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Diaconal Ministry as a Proclamation of the Gospel[1]

I shall start my presentation by referring to a press release from LWI (the information service of the Lutheran World Federation) dated 21 March 2013, reporting from the enthronement of the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, an event also attended by the LWF General Secretary Rev. Martin Junge.

According to the press release, the archbishop in his sermon referred to the diaconal work of the church, stating: "We are asked to step out of the comfort zones and heed the call of Christ to be clear in our declaration of Christ, committed to the prayer in Christ and we will see a world transformed". In his greeting Rev. Junge called attention to the work of the Anglican-Lutheran International Committee, and to the last report from this group (ALIC III) titled: *To love and serve the Lord. Diakonia in the Life of the Church*.

The Preface of this document reports "a new phase in the maturity of relations between our Anglican and Lutheran churches" in the sense that the issue no longer is confront issues that need to be church-dividing, instead the work of the commission has been "focused on diakonia and the fullness of its expression in the spirit of the prophets and the gospel of Jesus the Son of God".

These expressions, formulated within the framework of bilateral dialogues between the Anglican Communion and the Lutheran Communion at global level largely correspond to the findings when we as Porvoo churches have been discussing the understanding of the diaconal ministry.

Allow me to indicate a few points that evidence such convergence. The first is a deep felt understanding that our dialogue does not aim at overcoming confessional differences, but of discovering together new perspectives of being church, as a mutual learning process in which our different traditions enrich our sharing of views, concerns and challenges. The second is acknowledging a change of focus in the discussion on the diaconal ministry, from ministry as order to ministry as ecclesiological expression, and further from ecclesiology to missiology as framework for interpreting the distinctiveness of this ministry. There may be many reasons for this change. A discussion on the diaconate as order may appear as a matter of limited interest, and in many instances as a problem to be solved: What do we do with the deacons? If they were not around, we would not have to wrestle with this issue.

1 Paper given at the Porvoo Consultation on diaconal ministry in Dublin 2013

When the church, her nature and mission in today's world has become the entry point for discussing this matter, quite another level of urgency is felt. This is expressed in the Oslo report from 2009 with emphasis "on *diakonia* as an essential aspect of the ministry of the whole church, participating in God's mission and to his world. Whist deacons exemplify and represent *diakonia*, it is not sufficient to understand the concept of diakonia narrowly in relation to a single category of ministers."

This view is also emphasised in the mentioned ALIC-report, with reference to the Oslo meeting, understanding "*diakonia* as the ministry of all the baptized, with the ordered ministries of the church as supporting them" (p. 5).

When elaborating on the ecclesiological dimension of diakonia, ALIC III sees "diakonia as an expression of koinonia, communion with and in Christ", in a manner in which *koinonia* and *diakonia* reinforce each other mutually.

This position deserves further reflection, as I am convinced that both Anglicans and Lutherans traditionally have not focused on this relation between *koinonia* and *diakonia*, and especially on its mutuality. For many Lutherans, *diakonia* does not belong to essence of being church, Word and Sacraments properly constitute the church, they would claim referring to *Confessio Augustana* article 7. From this perspective diakonia is a possible response in gratitude for what we, through God's grace, receive in Word and Sacrament. The view would then be that *diakonia* does not belong to what constitute the Church, but should rather be regarded a consequence of being church, of what we now are empowered to realize when sent as servants into the world.

Saying that *diakonia* is an expression of *koinonia* breaks with this scheme that establishes two separated steps in the process of becoming church, the first marked by *favor Dei*, the second as *donum Dei*, oriented by the concern of avoiding any understanding of synergy in conceptualizing the Church's being. Stating that *koinonia* and *diakonia* reinforce each other mutually implies moving beyond this position, but in a manner by which *diakonia* is no longer viewed as human action as may have been the tendency in the past, but in the first place as divine intervention with the purpose of transforming, reconciling and empowering people for participation in God's mission for the healing of the world.

For Lutherans who often understand diakonia as professional health or social work, with the risk of reducing diaconal work to activities at the margin of the ecclesial space, this view implies on the one hand recognizing the ecclesiological and missiological dimension when performing diakonia, also in arenas that seemingly have no ecclesial significance. On the other hand it requires a readiness to include *diakonia* as vital dimension in all expressions of being church, being it liturgical life, proclamation, and missionary outreach.

For Anglicans, the main difficulty lies in the fact that the very term *diakonia* largely remains unknown and does not belong to the ecclesial vernacular. I register, however, with interest a new openness in this regard, for instance in some of the papers that we have received in preparing for this consultation. In a statement from the Scottish Episcopal Church I read: "It might be said, we do not talk the talk of *diakonia* but we do walk the walk". Without any doubt, when it comes to *diakonia* the walk is more important than the talk. It may however be, as the referred document affirms, important also to develop the talk, especially if the terminology may help us to clarify the relation between what we *are* and what we *do* as churches.

I also notice an interesting change of terminology in the report from the Anglican partners when referring to the deacon's ministry, now talking about *distinct* deacons instead of *permanent* deacons as often was the case before. I assume that this new term acknowledges the necessity of a reflection on the distinctiveness of this ministry and thereby also on the distinct diaconal nature of the church and her mission in the world, and how *koinonia* and *diakonia* mutually reinforce each other.

So far some of the elements that constitute the context in which we this week are to share reflections on the diaconal ministry as proclamation of the gospel. Do we see a similar mutual relationship between proclamation and *diakonia* in the sense that they mutually reinforce each other?

From the Lutheran tradition that I represent, this is a very touchy question, especially from the perspective of diaconal actors that do not consider preaching a part of their professional activity, and even fear that proclamation would be misinterpreted as a from above promotion of Christian opinions. For some preaching too often lead to moralistic or religious judgement with the result that people that already struggle with their self-esteem experience being invaded or reduced to being objects of church-centred agendas.

The question is however: What do we understand by proclamation? And how do we understand diaconal work? To me it is clear that both concepts would gain from being critically related to each other. In the process of producing what sometimes is referred to as the "LWF handbook on Diakonia", *Diakonia in Context*, this was presented as one of the greatest challenges. In 2008 a global consultation was held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, as part of this process, and in the message from this event the participants "*acknowledge difficulties in clearly defining the interrelationship between proclamation and diakonia. Both are expressions of the Gospel and both are core elements of the mission of the church*".

It was clearly noted that especially the Africans defended a stronger link between diakonia and proclamation. They question the way in which many Western faith-based agencies were implementing relief or development projects without

linking this work to local churches, and also without affirming its distinct Christian identity. Can diakonia be performed without proclaiming what moves its engagement and without testifying to the Christian message? The representatives from Africa, and also many from Asia and Eastern Europe, would strongly question the departmentalization between diakonia and proclamation, as also did the LWF Mission document from 1988, *Together in God's Mission*, stating:

> *"The wholeness of mission needs to be manifested by the unity of word and deed in all of the church's outreach. Both are vehicles of the unconditional love of God who accepts persons while they are yet sinners and without any regard to their social, racial or cultural background. Word without deed falsifies the very word itself as it makes the gospel abstract and denies God's transforming power in creation and in incarnation. The failure to accompany witness through word, by witness through life may close the door to the gospel. On the other hand, the deed without the word is in danger of degenerating into sheer humanitarianism and conformity with the context and of failing to convey the fullness of salvation as God's gift. The credibility of the witness is ultimately grounded not in deeds, which are bound to remain imperfect, but in the gospel itself."*[2]

The European participants, and mainly those representing diaconal institutions or agencies, feared that this understanding could lead to a position where diaconal action was being reduced to an instrument for another purpose than what it basically is: service to the neighbor in need. That concern is strongly affirmed in *Diakonia in Context*:

> *"Diakonia cannot be an instrument which serves the needs of the one helping, nor can it become an instrument for evangelizing people. Diaconal action would then wrongly become a strategy, in a conscious effort to combine human-care activities and proclamation so that people can be converted. A result may even be that the diaconal activities would be chosen according to whether they would be effective in recruiting new church members."*[3]

But the document also affirms that diakonia can never be silent and should not pretend to be so. Diaconal action, as integral part of the Church's mission cannot pretend that proclamation is not a part of this mission to the world. Word and deed cannot be separated; nevertheless, they should not be mixed in a manner

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2 Together in God's Mission: *An LWF Contribution to the Understanding of Mission*. LWF Documentation, No. 27, 1988, ch. 4.1.4.

3 *Diakonia in Context*, p. 84.

in which one of them is reduced to being an instrument of the other. And as it largely will depend on the context how to interrelate diakonia and proclamation, it is not possible to prescribe what exactly to do when holding these dimensions of the Church's mission together. Instead some general and guiding principles have been formulated:

1. "Diaconal action is meaningful in itself. It does not need to be justified by other reasons; it should never be reduced to be an instrument for other purposes.
2. Diaconal action must be unconditional. It cannot allow conditions to be a prerequisite for receiving help, as for instance participating in religious activities.
3. Diaconal action must respect the integrity of each person and their freedom to express their faith according to their own convictions and traditions.
4. Diaconal action must ensure that persons in vulnerable situations are not influenced or pressured toward religious practices and choices.
5. Diaconal action must acknowledge the spiritual dimension of human life, and especially of human suffering, and therefore be ready to assist people that ask for assistance, including counseling when this is asked for.
6. Diaconal action must be able to interpret reality and processes of social change in a holistic manner.
7. Diaconal action must be ready to account for its faith-based identity.
8. Diaconal action must take responsibility for the witness it is giving to the message of the Church."[4]

As you will understand, these principles have been worked out with a special reference to international diakonia that is diaconal action across geographic, ethnic, social and also religious borders. But even so, these principles are also relevant in our context, also at the level of local congregations involved in diaconal activities.

This brings me to the Church of Norway's Plan for Diakonia and its´ definition of diakonia as the gospel in action:

> *"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".*

4 *Diakonia in Context*, p. 87.

The first observation to be made here is that the plan does is not explicitly state how diakonia relates to proclamation, although it contains several passages that refer to proclamation with the concern that it must include a diaconal dimension. The view is rather the gospel in a holistic sense, encompassing word and deed, and that the diaconal mandate in the first place relates to the gospel as action.

It is evident that gospel here is not understood as preaching in a narrow sense, a message owned or administrated by the Church. The gospel is in the first place a story, "*how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him*" (Acts 10:38).

As reads the Hanover-document: "As the incarnate Word sent by the Father, Jesus is the basis for the church's *diakonia*, the freedom to announce and act out God's eschatological salvation (Rom 15:8)".

ALIC III affirms this understanding, saying that "*diakonia takes its concrete model from the life of God made visible in the incarnate Christ*" (p.12) and introduces the concept of *Diakonia Dei* as parallel to *Missio Dei*. It is the "*life of the Trinity*" that "*gives both real and ideal shape to diaconal ministry which nurtures in communities a spirit of mutual trust and love, of interdependent, empowering relationships like those we see among Father, Son and Holy Spirit*" (p.11).

The Trinitarian perspective thus adds insight to the ecclesiological dimension of *diakonia*. It allows us to see *diakonia* as an expression of God's salvific project of sending his Son into the world, thus emphasizing its missiological and Christological foundation. On that foundation is based the understanding of *diakonia* as the Gospel in action. It sees diaconal action in continuity with the *diakonia* of Jesus, in line with the commission given in John 20:21: "*As the Father sent me, so also I send you*", in other words, sending in the sense of being incarnated in human reality. And it means sending as holistic mission encompassing proclamation, care for people in need, and advocacy through actions of promoting human dignity and justice.

This holistic perspective questions the kind of departmentalization that sometimes has characterized diaconal work, giving it an impression that it can be performed without links to its faith base, for instance as social or health work following the same rules of professionalism as would the case for public service deliverance. In one way or another, diaconal action will always affirm its ecclesiological and holistic nature when being performed.

How this is done, however, depends on the kind of action and on its context, as we have seen, this was also the backdrop for the working out of the guiding principles in Diakonia in Context. It remains a main concern to emphasize that diaconal action is meaningful in itself, it cannot be reduced to being a tactic tool for other agendas; no matter how praiseworthy these may appear, as for instance

promoting the Christian message or attracting people to become active Church members. Acknowledging diaconal ministry as a proclamation of the gospel affirms, yes, the ecclesial and the holistic dimension of diaconal action, but this does not mean subordinating *diakonia* in relation to ecclesiocentric strategies.

Diakonia – as sending and action incarnated in the world – is not for the sake of the church, but for the sake of the needy, for their cause. As such diaconal action proclaims God's care and good will for all creation, and especially for those who suffer, it denounces injustice, it seeks to unmask inhuman structures and practices, and to give voice to marginalized people and those that for different reasons have been silenced. So in no way diaconal action should be conceived as silent or humble service. Within the ecumenical movement the prophetic dimension of diakonia is often emphasized, as courageous proclamation of God's compassion and justice.

The relation between *diakonia* and proclamation should therefore be interpreted as a process of mutual orientation and reinforcement. Through its action *diakonia* lifts up visible sign that witness to what the Church is called to proclaim in words. Without such signs the words may sound irrelevant in today's world. On the other hand diakonia is motivated and oriented by the Gospel and its promise of God's liberating grace in Jesus Christ as hope and life in the world. In a time of globalization, the gospel proclaims – in word and deed – God's lordship as transformation, as future with hope. In a time of neoliberal ideology and consumerism, it announces Christ's liberating grace as reconciliation and newness of life. In a time of individualist pursuit of success in which so many find themselves as losers, it announces the Spirit's energizing and empowering presence promoting dignity and fullness of life.