Diakonia and Mission: Charting the Ambiguity

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About the Author

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Around the world individual local churches, denominations, seminaries, training institutes, and even governments struggle with the meaning of *diakonia* and its cognates (*diakonein, diakonos,* etc.). In large part the ambiguity of *diakonia* as a Greek term is due to the usage of linguistic variations of the term outside of its New Testament context; *diakonie* in German is best translated as religiously-motivated social work. Scandinavian languages have similar terms with like meaning. *Diakonia* as a New Testament term has been interpreted to mean acts of lowly, humble, service, and this field of meaning has been assumed to apply equally well to what Germans call *diakonie.* The precise nature of *diakonie* as a religious term, however, is contested in the secular cultural context of many European countries. Linguistic research on *diakonia* in the New Testament context by Roman Catholic scholar John N. Collins further challenges the traditional understanding of *diakonia* and *diakonie* as lowly, humble, service. Needless to say, a term translated as "ministry" and "service" in English Bibles directly impinges on our understanding of mission. The ambiguity surrounding *diakonia,* therefore, is germane to challenges in defining mission in general and is also directly relevant to our 2015 APM conference theme of examining the naming of mission program titles.

The word's assumed connotation of "lowly, humble, service" has influenced ecclesial discourse in ways which have not always been positive. The ubiquitous use of "servant leadership" language, for example, as the paramount understanding of ministry can be a problem for a number of reasons which I elaborate on later in this paper. Our APM colleague Bill Burrows pointed out years ago the problem of reductionism in this move away from the rich spiritual depth of ministry – observed perhaps most poignantly in the liturgical theology of ordination rites – to ministry as mere ethical commitment to be humble and morally earnest (Burrows 1980: 69). I see "servant leadership" rhetoric as sometimes engaging in such reductionism. John N. Collins's research further calls such rhetoric into question.

The field of missiology has struggled with *diakonia* in several ways, but perhaps most directly in our definitional concerns about how ministry and mission are interrelated. Is ministry (*diakonia*) a subset of activity done by specifically or generally commissioned persons *on behalf of* the community which, as a whole, participates in the broader *missio Dei,* or is mission a subset of activity – "mission in the dimension of difference" – with ministry being just about everything individuals or the church does? At the risk of being somewhat reductionist myself, I see John N. Collins and Paul Avis representing the "ministry-as-subset-of mission" view and

Titus Presler representing the "mission-as-subset-of ministry" view (Avis 2005; Collins 1990; Presler 2010). My own view probably comes closest to that expressed by Paul Avis. He simultaneously refers to mission as a broad concept and also a concept more limited to "cutting edge" activities. For Avis, "[m]ission is the whole Church bringing the whole Christ to the whole world. In this holistic concept of mission, mission is seen as the cutting edge of the total life of the Church" (Avis 2005: 1).

For missiologists what is at stake here is also related to the decades-long debate (now somewhat muted or taking a different shape in an ethos of anti-institutional attitudes) between the interrelationship of ecclesiology with missiology. In the 1960s this was simplistically expressed in the contrast between "God-church-world" and "God-world-church" framing of how the *Missio Dei* ought best be understood. (The debate between Hoekendijk and McGavran on this does not need to be pointed out for this audience of missiologists.) How one conceptualizes ministry (*diakonia*) as either a subset of mission or as the more encompassing term than mission reflexively influences and is influenced by one's ecclesiology.

For this paper, my intent is not to rehearse the missiological debates around so-called ecclesiocentrism and liberal expressions of the *missio Dei* of the early to mid-20th century (expressed, respectively, at Tambaram in 1938 and Uppsala in 1968) or even to wade into the debate about how mission and ministry might best be defined. Rather, I want to focus on the ambiguity surrounding *diakonia* specifically. This debate is reasonably well known by theologians and church leaders in Europe and northern-European influenced denominations and federations; Lutheran World Federation and Porvoo Agreement denominations know this debate best (Hanover Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission 1996; Dietrich, Jorgensen, Korslien, and Nordstokke 2014). The debate around *diakonia* is almost entirely unknown by American evangelicals, a group well-represented among our APM colleagues. Roman Catholics, United Methodists, and Anglicans have scholars who have addressed the matter extensively, but the extent to which their ideas have influenced others in their churches is difficult to tell (Avis 2005; Collins 1990; 2006; Gooder 2006; Hartley 2004).

To be clear, my contribution in this paper is primarily to call for more conversation in missiological circles about the contested nature of the biblical term for ministry – *diakonia* – as it is being used in a number of academic programs in Europe which for Americans might be seen as programs in mission or "holistic ministry." How we talk about *diakonia*

makes a difference in whether and how missiologists build partnerships with denominations and training institutes that use the term *diakonia* as a constitutive dimension of God's mission. Training centers such as the Diakoniewissenschaftliches Institut at the University of Heidelberg is probably the most long-standing and research-focused diaconal institute in Europe, but similar institutes also exist in other European countries (Norway, Czech Republic, Finland). I believe missiology has an especially important gift to offer these regions where the church seeks to be faithful in addressing its "asymmetrical burden" in the midst of European secularity. Understanding *diakonia* is integral to being faithful in that context (Schreiter 2010). Our understanding of *diakonia* also influences the ministry of deacons in our churches, a ministry which Paul Avis describes as "at the same time the most problematic and the most promising of all the ministries of the Church" (Avis 2009: 3).

I look forward to hearing from conference participants about how you are navigating the terrain around the term *diakonia* in the contexts in which you serve. How are you experiencing – if at all – the ambiguity which surround this term in your own academic programs or denominations? Is this a problem primarily for Lutheran and Lutheran-influenced groups? In the school where I work we have just barely begun to grapple with this problem in our "Open Seminary" program which utilizes a number of biblical Greek terms as an interpretive framework for its curriculum. One of those terms is *diakonia*. In my own denomination of the United Methodist Church I seem to be serving in a kind of mediating role between two different understandings of *diakonia* and have been trying to negotiate those differences for almost twenty years. As mostly a historian of mission, the few times I have authored explicitly theological articles in the last fifteen years have mostly been occasions where I focused on this question (Hartley 1999; 2003; 2004; 2014; Hartley and Van Buren 1999).[1]

Conceptually, the ambiguity surrounding the meaning and practice of *diakonia* might be best characterized as an ellipse which – for the geometrically uninitiated – is defined as an elongated circle with two gravitational centers. The various sorts of discourse about *diakonia* could be seen as constituting the various orbital paths one could take in lesser or

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1 This has been personally important to me as my calling as a permanent deacon in God's church is a calling that resonates as deeply as my missionary vocation. In fact, I view my diaconal calling as a particular expression of my missionary vocation. Interestingly and somewhat self-critically, my reflections on the diaconate have not always reflexively informed my missiological thinking as much as I think they could have or perhaps should have.
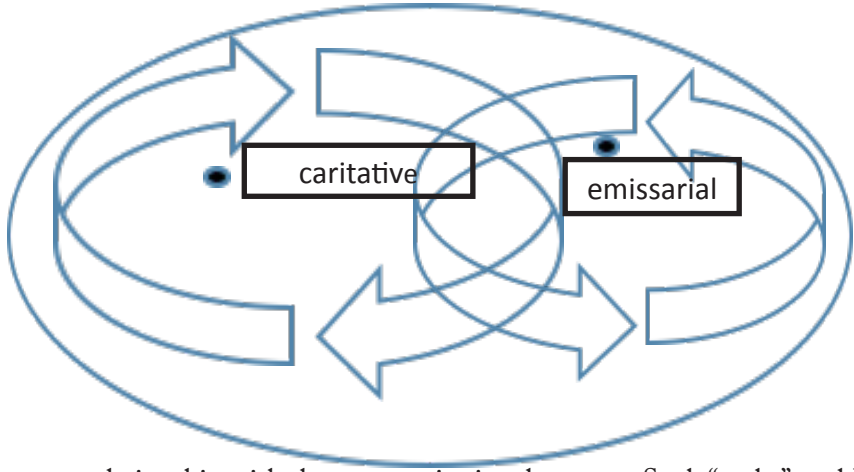
greater relationship with the two gravitational centers. Such "paths" could be depicted with the use of many more arrows than in the figure above. The gravitational centers are the caritative and the emissarial dimensions of meaning for *diakonia*.

Caritative

For most northern European Christians today the term *diakonia* mostly brings to mind the field of meaning which in German is called *diakonie* or religiously-motivated social welfare work – the caritative gravitational center in the figure above. The genesis for this understanding of *diakonia* mostly comes from biblical interpretation of the choosing of the seven in Acts 6 and the tendency of deacons (who were not known as such in Acts 6) by the fourth century to be associated – at least sometimes – with the imagery of the basin and towel (Connolly 1932: 148-150). The understanding of deacons' vocation to be focused on humble, loving service found expression in Luther's and Calvin's ecclesiology as well (Olson 1992: 99-118). In the nineteenth century the association between deacons and social welfare work was strengthened further by the work of Theodor Fliedner and Johann Wichern in their work among the poor which Wichern famously called the church's "Inner Mission."

A one-to-one correspondence developed between deacon's work and loving, humble service such that biblical terms for ministry (*diakonia, diakonos,* etc.) similarly took on a strong caritative meaning in German

and other European languages. During World War II the diaconal movement in Germany largely acquiesced to the demands of the Nazi party; diaconal workers were, by definition, humble servants after all. Friedrich von Bodelschwingh (1877-1946) was a noteworthy exception to this in his work to save the aged and mentally ill from being classified as "Lebensunwerteslebens" (life unworthy of life) and killed by the Hitler regime (Strohm 1990; Nordstokke 2014). (My own great-grandmother who was severely mentally ill during the war years was so classified and killed.) By the last few decades of the twentieth century a more or less subservient understanding of *diakonia* in northern European languages began to be modified somewhat around the concept of "prophetic diakonia" and an understanding of *diakonia* that sought to infuse a stronger ecclesial dimension into the understanding and practice of *diakonia* (Poser 1987). Juergen Moltmann was one prominent theologian who engaged in theological reflection around the concept of *diakonia* in this period and sought to apply insights from liberation theology to it (Moltmann 1984).

Prominent centers of study around *diakonia* mostly understood in this caritative dimension have been established in a number of European countries. The Diakoniewissenschaftliches Institut at the University of Heidelberg is perhaps one of the most long-standing and influential of these institutes. Some of these institutes have master's level degree programs which acquaint students with the debate surrounding *diakonia* but do not appear to be explicitly missiological in the scholarly resources which they utilize even if their program's description seems to encapsulate much of what the Association of Professors of Mission encourages. The Norwegian Diakonhjemmet University College describes its master's degree in Diakonia and Christian Social Practice as follows:

> After completing the programme you will have…
>
> Obtained the knowledge of the theory and practice of diakonia, as well as the professional competence required to function within congregations, institutions and organizations. This knowledge includes a basic understanding of Christian theology.
>
> Acquired an integrated and professional understanding of diaconal approaches and methods that express international and ecumenical awareness, interdisciplinary perspectives, perspectives of participation and gender awareness in relation to diaconal practice.

> Gained competency in facing the major contemporary challenges within diaconal action related to the struggle for justice, stewardship of Creation, building inclusive fellowships, and expressing love for one's neighbour.
>
> Developed his/her competence in applying acquired knowledge related to understanding, methods and problem solving – in new and unfamiliar environments (Diakonhjemmet University College, 2015).

In this program description the term "missiological" or "missional" could be readily inserted in place of diaconal. For us in the Association of Professors of Mission it is worth considering why it is not.

Emissarial

The renegotiating of the concept of *diakonia* to be more liberative and prophetic in the 1980s was even more strongly called into question by the landmark linguistic study of *diakonia* and its cognates in the New Testament by John N. Collins's *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources* (1990). In the twenty-five years since its publication it has prompted considerable re-evaluation of *diakonia* by biblical scholars. To my knowledge, no one has brought forth evidence which seriously counters the claims made by Collins in his 1990 publication. The differences between the older understanding of *diakon-* words and the newer interpretation may be succinctly expressed by comparing the definitions of the term in Bauer's Greek-English Lexicon in the 2nd edition (sometimes denoted by the initials of its authors as BAGD, 1979) with the 3rd edition which directly draws from Collins's work (BDAG, 2001; Gooder 2006: 46-47).

Comparison of Definitions of *diakoneo* in the New Testament in Bauer's Greek-English lexicon[2]	
BAGD 2nd edition (1979)	BDAG 3rd edition (2001)
1) Wait on someone at table	1) To function as an intermediary, act as a go-between/agent, be at one's service with intermediary function either expressed or implied.
2) Serve generally, of services of any kind	2) To perform obligations, without focus on intermediary function.
3) Care for, take care of	3) To meet an immediate need, help.
4) Help, support someone	4) To carry out official duties, minister. Rendering of specific assistance, aid, support (Acts 6:1); send someone something for support (Acts 11:29).
5) Of the ecclesiastical office serve as deacon	5) Acts 6:2 poses a special problem: care for, take care of… "look after tables" can be understood of serving food at tables… but it is improbable that some widows would be deprived of food at a communal meal. The term *diakonia* (verse 1) more probably refers to administrative responsibility, one of whose aspects is concern for widows without specifying the kind of assistance that is allotted.

There are three insights which are critical in this shift of *diakon-* word definitions in the New Testament (c.f. Avis 2005; Hannaford 1996; Collins 1992; 2002). First, there has been a significant change in understanding these terms for ministry such that their field of meaning is increasingly focused on intermediary or emissarial relationships of persons and less on the caring, ethical, nature of the acts performed, such as in taking care of or helping someone.[3] It is the relationship with and to the church that is critical to recover here *not* the officious status which may be associated with terms such as emissary or ambassador. Ministry is something that is given to someone by the church; calling something "my ministry" is thus, strictly speaking, an oxymoron (Avis 2005: 46).[4] Ministry is something which the Church may give to an individual (whether lay or ordained) as a public expression of the Church's mission in the world. Something could be designated a ministry through an informal public approval or through a service of ordination; the point is that the work is in some way accountable to the Church. For missiologists this understanding of ministry carries with it the long history of missionary orders which may be especially useful in infusing strength in what has sometimes become a rather anemic understanding of ministry.

Second, as already suggested, the revised definition of *diakon-* terms introduces a greater focus on the missionary meaning of the term such that *diakonos* (minister) is more closely related to *apostolos* (messenger) than our previous understanding of *diakon-*terms have tended to permit with its focus on lowly, humble, service (Schmittals 1969; Braaten 1985). Paula Gooder has underscored that the *diakon-* terms still maintain a sense of menial service in some New Testament passages. However, even when menial service is emphasized as part of a minister's vocation it is still very much related to the minister's emissarial relationship to an authority – and ultimately to Christ as his missionary (Gooder 2006: 46). At a personal level, a more apostolic understanding of a minister's

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2   The table above is a much-abbreviated depiction of an extensive comparison in two editions of a Greek-English lexicon which also contains definitions of other *daikon -* cognates such as *diakonia* and *diakonos*. For serious examination of these definitions please consult Bauer (1979) and Bauer and Danker (2001).

3   I have only included the verb *diakoneo* in the table above but similar contrasts are evident in related terms *diakonos* and *diakonia*.

4   A fruitful trajectory of reflection to explore here would be the interrelationship between vocation and ministry – for pastors and others (c.f. Hunter 2003; Placher 2005).

vocation may further guard against an unhealthy victim complex whereby one perceives oneself as a burned-out servant of the people more than a sent emissary of God. I believe that the old understanding of *diakonia* and the attendant "servant leader" language is especially vulnerable to such a distortion of ministry – especially if it is left ambiguous whose servant one is (Dulles 1987; McCrimmon 2014). Instead, what is emphasized in the revised understanding of *diakonia* – and, of course, elsewhere in the New Testament – is that one can be radically free to perform menial and self-sacrificial missionary service precisely because of the "high calling" and close emissarial relationship and friendship one can have as a *diakonos* or minister of Jesus.

In a similar way, the older definition of *diakonia* has contributed to wider problematic ecclesial self-understandings. The missionary impulse of the reign of God does not consist in a timid humility of a "let the world set the agenda" variety as the World Council of Churches proclaimed in 1968. In this appeal the WCC was motivated in part by a well-intentioned desire to correct the abuses of ecclesiastical hubris. The diaconate was seen as a vehicle to accomplish this in the Church (Morche 1996). Indeed, ecclesiastical hubris must be rejected, but in doing so one must not be dismissive of the Church (Hannaford 2000: 239-279). An embrace of a revised definition for *diakon-* terms, while of course not refuting true Christian humility, may help the diaconate (and the Church as a whole) embrace the radical missionary values of God's reign whereby the whole Church brings the whole Christ to the whole world.[5] Deacons, deaconesses, and missioners cross boundaries with and for the Gospel;[6] they do not

5   Of course, in a very important sense it is not the Church that brings Christ to places and people where he is totally absent. Nor is it the case that the Church is equated with God's reign. The Church participates in God's mission through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. And yet Christians affirm that the Church is also far from being merely incidental in accomplishing God's mission in the world.

6   I am very conscious of the fact that such language of "boundary crossing" is received by some persons as linguistic remnants of a colonial enterprise. I believe that much theological discourse about boundaries and mission needs to be reframed in light of insights gained from postcolonial theory and other sources. I have found David Bosch's essay on the "vulnerability of mission" to be especially useful in my teaching in this regard. Bosch notes that "the activities of adherents of any religion which holds that it has a message of universal validity will invoke images of paternalism. And since the Christian faith, as I have suggested, is intrinsically missionary, it will often be experienced as paternalistic even where it is not. This is, if you wish, simply an "occupational hazard" of

follow an ambiguous or secular "world" which calls the shots for its lowly servants.[7]

A third insight which may be garnered from this new definition of *diakon-* terms is best framed in a negative way: Ministry is not synonymous with activities of Christian discipleship. There has been a rather widespread ecumenical tendency since the 1950s to expand the meaning of ministry to the service of all baptized believers (Poser 1986; Collins 2006). This resulted in nearly everything being identified as a ministry with little left to be considered a matter of Christian discipleship. Loving one's neighbor, caring for the poor, and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ are activities all Christians ought to do as a matter of their discipleship and are not necessarily ministries – *although they could be.* As Paul Avis argues, all baptized Christians are *potential* ministers even if not all Christians are, by virtue of their baptism, ministers (Avis 2005: 52). As ecclesially accountable leaders missionaries and others are called to encourage and support the serious discipleship of others whether their activities are recognized by the Church (and therefore ministry) or not.

I believe the new interpretive direction opened up by John N. Collins is rich with missiological opportunity. This is perhaps most strikingly expressed in Collins's paraphrased interpretation of the choosing of the seven in Acts 6.

> The Greek-speaking members of the community complained against those who spoke Aramaic that their housebound widows were being overlooked in the great preaching (*diakonia*) that was going on day by day in the environs of the Temple. So the Twelve summoned the whole complement of the disciples and said: 'We cannot possibly break off our public proclamation before the huge crowds in the Temple to carry out a ministry (*diakonein*) in the households of these Greek-speaking widows. Brothers, you will have to choose seven men from your own ethnic group who are fully respected, empowered by the Spirit, and equipped for the task. We will then appoint

Christian missionaries (Bosch 1994: 83)." Bill Burrows is helpful in this regard as well (2010). Among United Methodists, Hendrik Pieterse provides a helpful discussion of the way the UMC uses theological language as a worldwide church (2013).

7   Paul's description of himself and others as slaves (*doulos*) of Christ highlights an honorific element alongside the menial in a similar way to the revised definition of *diakon-* terms (c. f. Martin 1990).

them to the role that needs to be filled. That will mean that the Twelve can get on with attending to worship in the Temple and to our apostolic ministry (*diakonia*) of proclaiming the Word there (Collins 2002: 58).

Even though I think Collins's interpretation of Act 6 and other passages hold a great deal of promise, it is also true that *diakonia* understood in this new way is vulnerable to being misunderstood. Collins's interpretation of *diakonia* in no way calls for retrenchment to "take back" ministry from laypersons and give it exclusively to those who have been ordained. Accountability – a key dimension of a go-between's or emissary's calling – can take many different forms and can be informal or formal in nature.

Conclusion

Our current intellectual context with regard to the understanding and practice of *diakonia* – understood both as religiously motivated social work and as a Greek term in the New Testament for ministry – does not seem to be moving very quickly toward resolving the ambiguity of this word's usage. We seem to be at different places on our ellipse trying to make sense of one another's orbital paths as best we can. Whether this ambiguity will soon be resolved is impossible to predict. Until then, it is important for missiologists and especially professors of mission to at least be aware that there is ambiguity here so that institutional partnerships, ecumenical relationships, and even personal relationships might be initiated or strengthened and not side-tracked by misunderstanding. It would be a tragically ironic thing indeed for ministry to be stymied because of confusion over *diakonia*.

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