

Church and welfare state in Norway: Diaconia in the context of welfare pluralism

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The questions I will address in my lecture are:

1. How does the Church at the parish level conceive of “diaconia” and the associated tasks and challenges?
2. How does the concept of “diaconia” relate to the concept of “welfare”?
3. To what extent does the Church at the parish level interact and co-operate with the local public sector (the municipality) in matters of welfare?
4. How does the public sector perceive the Church as a provider of welfare at the local level?

I will discuss these issues in the context of “welfare pluralism”.

1. The concept of welfare pluralism

Since the middle of the 1980s the welfare state in many countries have been criticised for standardisation and lack of efficiency. The principle of equality on which the development of the welfare state was built, entailed a standardisation of the services offered. We may perceive this standardisation as a reflection of a society in which experiences in life and work were fairly similar, characterising whole social classes (Rosanvallon 2000). What we have seen over the last decades is a new form of society where life and work experiences are more differentiated than before. The existing system of public services has been seen as unable to serve diverse needs related to local needs and individual diversity. Public services are accused of being bureaucratic, inflexible, and also expensive (the lack of efficiency argument). Instead, it is argued, a plurality of service providers is needed to serve a plurality of needs. The concept catching the alternative is ‘*welfare pluralism*’ (Lorentzen 1994). A conflict between freedom and equality has been stated. Though this criticism first appeared in the Anglo-Saxon part of the world, it has spread, also to Norway. We may refer to it as the discourse of freedom and ask how this discourse has affected public policy and the role of the Church in particular. I will deal with this issue when I return to the question of relations between the Church and the public sector.

2. Diaconia in the welfare state

Diaconia is listed as one of four specified fields of priority in the Church of Norway in the period 2002 - 2005 as decided by the Church Synod 2001. In the priority document it is claimed that diaconia is the “body language” of the Church, necessary for the Church to remain its credibility in the population. In describing the challenges to diaconia in present day Norway, the Church Synod emphasises the equivocal nature of the present welfare situation, e.g. with regard to material, social and cultural aspects of welfare:

“Most people do not have to worry about their “daily bread”, however, the difference between poor and rich increases. The position of women in society has changed, but many women still carry heavy burdens on their shoulders. Health and social welfare arrangements are comprehensive; nevertheless, many people feel the scarcity of welfare resources at the local level. A significant element of multi-culturality helps increase familiarity with cultural diversity; at the same time we witness many expressions of fear of those that are perceived as strangers” (Kirkerådet 2002).

It is stated that although the public welfare sector is strong and the public welfare system is comprehensive diaconia remains a central task for any Christian congregation.

3. Diaconia in the Church of Norway - part of the voluntary sector?

In Norway, with its state church, The Church of Norway is not a voluntary organisation, but rather a statutory body. On the other hand, no prescriptions exist for the regulation of the welfare activities of the Church. In this way, welfare activities organised by the Church, what we may tentatively term “diaconia”, may be regarded as voluntary, or third sector, activities. This way of looking at Church based welfare activities is also the way these activities are categorised in Norwegian welfare research (see e.g. Lorentzen 1995). It should be noted, though, that it is not self-evident that diaconia, organised by the Church of Norway as a statutory body should be classified this way. It has been disputed on a formal, legal basis (Repstad 1998).

4. Kramer's typology of the functions of voluntary organisations in the welfare state

Nevertheless, since Church based welfare activities may be classified as voluntary service provision, I will take advantage of voluntary agency theory analysing the role of the Church. Useful in this connection is Kramer's four types of organisational roles of voluntary agencies in the welfare state (Kramer 1981). Kramer distinguishes between the *vanguard* role, the *improver* role, the *value guardian* role, and the *service provider* role as his main categories. The categories explain themselves. The service provider role refers to the running of programme activities usually integrated in the welfare state.

In discussing the latter, Kramer introduces three sub-categories of relationship between the voluntary agencies and the state, three types of provider roles of voluntary agencies: the primary, the complementary, and the supplementary provider role. As a *primary* provider the voluntary organisations are alone, or almost alone, in providing the service, i.e. there are at most only a few public providers. As a *complementary* provider to the public sector, the voluntary agencies provide services that are qualitatively different in kind from those provided by the former. Thirdly, voluntary organisations provide *supplementary* services if these are similar in kind to those provided by the public sector, "some of which may offer an alternative choice or serve as a substitute for a governmental service", as Kramer puts it (1981 p. 234). Thus, in studying the role of the Church in the provision of welfare in general terms, we may more specifically investigate into the specific roles of the various activities organised by religious agencies. My comments in this lecture will only touch the issue, on the basis of my piecemeal knowledge of the field. With the Lutheran theology in mind we may expect Church based welfare activities to have mainly complementary and supplementary roles in the welfare state.

5. Conceptions of "diaconia" within the Church of Norway: nature and purpose of diaconia

The empirical data I will draw on in this lecture is primarily connected with three partly ongoing, partly completed research projects, all of them focusing on Church and welfare. In one of the projects we studied how parish councils in one diocese constructed diaconia as a

concept and how they assessed the local situation with regard to parish level diaconia (Angell and Kristoffersen 2004). The theme of the second project is the role of the parish deacon in the local community; the parish deacon as a welfare worker (Angell 2002). The third project is a case study of the city of Drammen (located in Tunsberg diocese), which is part of a European study on “Religion and welfare” (Bäckström 2003).

How does the Church at the parish level conceive of “diaconia” and the associated tasks and challenges? The parish councils in Tunsberg diocese were asked what they considered to be the task of diaconia. They were presented two alternative claims and asked to choose the alternative that best corresponded with their perception of diaconia. One option constructed the task of diaconia as doing the “good deed”, the other added a condition, i.e., that the good deed contributed to helping people create or strengthen a relationship with God. Possible biblical parallels may be the story about the Good Samaritan on the one hand¹ and the challenge of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as it is written in Matth. 5,16 on the other. In Matthew 5,16 Jesus says: “And you, like the lamp, must shed light among your fellows, so that, when they see the good you do, they may give praise to your Father in heaven”. Measured this way, the views of the task of diaconia in society was as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The task of diaconia as perceived by the parish councils (N = 70).

The task of diaconia	Number of parishes	%
The task of diaconia is to do "good deeds"	18	26
The task of diaconia is to do "good deeds", and thereby, help people to create or strengthen a relationships with God	52	74
Total	70	100

There is a clear tendency that the parish councils consider the second alternative to be the most appropriate expression of the task of diaconia. Theologically, this is interesting within a Lutheran context. The split in the views of diaconia may be taken to be an expression of two sub-traditions within the overall Lutheran religious tradition of the Church. The first alternative may be interpreted as a way of expressing diaconia as welfare agency, as part of

¹ It is worth noting that in this context only some elements from the story is focussed. E.g., we do not make a point of the social status of the Samaritan in the contemporary Jewish society.

the secular regiment or kingdom of God². The second alternative may be interpreted as a way of expressing a view of diaconia along the Pietistic sub-tradition within the Church. This sub-tradition has a strong position in Norwegian discourse on diaconia.

The frequency distribution in Table 1 corresponds in broad outline with findings in a survey which was part of “The deacon in the local community” (undertaken in 2004). In this survey about 20% of the respondents preferred the first alternative as an expression of their view of diaconia, the rest, about 80%, preferred the second alternative.

Another approach to the question of the task of diaconia would be to ask how relevant various aspects of welfare are, as tasks for the Church to involve itself in. This may be related to the concept of “welfare”. This concept is most fruitfully understood as a multidimensional concept. In this context we will link our standing of welfare to Allardt’s discussion of the concept (Allardt 1975). The concept of ‘need’ is his starting point, and he differentiates between three dimensions of welfare, a material or economic dimension (“*to have*”), a dimension referring to social relations (“*to love*”), and a dimension of human quality referring to the person’s relationship to society, e.g. connected to the need of self-fulfilment (“*to be*”). The way the Church defines its mission in society, to preach and to help, to say it in a very simplistic manner; it is supposed to cover all three dimensions of welfare.

Along this line of reasoning the parish councils in Tunsberg were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed that it is the task of diaconia to:

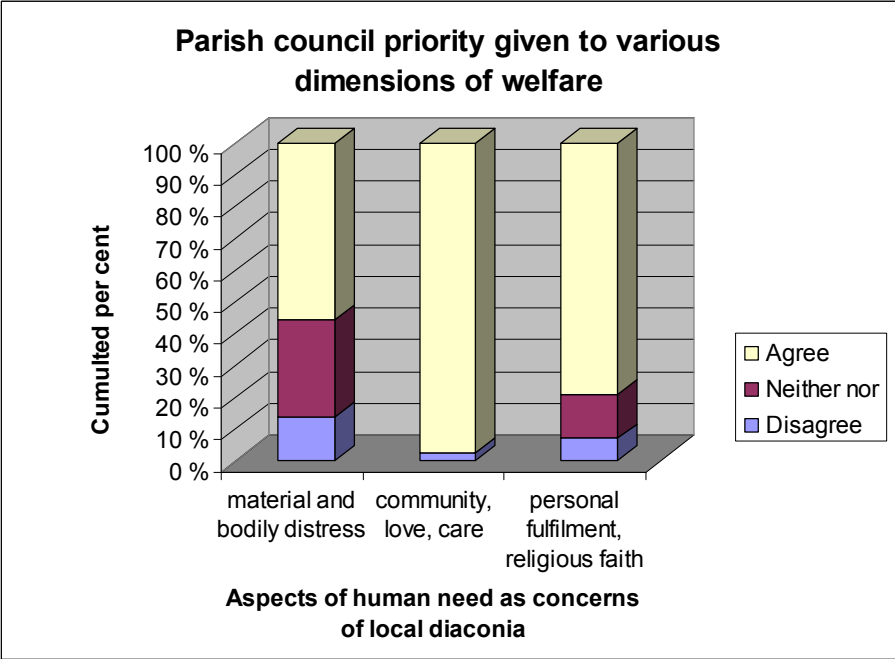
1. help prevent and mitigate material and bodily distress,
2. help people experience community, love, and care,
3. help people at the personal level, strengthen their self-respect, and help them to fulfil themselves, to personal liberation, to religious faith.

The distribution of responses to those questions is shown in Figure 1. First of all, only a small fraction of the parish councils disagreed to considering any one of the dimensions of welfare as a concern of diaconia. On the other hand, the share of those that explicitly agreed that the tasks proposed were tasks of diaconia varied between the tasks proposed.

² Luther gives a summary of the doctrine of the two kingdoms, the secular and the spiritual, in "Ob Kriegsleute auch in seligem Stande sein können" .

Around half of the parish councils agreed that it is a task of diaconia to help prevent and mitigate material and bodily need, what we may call physical welfare, related to Allardt’s “have” dimension. However, there was almost unanimous agreement that it is a task of diaconia to help people experience community, love, and care, what we may call social welfare, related to the “love” dimension of Allardt. The third dimension, which we may refer to as spiritual welfare, received support as a task of diaconia by a rate somewhat in the middle between the two previous dimensions. This finding was confirmed by the responses to a follow-up question concerning priority in case the parish councils had to choose one field of priority among the three areas mentioned. Three out of four would give priority to social welfare, one out of seven prioritised spiritual welfare, and only a few councils gave priority to physical welfare.

Figure 1. Parish council agreement/disagreement to giving priority to various dimensions of welfare.



In the deacon survey the deacons were asked to assess the priority given to the same three dimensions of welfare referred to above, in the local diaconia as it was organised and implemented in the parishes covered by the survey. Basically, a pattern similar to the one presented for the local parishes appeared among the deacons, with some noticeable differences in the specificities of the frequency distributions. Among the deacons, in practical diaconia, as it is organised and carried out in the local parishes where deacons are employed,

less than 10% gave high priority to physical welfare. In contrast, about 90% gave high priority to social welfare, with spiritual welfare somewhere in between.

There may be various reasons for this discrepancy. One reason may be that in the local parish study, councils with a deacon on their staff may have given each welfare dimension a priority different from those that did not employ a deacon. Other methodological explanations are also possible. Another type of explanation would be the old wisdom of the gap between theory and practice, ideal and reality. What you might like to accomplish is one thing, what the practical situation allows for may be something else. In our case, at least the first methodological explanation turned out not to be true. Statistically, there was no significant difference between the views of councils in parishes with and without a deacon. At this stage, I have not had been able to go deeper into the material.

6. Orientations of local diaconia: prioritised fields of activity and diaconal profiles

What kinds of activities do parish councils consider important as diaconia? In the survey the councils were asked to express degree of agreement/disagreement (on a scale ranging from 1 - total disagreement - to 5 - total agreement) with claims of the importance of a wide range of possible, pre-specified, Church-related tasks at the local level. Not all of them would necessarily, at a first glance, qualify as diaconia, at least not by me. The activities specified ranged from, say, conducting Bible classes, confirmation classes, activities connected to the church service, and spiritual counselling, to visiting service, family counselling, care for the sick, and those who struggle with substance abuse, and political engagement in affairs related to environmental, social, and development aid issues. We notice that the range of activities go beyond what would reasonably be comprised by the welfare concept of Allardt.

Measured this way, the five activities receiving the highest average scores were the following:

1. visiting service
2. groups for the bereaved
3. care for the sick
4. care to meet spiritual needs
5. spiritual counselling

Visiting service is traditionally associated with visiting elderly, more or less socially isolated, people. But with no more qualifications it may be interpreted as a way of organising contact between people more generally, particularly in situations where other social contacts are few. With the three dimensions of welfare in mind, it is reasonable to say that the parish councils cherished social and spiritual welfare, though care for the sick may also be taken to involve physical welfare.

At the opposite end of the list the following activities received the lowest average scores, arranged according to score value (lowest score first):

1. organise Bible study groups
2. run kindergarten
3. work to influence political processes and decisions (political influence)
4. involvement in environmental issues
5. provide money for people in need

The list may require different bases for interpretation. Some of the activities may have received low scores because they represent tasks that are primarily considered tasks of the public welfare sector (2 and 5). Thus, it may involve a consequence of the perception of the character of the welfare state. Other activities may be considered relevant to the local Church, but not as diaconia (1). Some activities may even be considered not to be the tasks of the Church at all (3 and 4). Involvement in environmental issues is explicitly mentioned as a challenge for the local parishes in the Comprehensive Diaconal Programme for the Church of Norway (Kirkerådet 1988) in the context of health and welfare work. More generally, care about people's life situation in the local community makes engagement to influence political processes and decisions topical for the Church.

Do the responses to these questions reveal distinct response patterns? Do the parish councils represent distinct orientations in their approach to and perceptions of diaconia? Factor analysis was applied to search for possible underlying dimensions in the response patterns. In such analyses the basis is variation. In order to allow for variation in the responses the types of activities which received the highest average scores (visiting service, groups for the bereaved) were excluded from the set of variables on which the factor analysis was based.

The analysis gave the following result: Four underlying dimensions were identified in the data material, providing the basis for what we may call orientations or profiles of local diaconia.

1. Society oriented (political) diaconia
2. Church oriented diaconia
3. Socially and care oriented diaconia
4. Distress and crises oriented diaconia

Society oriented (political) diaconia refers to a diaconal profile, which emphasises the importance of work among refugees, involvement in development aid, environmental issues, and social questions in general, and influencing political processes and decisions. Importance is given to co-operation with public authorities at the local level, and with those who are in charge of and responsible for health and social affairs in particular.

Church oriented diaconia refers to a profile, which emphasises the importance of work related to the church services, organising Bible study groups, activities for and among the candidates for confirmation, Church circles (“kirkeringer” – often with the purpose of collecting money for improving the embellishment of the Church building).

Socially and care oriented diaconia refers to a profile, which emphasises all sorts of child, youth, and family oriented activities, like child groups, youth groups and clubs, teenage choirs (“ten sing”), care for sick people, and spiritual counselling.

Distress and crises oriented diaconia refers to a response pattern where emphasis is put on engagement in favour of people with substance abuse problems, other marginalised people, engagement in centres of refuge for battered women and children, and emergency telephone service for people in crises.

In the construction of the profiles, only variables with correlation coefficients above 0,50 were incorporated.

Figure 2. The significance of the variables in the four profiles as expressions of diaconia.

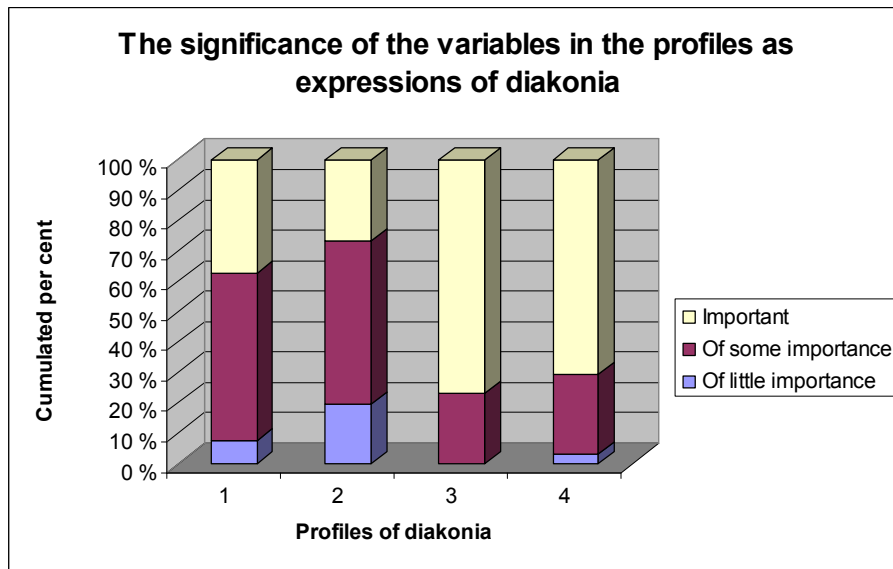


Figure 2 demonstrates what we may call the relevance of the profiles to the parishes. It shows the degree of importance assigned to the variables comprised by each profile. For each profile, an index was constructed measuring the mean value, or average, of the scores of agreement/disagreement, given by the parish councils, to the variables included in the profile. The average values calculated this way were grouped and categorised accordingly, so that low mean scores, implying primarily disagreement, were categorised as “of little importance”, high mean value scores were categorised as “important”, and middle range scores were categorised as “of some importance”. The distributions are also presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The significance of the variables in the four profiles as expressions of diaconia, percentage figures.

Degree of importance:	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Of little importance	7	20		3
Of some importance	55	54	23	26
Important	37	27	77	70
Total	100	100	100	100

Measured this way, the relevance of the profiles varies. Using percentage of “important” as a basis for comparison, it is clear that profile 3 and 4, the socially and care oriented, and the distress and crises oriented profiles, were the most significant among the four types. Among the four, the second was the least important. It is not surprising. The variables comprised by this factor, are probably disputed as expressions of diaconia at all. Their social qualities, their possible effect as being conducive of social integration, may be one reason for classifying them as diaconia.

It is worth remembering that the profiles do not reflect what is actually taking place in the parishes, but only how the parish councils perceived the tasks related to diaconia, which were considered important and which were considered not so important.

The factors or profiles were constructed inductively. The main concern in the survey was to present an array of alternatives (variables) including elements that might be related to each of the three dimensions of welfare described earlier. It is clear from the construction of the profiles that they cut across Allardt's three dimensions of welfare.

Theologically, the typology is interesting. If we return to the two biblical models of diaconia that I introduced earlier, as a first attempt, two of the profiles may be connected with each of the models. The second and the third profile may be connected with the model inspired by Matth. 5,16, the first and the fourth profile with the model inspired by the Good Samaritan. In this way the profiles may be seen as reflecting different tradition within an overall Lutheran religious tradition.

The scope of diaconia varies among the profiles. In a way, it seems that Church oriented diaconia has the narrowest scope; its main focus is on what is going on in the church. Society oriented diaconia has the widest scope. It is associated with local as well as world-wide involvements and engagements. The other profiles are associated with scopes less narrow than Church oriented diaconia and less world-wide than society oriented diaconia. Except for the church oriented profile, the profiles are highly consonant with the interests and orientations of the welfare state.

7. Church and welfare state: relations between Church and public sector at the local level

How are the relations between the local Church and other actors in the field of welfare? To what extent do the parishes co-operate with other agents or agencies in their welfare activities? Who do they co-operate with? To what extent are the relationships mainly unilateral or mainly characterised by mutuality?

Findings in the Tunsberg study indicate that the parishes are part of networks of co-operation in the field of welfare. Table 3 shows that many parishes maintain frequent contacts with public agencies, various types of Christian based actors and organisations, as well as other types of voluntary organisations. This pattern of co-operation may indicate that, at least to some extent, local diaconia is integrated with the public sector. The survey did not go deeply into this matter.

Table 3. Patterns of co-operation of the parishes included in the Tunsberg study, percentage figures.

Actors/organisations	Often	Sometimes	Seldom/ never	N
Municipal social, school, and culture sector	21	58	21	47
Municipal health sector	23	54	23	48
Other parishes within the Church of Norway	36	46	18	50
Other Christian based associations/foundations within the parish	47	34	19	47
Other Christian based organisations, missionary organisations, etc.	20	74	6	50
Voluntary, humanitarian organisations	20	59	21	51

On the other hand, in the deacon survey referred to earlier, the respondents were asked about partners in co-operation, frequency of contact, as well as who initiates contact between the partners. With regard to frequency of contact, other response categories were used, which make findings not directly comparable. Crudely, the patterns in Table 4 seem to be similar to those of Table 3. The information in Table 4 confirms that there are links of some significance between the parishes and the public sector at the local level. Among the parties in the interaction with the public sector as they are specified in the table, the local health sector is most often mentioned as a partner with whom the deacons have frequent contact.

Table 4. Patterns of co-operation of deacons within the Church of Norway, percentage figures (N=127-129).

Actors/organisations	Monthly +	A few times a year	Never	Total
Municipal social sector	34	45	21	100
Municipal health sector	48	40	12	100
Municipal school and kindergarten sector	15	57	28	100
municipal culture sector	17	43	40	100
Voluntary, humanitarian organisations	33	51	16	100

As for who initiates the contact between the deacons and the partners within the public and the voluntary sector the response pattern is fairly unambiguous: In most cases deacons say that one party takes contact as often as the other. In cases where this balanced mutuality does not prevail, the deacon is usually the active partner. Only in less than 10% of the cases did the deacons indicate that the other party was the contact initiator, irrespective of who the other party was among those listed in Table 4. In this way, balanced mutuality seems to prevail with regard to initiation of contact between the deacon and public and voluntary agencies. This is the main tendency. On the other hand, in case of non-mutuality, the deacon is the active party. What I myself found somewhat surprising was the degree of balanced mutuality in the contacts. I would have expected a less balanced situation, but definitely with the deacon as the active party.

Nevertheless, using these measures it seems that the Church is a relevant partner in co-operation for the public sector at the local level, and vice versa. This is how the situation may be interpreted on the basis of the information presented. How the situation appears from the other side, in particular from the side of the public parties at the municipal level, remains to be seen. On the background of the analyses the orientations of the local parishes to diaconia and the descriptions by the deacons of local priorities, it would seem that a basis for fruitful interaction and co-operation exists. But such commonalities do not in themselves make up a sufficient basis for co-operation.

It also remains to consider the role – or the roles - of diaconia in the co-operation with the public sector or the welfare state at the local level, as conceived by Kramer in his typology of functions of voluntary organisations in the welfare state. The two survey studies referred to in this speech/lecture do not provide information to this end.

What can we say about the perceptions and expectations of the Church as a welfare provider (local diaconia) by public welfare actors or agencies? I have only started the systematic analysis of qualitative data relevant to this question. This information has been collected as part of the two ongoing research projects, “The deacon in the local community”, and the case study of Drammen. The analysis of the qualitative material has just started, and I can only present preliminary and to some extent impression based findings.

Representatives of the public sector in Drammen, interviewed in their capacity of political or administrative actors, seemed to hold fairly traditional views of the role of the local Church, both in general and with respect to the role as provider of welfare. Concerning the latter, the Church is expected to be concerned with or engaged in the welfare and well-being of children, youth, the elderly, and marginalised people, especially those experiencing substance abuse problems. What the Church has to offer, is first and foremost volunteers, people with a genuine commitment to what they engage in when they volunteer in diaconia. In this way, local diaconia may take on a complementary role in welfare service provision, in the sense the concept is defined as part of Kramer's typology (1981). The fairly "thin descriptions" (Geertz 1973) the selected representatives of the local public sector provided in their views of the role of the Church in the local community, both with regard to current activities and what to be expected from the Church, may be interpreted as an expression of lack of familiarity with local diaconia, lack of knowledge and lack of experience. In some interviews in the two projects I just referred to, it seemed that the interview itself had an enlightening function on the interviewees, in the sense that they expressed the interview situation gave them ideas about possible areas of common interest of the Church and the public sector, which had not occurred to them before.

In this sense, public sector representatives may be said to support a view which assign to the Church a marginal role in the area of local welfare provision. However this may be, it did not seem very interesting for the public sector to explore possible common interests and complementary resources to be used to the common good or the good of the local community. In this way, it seemed that the idea of welfare pluralism has not yet taken root at the local level, at least not in the municipalities covered by the two studies referred to in this section.

This vagueness about the role of the Church in welfare provision by the representatives of the local public sector should be complemented by their clear and relatively unambiguous view of the role of the Church in the public discourse on welfare. The prevailing view was that the Church appeared to be fairly invisible in the public discourse. On the other hand, in the opinion of the interviewees, a much more active and visible role would be welcomed. Not necessarily because of a uniqueness of the Church, but, more generally, because in a democratic society, the more actors participating in the public sphere debates, the better. But the view was also expressed that the value basis of the Church made it particularly important in the welfare discourse as a critical voice. In this way, the Church may be said, at least

potentially, to have a value guardian role to play in the welfare state, with reference to Kramer's typology (1981), as acknowledged by the public sector representatives in the Drammen study.

Several interviewees held the opinion that the Church seemed to be hesitant and somewhat afraid of engaging in public debates. What they asked for was a more active and clear voice from the Church on issues of welfare and welfare policies. This is interesting when compared with the typology of orientations of diaconia, the diaconal profiles presented earlier in this lecture. On the basis of the information from the parish councils in Tunsberg diocese and the public sector representatives in Drammen (Drammen is located in this diocese), it looks as if the orientations prioritised by the parish councils correspond to the public sector perceptions of the role of the Church in welfare provision, but not appreciated enough for the public sector to actively search for interaction and co-operation. On the other hand, orientations of diaconia assigned lower priority by the parish councils, though not all of them, are in demand by the public sector. Of course, this analysis may be based on false premises. The precaution should be taken that the information used in the analysis, partly refer to different populations. What is interesting about it is that it inspires further research into the role of the Church in welfare provision in Norway. If money will be available, I will be happy to participate in further research.

8. Conclusion

There is no unidimensional view of diaconia in the parishes in the Church of Norway. The profiles constructed on the basis of the response patterns of the parish councils ask for further research. But among the divergent views of what is important in diaconia, there are some common trends; the concern with the situation of the elderly, the bereaved, the sick, and those in existential distress, that have always been at the heart of diaconia. Partly, this work is known and in some degree acknowledged by the public welfare sector, though not to the extent that they would bother to commit themselves to finding out what the Church has to offer as a potential partner. It is left to the Church to promote itself. But what the public sector seems more unambiguous about, is value of the voice of the Church in public space, a critical voice we must presume, at least as the rhetoric goes. But I must say, that the respondents

sounded sincere in their view, even though they did not always appreciate the content of the message communicated by agents of the Church.

This is a period of transformation, and as both Nordstokke and Godhe made a point, the Church has to be present in the process, with “compassionate courage”, both in the public space and by “the line of exclusion”. The Church may have nothing to say in public space, at least not with a credible voice, if it is not at the same time present at the margins of society. It may require rethinking of diaconia at the local level, also in Norway.

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