always strive after the immediate client satisfaction, but involves a long strenuous therapeutic arrangement. Quality is here more than and different from satisfaction and superficial well-being. On the strength of the Christian human image laid down in the core concepts, a diaconal quality concept must be described out of a deeper and distinctive rationale compared with that of other sectors.

For this reason, a diakonia-specific quality management system has been developed which may be certified for individual establishments case to case. In the elderly care sector, a 'Diakonia Seal' has been firmly established in the meantime, and in hospitals 'Pro-Cum-Cert' which includes the KTQ system (cooperation for transparency and quality in hospitals) developed mainly by funding bodies, but expanded in a diaconal sense. Even though there are organizations, for understandable reasons, which answer for their diaconal quality according to their own standards, the quality security requirements emphatically offer diaconal establishments an opportunity to reconsider and sharpen their diaconal profiles.

Within the scope of such quality reflections, characteristics of diakonia are itemized here in the form of a checklist:

- Offers of worship service
- Offers of pastoral care
- Offers of continuing and permanent diaconal training
- Diaconal personnel development
- Care of diaconal spirituality
- Arrangement of church calendar
- Recognizability by means of coherent logo and corporate design
- Constitution of an ethic committee
- Guidelines for terminal care and care of the dying
- Palliative medical provision
- Guidelines for recruiting, accompanying and training volunteers
- Guidelines for careful treatment of resources of the creation (ecology management)
- and many others

In quest after diaconal quality, discussions about architectural and artistic reconizability are also increasingly topical. Whereas conventional general convictions of orientation, e.g. "not for show, but for solidity" (*nicht protzig, sondern gediegen*), have repeatedly been present, a concrete question is being raised whether there is a specifically diaconal and church-related artistic direction and relevant criteria may be set. I would rather not go too far here by delving into this subject. At least it may be recalled, however, that many traditional diaconal bodies let their house or corporate bible passages exhibited in a prominent place of the entrance areas. This specific Protestant-diaconal tradition may be taken up with up-to-date artistic means.

## Training courses in diaconate and consecration

We may generally mention diaconate as a diaconal ministry in a similar way as we do with pastoral ministry. It is hence possible to work in diaconate of the church without being consecrated as a deacon or deaconess. Likewise there are many different training courses towards this ministry.

Generally speaking, deacons and deaconesses fulfil double qualification: study at a specialized school or college (e.g. social work or social pedagogic) plus (mostly two-year) theological-diaconal additional qualification. Many regional churches have regulations regarding diaconal officers which lay down provisions for consecration and, occasionally, remuneration. Most diaconal officers belong to communities (formerly sisterhoods or brethren homes), which is, however, no requirement.

The title of diaconal officer presupposes a certain quality level, defined according to church-related diplomas. The courses towards it are illustrated in the 'competence matrix'. Those who are consecrated individually as diaconal officers must belong to a Protestant denomination.

In case of members of sisterhoods and diaconal communities, the situation is different: a diaconal sister, for example, is called as such first and foremost through her affiliation to a sisterhood (community). Qualifications in sisterhoods are various. Theological-diaconal courses have a stronger emphasis on the integration in and identification with the communities concerned, often with individual tendency of respective diaconal bodies. These training courses are illustrated in the joint paper of the associations in diaconate.<sup>16</sup> They lead not only to a common diploma, but accompany also the whole community life (in parallel to career life), also through a whole range of spiritual offers. In many sisterhoods and communities, there are also members who belong to one of other ACK churches (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen: confederation of Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox denominations). Communities offer their members opportunities to participate in the diaconate of the church. Members of sisterhoods work in most cases in the health-care sector. Sisterhoods whose members work above all in hospitals, nursing homes or ambulant care have, therefore, the character of trade association for this professional category.

Communicative competence with diaconal reference generally corresponds to the quality logic of person-centred services which basically deviates from the established productivity parameters of the industrial sector. Friedhelm Hengsbach's formulation is very informative in this sense: "Medical, nursing, therapeutic services cannot be stored, they are rendered available and required simultaneously. They cannot be successful without the cooperation between those who offer them and those who receive them. This cooperation is communicative and has the main objective of understanding." The diaconal quality of person-centred services cannot be insured without communication-oriented continuing trainings and diaconal personnel development. The suggestions presented in this booklet may be useful in this sense.



## **Sisterhoods and brotherhoods – communities in diaconate**

Sisterhoods and Brotherhoods in diakonia, often called diaconal communities, too, are a great help for the diaconal profile. By virtue of their community culture and tradition, they have the prior conditions as diaconal cores to give impetus to the broad range of service communities and establishments. They are bearers of value-oriented diaconal culture and hence promote the success of the establishments concerned. The groundwork study 'Culture of Values and Entrepreneurial Success' of the University of St. Gallen<sup>17</sup> demonstrated this eloquently.

Sisters and brothers of our associations (Zehlendorf, Kaiserwerth, VEDD, community diakonia among others) and diaconal officers assume a particular responsibility also in the future for the diaconal profile of their professional sector. Whereas only a small number of deaconesses are still active in their career life, there is a considerable number of successor generations of diaconal sisters and brothers and diaconal officers. Many retired deaconesses repeatedly draw our attention to the importance of regular intercessions for diaconal establishments and the wealth of a mature spiritual self-confidence for the lifestyle of a diaconal house.

The EKD has produced many impulses and documents which aim to strengthen diaconate as an ordained church ministry.<sup>18</sup>

These efforts are justified by the fact that they do not intend to trigger any competition between diaconate and pastoral ministry, but rather give a theoretical foundation to the ministry of diaconal officers based on their special professionalism independent of pastoral ministry (cf. the competence matrix above).

For the broad range of health-care professions in diaconate, this causes no problem alone by the nature of their activity fields. We welcome the enhanced cooperation of the associations of the communities in diaconate regarding this issue at regional and supra-regional and levels.

According to the Christological understanding, diaconate is founded on the church out of its witness service for Christ. Diaconate and pastoral ministry are two shapes of one service (ministry) mandated to the church. This consists in church's testimony to the service of Jesus Christ for humans as Body of Christ through her own words and deeds. Both the diaconal ministry of helping love and the pastoral ministry of proclamation and sacraments are for their respective parts specific implementations of one of the services mandated to the church.

Whereas the verbal character of religious communication enables a clearly recognizable mark of the witness to Jesus Christ, the practising love of neighbours assigned to diaconate bestows this witness its due credibility. Both are cross-referential and have a constructive significance for each other. For the sake of the recognizability of diaconal actions, however, spoken (and written) proclamation is indispen-

sable as, the opposite way around, spoken words require implementation in their corresponding deeds in order to be credible.

[diakon.at.org](http://diakon.at.org)

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