

Theses on Diaconia

The Danish Diaconal Council finds that it is essential to have an ongoing discussion on the essence and forms of expression of diaconia.

This discussion should continuously be put into context of the time and the reality we live in, which also means that such a discussion should always be in progress and can never be concluded.

In 2008 the Danish Diaconal Council decided to put down a committee, whose task was to develop a number of diaconia theses. This resulted in a discussion paper which formed the bases for discussion at the follow-up Diaconal conference held at Diakonhøjskolen – the Diaconia College – in November 2008.

The two times ten theses below are the result and summary of the conference and the Council hereby present them to inspire to continuous reflection, discussion and debate.

.....

Completed at the Danish Diaconal Days, November 18-19 2008.

Committee on the Diaconia Theses consisted of Lars Bundgaard, Lars Eyermand, Jens Maibom Pedersen and Jens Aage Bjørkøe.

Translation: Heidi Paakjær Martinussen

Ten theses on the essence of Diaconia ...

1. DIACONIA means service...

The word is Greek and is used in the New Testament about different forms of Christian service through actions, preaching and teaching.

2. DIACONIA has the Christian view on the human being as its starting point...

The basic Christian view on the human being, that every person is unique and created in the image of God, is the starting point for Diaconial work

3. DIACONIA is Christian charity/caritas/neighbourly love carried out in praxis...

The Gospel of Christ and the preaching of Jesus are the role model and the take-off for the diaconal work and its praxis.

4. DIACONIA is action and its task is to redress human suffering...

Diaconal work aims at people in precarious situations, groups at risk and individuals who suffer, are in situations of abuse, depression or suffer other injustices.

5. DIACONIA is to speak up when human lives are violated...

Where structures alienate and destroy people's lives, Diaconal work must – based on the starting point of Diaconia – interfere and partake in the public debate.

6. DIACONIA is to "be able to speak more languages" ...

Diaconal work focuses on the whole human being and must therefore master more "languages" and thus know when it is best to listen, to act, to preach, to recount, to commit oneself and to back out: when to protest and when to be accepting etc.

7. DIACONIA has many different means of expressions and forms of activity

There is not only one way of practising Diaconia. Diaconal work has developed and is still developing a richness of methodical plurality.

8. DIACONIA can be practised by individuals and institutions and organisations alike ...

All people and organised groups who have the gospel at heart and who are inspired by the teaching of Jesus can practise Diaconia.

9. DIACONIA is to hold the church to the connection between word and deed...

Diaconal work must continually "recount what it sees" as inspiration to hold the Christianity of the church to the connection between word and deed.

10. DIACONIA is to continually be challenged by the gospel...

Diaconal work must continually challenge itself at its own starting point; translate and operationalise the message in view of a timely or modern expression.

Ten theses on Diaconia in praxis

(Working Day Diaconia)

The Diaconia theses below is "Working Day Diaconia's" understanding of "Giving assistance based on a Christian foundation".

1. The fundamental attitude, values and view on human beings of the organisation/institution/project must be stated in agreement with the Christian view on human life.
2. The fundamental attitude, values and view on human life must reflect that the single human being is unique, unconditionally valuable, has the right to a dignified life and can demand to be treated with human dignity.
3. Diaconia is:
 - A concrete social endeavour on a Christian foundation
 - To provide organised care for the whole human being
 - To be the "here and now" aid – and a long-term "life aid"
 - To fight for equal rights for all people
 - To be protesting when the individual person is treated wrongly
4. This means that we feel a responsibility to help the whole human being – to meet its physical, psychological and spiritual needs.
If anyone wishes to talk about existential questions possibility must be present for him or her to do so. If anyone asks about Christianity, view on life, law of life or faith they may not be dismissed. If an employee does not wish to enter into such a discussion him/herself, he or she must forward the task to another colleague. When asked we must stand by our foundation. We meet people who are not only in a societal or mental need but also often in existential need.
5. This means that the Christian view on human life must be asserted. This is the view on the human as a being of spirit and not only as a creature of biology or psychology. The human being is created in the image of God. With the words of Grundtvig (Danish hymn writer and founder of the Danish life-long learning schools – the folk high schools – in the 19th century) the human being is a unique, miraculous creature, a divine experiment that shows how spirit and dust can penetrate each other and be explained in a common divine consciousness.
6. The foundation is faith in our God of compassion, grace and fellowship. The situation and conditions of the individual must therefore always be seen as open and forward looking. This means that no individual can be written off, as the possibility for a dignified life is present in every individual and in every fellowship. The gospel holds a view on human life that breaks down those walls that we are building around each other.

7. The gospel points out that human life is always accompanied by a positive affirmation of the individual: Someone cares for you, someone needs you, you are capable of doing something. Your existence is valuable and important.
8. Regardless of the fact that there are destructive powers everywhere in society, in the human fellowship and in the individual; and regardless of the fact that these powers are a victimising force and something one makes oneself and others victims of; we do not regard these destructive powers as having the last word. It may look hopeless but it is never hopeless. No matter what the condition and the circumstance of the individual are, the meeting always happens in light of the fact that "every individual has infinite value."
9. No matter what the human being has done or not done, God loves every one of us.
10. The gospel affects our attitude towards our fellow human beings and especially our attitude towards those who are in trouble, the unsuccessful, excluded, socially marginalised and oppressed.

Elaborating comments on the theses

Demarcations and openings

1. The Christian view on human life is not only used to preach and convert people but as a launch pad and starting point for helping people
2. This means that we do not have the job and duty to be missionaries. This job simply is not included in the aim which is to help people in their need.
3. The work should not be used for preaching and mission. Nor in a mix of tasks which is often seen. There must be no doubt what the aim is. It is to help. Not to preach and convert. This belongs in another sphere.
4. The Christian foundation is therefore not a fanfare which should be proclaimed but a source of power and a values enzyme which hopefully penetrates all our actions.
5. Otherwise religion easily transforms into being a contamination of the work. Correspondingly it is true that religion easily gets contaminated by the confusion with practical actions and their ambiguity. The historical experiences from the church are overwhelming and also currently relevant in connection with the emergence of Islam.
6. Faith and action, spirit and body are connected and mutually contingent but may not be directly mixed in an organised endeavour to help. The connection cannot be put in a system. God lives in the heart and the Holy Spirit is not an empirical entity. But there is an old saying that *“it is a dead end street which does not start from the heart.”*
7. Mission and preaching should therefore not be mixed with good and honest work to aid people. The help must be without second thoughts and hidden motives. When you help then you help people for their own sake.
8. This means that there is no difference between how we meet people and their need no matter if he or she is a Christian or not, an atheist or belongs to a different faith or religion.
9. It means that the work has no more of a Christian stamp than other decent work. Cf. Luther’s idea of vocation: “In my vocation and work I can properly honour my God and father.” [freely translated]
10. The work is not neighbourly love put into a system, as neighbourly love can not be put into a system. It can be made applicable everywhere and when it happens it is not linearly connected to our faith. You cannot make a direct and factual deduction from faith to actions of love.
11. It means that the work has its spiritual roots in this foundation and that no one has the right to convert it into another foundation or a tool for an ideology.
12. The concentration on the ethical content of Christianity offers the possibility of an open employment policy. One can also let people with other interpretations of life partake in the work. The foundation and set of values is clear and specific but Christians, atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews and Muslims can be united in the work.

Actual Diaconal Activities

There are different types of diaconia and a differentiation in the understanding and the realisation of the concept. One may talk of:

- 1) the “narrow path”: a self-understanding of diaconia that sees it as a specific church function. This is the traditional predominant understanding of identity, goal and means in diaconia
- 2) the “broad path”: which is more open to the world and non-church in its identification, terminology and visible profile.

A: Descriptively we can identify four kinds of existing diaconia:

1. Actions of love as they manifest themselves in the human being’s – the Christian’s – life in community with others: visible and invisible
2. Congregational diaconia. Organised actions of care in and from the fellowship of the local congregation and organisation. In praxis this normally covers many small local activities mainly based on volunteers and with little professional input.

The efforts can perhaps – with a little “luck” – at times be seen as part of preaching the gospel in the church: the precondition is that it contains the quality of love – and that this quality of love is experienced and recognised by others. If not, we have not proceeded and perhaps even regressed.

3. Organised social work on a Christian value base. It is seen as a part of the church life and nature (and possibly organisation). Proclaiming the gospel also happens through actions: “preach the gospel, if necessary, use words.”

This often covers big professional and modern institutions, NGOs etc. Areas of work: health- and social care and education. But there is a professional, economic and systemic linkage to spheres of the secular, normal society. See also point number 2.

4. As point number 3 but seen as part of the world. Ethical actions in “vocation and work.” It does not have a task or intention to preach the gospel – only to help.

Whether the Holy Spirit transforms the actions into a witness of faith and hence proclaims the gospel or not does not reflect glory on us – and it is not either a part of points number 4. But it is part of numbers 2 and 3.

Thus there is a different context to – and use of – the concept of Diaconia.

This naturally leads to differences and differentiation in the understanding of the concept itself and its formulation.

If it were only versions 2 and 3 that could be named “Diaconia” – cf. the frequently occurring traditional consideration of the concept, this leads to the understanding of numbers 1 and 4 as the “stepchildren” of Diaconia – tolerated but “apocryphal” (seen in the eyes of tradition.)

B: Five factual differences between Traditional Diaconia and Working Day Diaconia:

1. The goal:

- Common: to help on a Christian value base
- Difference: Whether to preach the gospel or not is included in the understanding of our purpose.

2. Ideological, theological:

- Traditional diaconia: The double commandment of love is often at the centre of the self-understanding and profile. *"Love the Lord your God ... and 'Love your neighbour as yourself."* (Luke 10: 25 - 29).
- Working Day Diaconia: The golden rule is at the centre of the profile to the outside world. *"So in everything , do to others what you would have them do to you"* (Matthew 7:12).
- There is a common primary understanding of being sent out: 1) the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30-37) and 2) *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."* (Matthew 11. 28-29) and 3) *"...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."* (Matthew 25:40).

3. Understanding of identity:

- Traditional Diaconia: An integrated function and dimension of the life of the church. Terminologically the concept of for example "diaconia" is keenly used as are the words of "church" and especially "preaching". This is done particularly with the view of "proclaiming the gospel through actions".
- Working Day Diaconia. We are sent into the world as all other believers of the gospel and sent forth from the church service with faith in our hearts – an active and hopefully determining source of power. The terminology is primarily ethical and existential.

4. Profile: Articulation, image, logo, ornamentation etc.

- Traditional diaconia: Religiously visible profile (for example Christian symbols and Bible quotes on the walls)
- Working Day Diaconia: secular as the rest of society in aesthetics and style.

5. Services offered and religious activities:

- Traditional Diaconia: pro-active profile. A visible part of the offer: devotions, pastoral care and (common) prayer etc.
- Working Day Diaconia: re-active profile. An offer which is activated if it is asked for. According to Danish cultural tradition with for example Christmas services - or perhaps without. Cf. for example the hospital sector and prisons.

C: HOT and in particular NOT. A critical angle – pragmatically illustrated:

1. Traditional Diaconia: The weakness of the church oriented diaconia can be an (overly) focus on the Christological and faith issues which weaken (or disregard) the interest in the professional and practical task, which is the very essence of the help. One is pre-occupied with the recognition of the church and perhaps sees oneself as the “true” church or as the most effective and credible advertising agency of the church; the credible mission etc..

This can be seen as a derailment from the core output of the dimension of help. Sometimes the overly focus only materialises in words other times it can also materialise in actions. Historically one has often seen a moralising and inhibited religious atmosphere.

If word and deeds do not correspond in the activity particularly with view to the dimension of love, the church-diaconal identity becomes a contradiction. It is historically influenced by the political “right wing” – and is contaminated by this: in the sense that it “uses and is being used.”

2. Working Day Diaconia: A thin cup of tea from a Christian perspective. Is there an actual connection between the value base and the everyday actions? A step on the road towards the current dechristianisation of society and hence also the institutions. The “religious need” of users is disregarded.

The challenge is to sustain the foundation and values both in theory and praxis. It is vulnerable in situations of internal conflict. What is actually the particular Christian and Diaconal about the place?

It too easily becomes part of the welfare system. It has very general and hence “loose” ethics. It is only a mirror of the time. It is often historically influenced by the political left – and is contaminated by this: in the sense that it “uses and is being used.”

D: Note about the terminology:

The concept of Diaconia as such is well-known and well-described historically and theologically but the concrete differentiation in views and profiles makes it necessary to use different terms.

A good definition should be adequate, exhaustive and defining. One must briefly outline what a concept covers and what it *does not* cover.

Particularly the last requirement to define or demarcate the concept, which is a clarifying exercise, is often not fulfilled when organisations are ideological or stress the value-based. This is so because one often thinks that ones work is not confined to ones own field of activity but refers to all aspects of society. Failing this requirement, the description becomes unclear and disinteresting.

To analyse and clarify both the concepts and not least the actualised reality it is necessary to use both the “hot and not” elements in defining the subject – both from an internally and externally analytical angle.

Concretely the working group has used concepts such as: “Traditional, church, sacral and real” about the main track. For the side track we have – during the analysis and clarification – used concepts such as: “Secular, worldly, temporal, the golden rule’s, and working day”.
