

DIAKONIA World Federation Assembly

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22nd Assembly: Shaken by the Wind Visions for the Future

Address by President Rev (Deacon) Sandy Boyce

During my term as President of DIAKONIA World Federation I have learned just how diverse are the expressions of diaconal ministry around the world and how diverse are the structures in which diaconal ministry is couched. There is no one way - but we have found we can all learn from each other. And that's the great work, I believe, of the DIAKONIA World Federation, that within and between the member associations we can all learn from the experience of the other, to affirm as well as to be a catalyst for change when need be.

It is worth briefly pausing to look at the development of the Deaconess movement in 1836 under the leadership of a German Lutheran pastor, Theodor Fliedner. It was a response to **the challenging contextual issues of the day**, especially with the rise of industrialisation, the movement from rural areas to the cities for employment, the subsequent rise of the urban poor who lacked the community support they might have enjoyed in rural communities, the rapid spread of disease, the end of the Napoleonic wars that left society in upheaval, and so on. It was into **this particular context** that Fliedner established a deaconess motherhouse and a diaconal community that would enable women in the 19th century to find a meaningful vocation and that would respond to these challenges in society.

Now, I want to suggest that this direct correlation between the **context** as the **catalyst for the shape and ordering of ministry** may at times be disconnected. It is necessary from time to time to step back from the immediacy of 'doing' ministry, to reflect on the pressing challenges for our time, and how may we together to respond through releasing lay and ordained people to exercise ministry and mission within the church and in the community.

You know the many current challenges in the world - globalisation, the unjust distribution of resources, weapons of mass destruction, the rise of terrorism, increasing disparity between the rich and the poor, complex inter-faith relations, accelerating climate change, the worldwide refugee crisis, to name but a few. The pressing overarching question may be, how can we live together in peace as a global community? The particular question for the church may be, how do we respond most effectively to this particular context in which we find ourselves?

Using the example of Theodor Fliedner and the development of the deaconess movement, the question may be, **what kind of model for ministry is required in our time and place, for our particular context?** (We have heard this morning some thoughtful insights about that)

David Clark in his two books, *Breaking the Mould of Christendom* and *Building Kingdom Communities*, offers very compelling arguments for a new way of thinking. He provides a comprehensive vision of church and ministry from a diaconal perspective. The movement

is away from what is *'done to'* people, and towards collaborative and collective action - **what people do together to address the issues and needs of the day.**

It is a movement from diaconal ministry as something Deacons undertake **on behalf of the church** 'out there' to **Deacons equipping and empowering the laity, the whole people of God, for diaconal ministry, and Deacons collaborating in collective action with others in the community, beyond the four walls of the church.**

It places Deacons within the heart of the congregation - visioning, animating, equipping, empowering, sending.

It places Deacons within the heart of the community - building relationships, standing in solidarity, drawing alongside people and groups, committing to collective and collaborative action in cooperation with community groups to work towards an outcome that will enable flourishing for all.

'The role of Deacon is not so much a personal vocation lived out in the community, but a vocation that releases **all members** - the whole people of God - to live out their baptism in service in the community, 'to recognise, encourage, develop and release those gifts in God's people which will enable them to share in the ministry of caring, serving, healing, restoring, making peace and advocating justice as they go about their daily lives.' *(Report on Ministry in the Uniting Church 1991 Assembly)*

The role of the diaconate is very much a live issue for Deacons in the Methodist Church in the UK, where there is currently a debate about the future of the Methodist Diaconal Order.

David Clark suggests that the kind of leadership required for a church that orients its life towards diaconal ministry requires new understandings about leadership. He suggests that Presbyters (Leaders and Pastors and Ministers) take responsibility for the renewal of the gathered church through accessing the kingdom community's gifts of life, liberation, love and learning.

The **diaconate as an order of mission** would assume responsibility for furthering the ministry of the laity as the church dispersed in the world, educating and equipping lay people for their task of building communities which make manifest the gifts of the kingdom community throughout the whole of society.

David Bosch's definition of mission picks up this idea of 'participation in the liberating mission of Jesus, **the good news of God's love incarnated in the witness of a community for the sake of the world**'.

What flexibility do we need in how we are church together in order to respond to the particular context and challenges of our time? What ways of organising ourselves as church will best enable a collective response to a particular context - social, political, economic?

Inga Bengtzon served 65 years as a Deaconess, and served for 13 years as the President of DIAKONIA World Federation. She was a visionary. Referring to the General Assembly of the WCC in 1983, she argued for the inclusion of a self-critical dimension of the diaconal role that challenges the church's "locked, frozen, static and self-centred structures" in order to turn them into a "workable, living instrument for the church's task of healing,

reconstruction and sharing with each other.” Diaconia, she said, cannot be limited to institutional forms. It must “break through the already established structures and demarcations in the institutional church” in order to act, heal, and build in the world. (*Bengtson, 1984, translated from Swedish*).

David Clark casts his vision to what he calls the **kingdom community** and suggests that in order to be able to undertake a **kingdom-focused mission**, the church has first of all to break the mould of Christendom, and become **a diaconal or servant church**, where **all the ministries** serve that purpose, and all the ministries orient themselves to **servant leadership**.

The diaconate should be responsible for encouraging and equipping the laity to exercise their ministry of kingdom community building in every sphere of the life of society.

What will enable us to most fully respond to God’s mission in and through the church? It’s a question for us all, and particularly how we orient what we name as **church to be a kingdom community with a kingdom-focussed mission**.

And I return to the question I asked when I introduced Theodor Fliedner’s initiative to establish a deaconess community in 1836 in Germany: **what kind of model for ministry is required in our time and place, for our particular context? How can the church best shape ministry so that the diaconal mission of the whole people of God can be best equipped?**

It is a continuing conversation and perhaps calls for a conversion of how we ‘do’ church.

4th July 2017

[David Clark is a member of the British Methodist Diaconal Order]

References

- Clark, D. (2005, reprinted 2014) *Breaking the mould of Christendom - kingdom community, diaconal church and the liberation of the laity*. Peterborough: FastPrint Publishing
- Clark, D. (2016) *Building Kingdom Communities - with the diaconate as a new order of mission*. Peterborough: FastPrint Publishing
[Available via Amazon]

David Clark has a blog at <http://www.diaconalchurch.com>