Called to Transformative Action

Ecumenical *Diakonia*

Study Guide

When meeting in Geneva in June 2017, the World Council of Churches executive committee received the ecumenical *diakonia* document, now titled *Called to Transformative Action: Ecumenical Diakonia.* It asked the staff to develop a study guide to facilitate member churches and ecumenical partners working with the document, making it their own and sharing their feedback with the WCC.

The WCC and ACT Alliance jointly took the initiative to produce the parent document in 2014, with the purpose of clarifying the understanding of ecumenical *diakonia* and providing a common platform for acting and reflecting together. The intention was to have a document "to be used for formation and training in ecumenical *diakonia*, to strengthen the institutional capacity of our respective constituencies," and to "foster the dialogue and cooperation between churches, ecumenical partners and the WCC." Chapter 1.1 presents the further background of the document and the directives given by WCC governing boards regarding its content and objectives.

The document consists of eight chapters. Chapter 1.5 offers an outline of all chapters. In addition, each chapter opens with an introduction and closes with a summary. These sections may give the readers of the document an easier entrance to the themes presented, as well as to the flow of the document.

As mentioned above, the *purpose* of this study guide is to:

- Facilitate reception of the *Called to Transformative Action: Ecumenical Diakonia,* addressing WCC member churches, regional and national ecumenical councils, and ecumenical partners such as the ACT Alliance, the LWF and their respective constituencies and related agencies.
- Facilitate the study of the ecumenical *diakonia* document, indicating key themes and concepts, providing tools for applying it in the context of the readers.
- Propose questions for discussion, with the aim of actualizing the issues that the document raises as related to local diaconal practice and how it relates to ecumenical partners and other networks.
- Indicate issues to be included in the feedback to the WCC.

The plan of this study guide follows the structure of the main document, with its division into eight chapters.

First, the study guide offers an overview of the content of each chapter, pointing to key issues and terms. Some of these are written in *italic type,* signaling themes to be discussed when using the study guide and addressing experiences and challenges in the local context.

Second, the study guide proposes questions for discussion. Other questions may be added according to the context in which the guide is used. The questions aim at facilitating the process of making the document useful for churches and ecumenical partners involved in ecumenical *diakonia*.

Third, the questions are also meant to serve as a basis for feedback to the WCC regarding its relevance and the use of the ecumenical *diakonia* document.

1. Introduction

This first chapter aims at introducing the term ecumenical *diakonia*, It conceptualizes ecumenical *diakonia* from two perspectives:

  a. The first links to a *theological* understanding of *diakonia*, seeing *diakonia* as a dimension integral to the nature and the mission of the church;
  b. The second perspective is *practical,* describing how churches are engaged in diaconal action across confessional and geographical boundaries.

The first constructs the normative foundation of *diakonia*, using primarily insight from theology, but also other sciences. The second uses a descriptive approach, reflecting critically on concrete diaconal practice. *Diakonia* thus expresses a strong link between what the churches *are* and what they *do.* Reflection on ecumenical *diakonia* requires an understanding of both dimensions: the churches' being and their joint action as a worldwide communion of Christians and institutions, and the social reality in which diaconal action is performed. At the same time, this reflection requires recognition of the rich *variety* of diaconal traditions in the churches, as well as the *particularity* of each context.

Ecumenical *diakonia* builds on the understanding that *diakonia* is *faith-based and rights-based action.* These two dimensions of *diakonia* are intimately inter-related. They affirm each other mutually, and they urge churches and diaconal agents to engage in transformative and liberating action, developing forms of *prophetic diakonia,* defending human dignity and promoting justice and peace.

Chapter 1 also introduces some of the situations that challenge ecumenical *diakonia* to renew its action in today's world, pointing to *profound changes in the aid and development landscape.* It next indicates some *changes in the ecumenical landscape,* and themes that can guide the renewal of ecumenical *diakonia*:

  a) Advocacy and prophetic *diakonia* as signs of hope;
  b) Public theology and *diakonia*;
  c) The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

Not all churches use the term *diakonia* when describing their social and caring ministry and their engagement in the themes indicated above. The material presented in this document points to advantages of applying the *diakonia*-language in line with what has become ecumenical practice. Chapter 1.4 presents a list of documents on *diakonia*, showing how the ecumenical movement has been reflecting on this theme. At the same time, this list serves as a resource for further study.

Questions for discussion
  1. How is the term *diakonia* used in your church/organization? Are there diaconal institutions, or actors?
  2. What other terms are used to designate activities and engagements that this document describes as *diakonia*?
  3. Is diaconal work included in your partnership with ecumenical bodies?
  4. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of your engagement in ecumenical *diakonia*.

2. The History of Ecumenical *Diakonia*

This chapter aims at telling the history of ecumenical *diakonia*, acknowledging that churches and Christians throughout the history have been, and continue to be, engaged in diaconal work. This is also the case when the term *diakonia* is not a part of their vernacular.

The roots of diaconal practice go back to the times of the New Testament. Practices of sharing resources and caring for persons in need, within and outside the fellowship of believers, have always been considered an integral part of Christian discipleship and mission. This chapter seeks to point to the *continuity* of ecumenical *diakonia*, throughout different historical periods, responding to different external and internal challenges.

Diakonia has also played an important role in the formation of the ecumenical movement; its mandate and work continue to challenge and stimulate ecumenical cooperation. Similarly, the ecumenical movement has contributed to the formation of ecumenical *diakonia*, its self-understanding and practice. This chapter seeks to identify key concerns in this process, in particular the growing awareness of *diakonia* as *faith- and rights-based practice,* recognizing the *ecclesial, holistic and prophetic* dimensions of *diakonia*. It invites readers to reflect how this is experienced in their local context, in the life of the churches and in the cooperation with diaconal agencies.

Further, this chapter presents *organizational structures* of ecumenical *diakonia*, reflecting different historical contexts and social challenges, how diaconal agents have sought to provide humanitarian aid, interchurch aid and development work. It explains the role of diaconal institutions and organizations (in ecumenical *diakonia*, these are often named *related agencies* or *specialized ministries)* and the efforts at establishing multilateral cooperation, as represented by ACT Alliance.

Questions for discussion
1. In your context, how are churches and diaconal organizations or agencies working together in ecumenical *diakonia*? (Check the ACT Alliance membership list at http://actalliance.org). How is the local ACT Alliance working?
2. What are the focal areas of diaconal action in your context? What are the main reasons for involvement in these areas of action?
3. How do *diakonia* and development work relate? In your view, what is converging and what is different when comparing them?
4. How are the faith- and the rights-based dimensions of diaconal work expressed and held together? Give examples from your church/organization.

3. *Diakonia* in Today's Polycentric Ecumenical Movement

The purpose of this chapter is to give an account of important trends in today's ecumenical landscape and to reflect on how they influence and set themes for diaconal work.

The term *polycentric* reflects the fact that the center of gravity of Christianity has moved toward the global South, focusing on new experiences of Christian faith, often conditioned by the struggle for human dignity, justice and peace. New forms of ecumenical life are emerging, urging the traditional ecumenical organizations, such as the WCC, to rethink their role and

mission. This chapter invites readers to discuss how this development is experienced in their context.

The WCC's 10th Assembly, held in Busan, Republic of Korea, in 2013, affirmed the challenges of this new moment, inviting "Christians and people of good will everywhere to join in a *pilgrimage of justice and peace."* The invitation reflects an understanding of a servant church, mandated by a holistic mission, "evangelism and *diakonia* done in Christ's way." It implies a commitment to the social reality of vulnerable and marginalized communities, often described as *the margins,* and to their insights and expressions of faith and hope.

This approach encourages churches and diaconal actors to be innovative, and "to re-imagine *diakonia* from the vantage point" of the margins, supporting a *"diakonia from below."* At the same time, it urges *diakonia* to be bold, both in action when providing services, and through advocacy and public witness, searching to develop forms of *prophetic diakonia.*

Questions for discussion
1. How is your context being changed by new religious movements, new churches, different theologies? How do they affect the life of your church or organization and your social outreach?
2. Does the concept of polycentrism make sense in your context? How do you assess your relation to the WCC, other ecumenical organs and bilateral partners within this new context?
3. How has your church or organization responded to the WCC invitation to a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace? What role has *diakonia* played, and how can diaconal action become better integrated when engaging in this pilgrimage?
4. How can *diakonia* assume a prophetic and innovative role in the mission of your church or organization and the performance of ecumenical cooperation?

4. Theological Reflection on *Diakonia*

This chapter aims at understanding *diakonia* from a theological perspective. It is based on the view that *diakonia* is an integral part of *the church's nature and sending* (mission) into the world. It acknowledges the fact that some church traditions do not apply the term *diakonia*; even so, it claims that the substance to which the concept refers is widely shared by churches and part of what *ecumenically* is confessed and taught.

The use of the *diak-words* (*diakonia, diakonos, diakonein*) in the New Testament provides insight into how the biblical authors apply them when describing the ministry of Jesus, as well as the vocation to be his followers with a mandate to serve. The chapter provides some tools for interpreting these biblical concepts theologically in a *Trinitarian perspective,* which fixes the understanding of *diakonia* to the three articles of Christian faith, and to the Christian faith in the Triune God—the Creator, Savior (Liberator) and Sanctifier (Giver of Life).

Following this perspective, *diakonia* is an integral part of the mission of the church, and at the same time, organically rooted in the all aspects of being church. *Diakonia* can be described as the *"liturgy after the Liturgy,"* that is, sharing the gifts of communion in a way that empowers for *discipleship* and service. Such service can be spontaneous and individual; often it will take

the form of *organized diakonia,* activities and services that aim at assisting people in need, defending human dignity, and uplifting the rights of the marginalized.

Questions for discussion
1. Are the terms *diakonia* and deacon used in your church or organization? If yes; how are they used? If no, which terms are used that correspond to what the document defines as *diakonia*?
2. Chapter 4.2 presents the biblical use of the *diak*-words (for instance Mark 10:45; Acts 6:1-6; 1 Timothy 3:8-13). How are the *diak*-words being translated and interpreted in your church tradition?
3. The WCC Vancouver assembly in 1983 stated that *diakonia*, as "the church's ministry of sharing, healing and reconciliation is of the very nature of the Church." Discuss this statement and its relevance in your context. How can this understanding of *diakonia* be more strongly expressed in the life and mission of your church or organization?
4. How is the relation between *diakonia* and proclamation understood and practiced in your church or organization? How is this issue communicated when collaborating with international diaconal agencies?

5. The Changing Landscape of Diaconal Action

The main aim of this chapter is to present trends in today's globalized world that change the landscape of diaconal action and therefore call for strategic analysis and innovative practice.

One of the alarming effects of globalization is *growing economic inequality,* which causes new forms of poverty and social conflicts; another is *climate change,* which threatens to aggravate life conditions for many who are already poor and marginalized. These trends are accompanied by changes in the political arena, with more freedom for the powers of the market, and less focus on international solidarity. Many agents of ecumenical *diakonia* report that their work is being hindered because of *shrinking public space.* Is this the case in your context?

The United Nation Agenda 2030 and the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) represent an important opportunity for action, due to their position as the public agenda both for governments and civil society. This chapter gives an account of how the WCC together with ACT Alliance and partners has been engaged in responding to this agenda. It presents some priority themes for ecumenical *diakonia*: migration and refugees, economic justice, climate justice, gender justice, and health justice. Readers are invited to reflect on the relevance of these themes in their context.

A core concern of this chapter is to motivate agents of ecumenical *diakonia*, in particular local churches and diaconal organizations, to be involved in activities related to Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. This includes *strategic planning, networking,* and *setting priorities.*

Questions for discussion
1. Discuss the positive and negative effects of globalization in your context. How do they affect the life and the diaconal work of your church/organization?

2. How have the UN Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals been received in your context? Have churches and other faith-based communities taken a role in responding to them? How can your church or organization be more committed?
3. The document presents several just causes to which it invites churches and diaconal agents to be committed (migration and refugees, economy, climate change, gender, health). What is the status of these causes in your church or organization?
4. What are the best ways to collaborate with churches and diaconal agencies when working with these issues? What are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of these partnerships?

6. The Distinctiveness of Diaconal Practice

The main aim of this chapter is to provide a better understanding of the distinctiveness of diaconal action and to reflect on how this identity expresses itself in the performance of diaconal services.

The presentation draws on the insights of chapter 4, applying the understanding of *diakonia* as faith- and rights-based action, expressing what the church according to her nature is and does. It further reflects the description of the changing landscape as given in chapter 5.

The reflection on distinctiveness seeks to clarify *what characterizes diaconal work* from this background, pointing to its *objectives* and *core values,* its *assets* and *work methods.* In many ways, this relates to the attention currently given to *faith-based organizations* (FBOs) as providers of health and social services, and to the recent recognition of *the role of religion* in relation to development.

One important issue when describing the distinctiveness of *diakonia* refers to the rich variety of *assets, both tangible and intangible,* the churches and diaconal organizations have at their disposal when engaging in diaconal work. The potential of these assets, in particular the intangible, is often underestimated. The chapter recommends an *asset-based approach* when responding to social challenges, which means mapping the diaconal assets and developing strategies for how to mobilize them in activities and engagements.

Another distinctive mark of diaconal work is its *interdisciplinary* approach when reflecting professionally on its practice. *Diakonia* as theory applies insight from many disciplines, from theology, social sciences and such practical disciplines as healthcare and social work. This raises the question of how to develop a *diaconal professionalism* that is able to articulate the distinctiveness of diaconal practice, and a *diaconal language* that communicates both in an ecclesial and public setting. It also raises the issue of *building diaconal capacity* in churches and organizations and of introducing *diakonia* as a study programme.

Questions for discussion
1. Use examples of diaconal engagement and organized activities from your own context, discussing how the faith-based and the rights-based approaches are expressed.
2. Identify diaconal assets (tangible and intangible) that your church or organization possesses, and discuss how these assets are activated in concrete work.

3. What kind of training and capacity-building in *diakonia* are available in your context? How do you assess the need and the possibility of providing more opportunities for training within this area?
4. Discuss the term *diaconal professionalism.* In your opinion, which elements of knowledge, of working methods and of working style does it include?

7. Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities

The main aim of this chapter is to establish a shared platform for discerning the principal challenges and opportunities, both external and internal, which face ecumenical *diakonia* today, globally as well as locally. It reflects the changed socio-political landscape as described in chapter 5. At the same time it seeks to identify concerns and principles that should guide churches and diaconal agents, applying the understanding of the distinctiveness of *diakonia* as elaborated in chapter 6.

A critical issue for many actors in ecumenical *diakonia* is limited access to financial resources. Both churches and agencies experience increasing difficulties in having their diaconal activities funded. In this situation, the theme *ecumenical sharing of resources* regains relevance; it urges churches and diaconal agents to find new ways of working together.

This leads to the next concern: How to organize ecumenical *diakonia*? When churches organized humanitarian and interchurch aid in the aftermath of World Wars I and II, it took the form of *multilateral* cooperation. The WCC and the LWF played key roles in both organizing and implementing the work, often in cooperation with regional and national ecumenical bodies. Since diaconal agencies, most of them rooted in the global North, have grown in strength, *bilateral* cooperation has become the preferred approach, also by many partners in the global South. Acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches, it is timely to discuss the kinds of opportunities they present in the current situation.

This discussion should include a critical reflection on *partnership,* and on how to develop and implement sound principles, being honest about the difficult issue of *asymmetrical power relations* and about the distinct competence and potential of each partner.

The issue of partnership opens wider forms of *networking* and of working with others, in particular with other agents of civil society, both secular organizations and those representing people of other faiths. *Diapraxis* has become a strategic approach and method in many contexts, witnessing to the importance of establishing arenas where different religious actors together can engage in promoting the common good.

In many contexts, the question of how to work with governmental authorities is a sensitive issue that requires critical discernment. The *public* character of diaconal work, and its aim of promoting the common good, implies open working relations with public authorities and government. This requires critical and constructive attitudes and bold commitment to *advocacy and public witness.*

Questions for discussion
1. The document states that funding for ecumenical *diakonia* is shrinking. Does your church or organization experience this trend? What are the consequences? What measures are taken in order to deal with this situation?
2. The document discusses the strengths and the limitations of bilateral versus multilateral partnerships in ecumenical *diakonia*. What are your experiences regarding this issue? How can the strength of both approaches be better applied?
3. The document urges diaconal agents to network and cooperate with secular organizations and with people of other faiths. What are your experiences in this area, and how can this strategy be strengthened in your diaconal work?
4. How are advocacy and public witness integrated in your diaconal work? Discuss strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

8. The Way Forward

As stated in chapter 1, the document *Called to Transformative Action: Ecumenical Diakonia* intends to foster *dialogue and cooperation* among churches, ecumenical partners and the WCC. This final chapter proposes some themes, encouraging all partners to address them and include them in their working plans, at local, regional and global levels.

This call is motivated by the conviction that our times, in the perspective of faith, may be a *kairos moment,* a time loaded with the promise of a new and better future, in spite of the many negative developments that cause suffering and fear. It urges all partners to be involved in critical reflection and innovative practice that announces hope with justice and peace.

Following the presentations in chapters 4-6, the three following *affirmations* are stated:

1. Affirming *diakonia* as a shared vision and mandate;
2. Affirming the diversity of gifts;
3. Affirming justice as a priority.

These affirmations are basic in the construction of a *joint understanding of ecumenical diakonia,* and of developing a solid *platform* for dialogue and cooperation.

Next, the document points to four focus *areas to be strengthened* in the process of fostering dialogue and cooperation:

1. Strengthening structures of shared action;
2. Strengthening networks of cooperation;
3. Strengthening communication;
4. Strengthening diaconal capacity.

Such strengthening implies affirming existing relations and cooperation, at the same time admitting shortcomings and tensions. The presentation of contemporary challenges and opportunities in chapter 7 may be helpful when setting the agenda for discussing these issues, however in a way that points to the *local context* and makes it possible to evaluate the practice of ecumenical *diakonia*.

Added to this discussion is the question of diaconal practice and *code of conduct.* It aims in the first place at raising ethical awareness and ensuring that vulnerable persons are

safeguarded when performing diaconal activities. It therefore recommends the establishment of routines that include codes of conduct. In addition, it points to the importance of developing working styles of mutual respect in all relationships, including as we engage and collaborate in ecumenical *diakonia*.

Questions for discussion
1. Discuss the challenges presented in 8.3, 8.4 and 8.5. Does they correspond to your experiences and vision for ecumenical *diakonia*?
2. Discuss how to strengthen structures of shared action? What do you see as the role of your church or organization in this process?
3. Discuss how to strengthen communication among actors in ecumenical *diakonia*.
4. Discuss how to strengthen diaconal capacity and to build competent leadership within the area of ecumenical *diakonia*.

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