
Diakonia and Mission

Veronica J. Mwakasungura

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Kjell Nordstokke offers a compelling definition of diakonia that resonates with me deeply. He notes: “[D]iakonia is a theological concept that reflects the very identity and mission of the church.”¹ Recognizing that this ministry varies across different communities, Nordstokke explains that the term *diakonia* does not lend itself to a precise definition. He emphasizes that diakonia is significantly influenced by how Christians respond to their calling and adhere to biblical teachings on being a good neighbor. Diakonia has always flourished through the call to action in response to the challenges faced by communities.

Defining Diakonia

When the church claims to be diaconal and emphasizes diakonia as its focus in ministry, this focus should then be evident in its actions toward the community and how the church represents Jesus’ good news to the world through the lived experiences within its community. Diaconal ministry calls us to protect and care for those who are oppressed and marginalized in our communities. Since the church knows the many ways that the system has been used to oppress people and work against the poor, we are to demonstrate that the church sides with those who are in need.

Diakonia: Rooted in the Gospel. Peyton Craighill in the book *Diaconal Ministry, Past, Present, and Future, Essays from the Philadelphia Symposium* defines *diakonia* as a word that directly translated from Greek means *service*.² This is not just any service, however. Craighill emphasizes that *Christian* service calls us to be servants to others and to serve God faithfully, altogether in service to the world, turning us from Word to ministry.

You cannot speak about diakonia without affirming that *our ministry begins with Jesus Christ and the gospel*. Christ calls us to become good servants of the Lord who are willing to serve others as well: “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28).

Diakonia: For the Sake of the Community. Elizabeth Mkame in her “Contemporary Understandings of Diakonia” draws the definition of diakonia from Archbishop Harley, who refers to

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this ministry as *the church’s role in transforming the community for the better*.³ The Archbishop believes that using diakonia was one way for the church to be responsible and deeply involved in the problems and the needs of society. The bishop saw that the church has an opportunity to be an agent for change in the field of activities that involve the community.

The vision I have for the church and service is also that of *transformation for the community*. The church has a great chance to transform communities when it employs its resources into developing ways for people to be sustained and providing tools from which society can benefit. We can view the world as the place that Jesus Christ always cares for and loves.

Diakonia: Involving All the Baptized. Timothy Siburg writes: “It may not be too much to claim that a deacon, through Word and Service, makes the mystery and promises of Christ’s love known in tangible ways in everyday life. It is in the day-to-day of life, that stewardship is made real.”⁴ Siburg claims that *every child*

1. Kjell Nordstokke, *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2009), 8.

2. Peyton Craighill, *Diaconal Ministry, Past, Present, and Future: Essays from the Philadelphia Symposium* (Providence, Rhode Island: North American Association for the Diaconate, 1992), xi.

3. Elizabeth Mkame, “Contemporary Understandings of Diakonia,” the report of a consultation held in Geneva, Switzerland, November 22-26, 1982. (World Council of Churches, Commission on Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Services, 1983).

4. Timothy Siburg, “The Future of Diaconal Ministry,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45:2 (April 2018), 21-22. <https://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/111/131>

of God is called to stewardship and diakonia through the promises of baptism. Diaconal ministry reflects God's love toward others. In faith, we understand that everything we have comes from God; Christ has taught us through the gospel what it means to share and help both those we know and those we do not know, and especially those who hate us.⁵

Historical perspectives on mission theology

The church understands the origins of God's mission from the beginning of creation. The mission of God is shared with the community and becomes a church. Servant-status is formed through evangelization. We emerge with God's mission of witness, proclamation, justice, dialogue, and reconciliation as the church commits itself to God's mission.⁶

The concept of diakonia, particularly in the African context, has emerged as a transformative force that is bridging the gap between traditional mission practices and the needs of the community. Diakonia offers a profound and practical approach to mission in the twenty-first century. In many African communities, the integration of spiritual and social services has refined the role of the church, fostering resilience and growth even during societal challenges. The African church is deeply embedded in the concept of community which makes diakonia a tool of transformation.

Revisiting the theology and mission

I call diaconal work "answered prayers we can touch." This ministry is rooted in the Word of God and is to be carried out as the bridge that connects the church and the world. It embodies the life of Christ-like service to address all forms of human need.

I am reminded every day in ministry that there is a need for action that goes together with what we preach; reading the Bible alone is not enough. We are seeking ways to make sure that the biblical words come to life in our actions toward the world and each other. Norma Cook Everist writes that to be faithful is to be responsive to the pain and the problems of the world, speaking with a prophetic voice and loving with boldness. Everist compares diaconal ministry to the open tomb of Jesus, acknowledging that faithful diakonia is grounded in the cross and manages to serve all of God's children using Jesus' ministry as the foundation for our reflection.⁷

I have always believed that faith communities are more than just Sunday worship services. I grew up seeing the church doing so much for the development of communities, playing a great role in educating people regarding the roles of faith and action. Diaconal ministry intentionally brings the cries and needs of the world to the attention of the church, so that the church can

5. Siburg. "Future of Diaconal Ministry" <https://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/111/131>

6. Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder. *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2004), 397.

7. Norma Cook Everist, "Diaconal Ministry from the Open Tomb to the Open World," *Dialog* 42 (July 2015): 183.

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address the community's needs with transformation, healing, and reconciliation. The hope in diaconal ministry is that the church has the power to address the needs of society.

Diakonia as a bridge between tradition and innovation

Diakonia draws strength from its ability to connect traditional theological frameworks with innovative practices. Many churches on the African continent have used diakonia approaches to address the challenges facing communities, such as poverty, healthcare, and education. These initiatives show the application of theological principles, demonstrating how diakonia can transform the church and the community.

I have had the privilege of working with Lutheran churches in Tanzania and Rwanda (East Africa) and have witnessed how diakonia ministries elevated education by building schools for children and youth with different needs, including those with disabilities. The church created opportunities for women and girls through education and capacity-building skills. It brought about sustainable development, health centers, and hospitals closer to the communities.

I thought for a long time that pastoral ministry can and should go beyond Sunday services. Just like me, many have dreamed of a church that touches people's lives and brings change in the most transformative ways. James Cone quoted Emilio Castro, who writes:

The church should discover and identify itself with groups of people that suffer because of unjust situations and who have no way of making themselves heard. The church should be the voice of those who have no one. The church must discover these groups and identify herself with them. Here is the modern way of the cross, the way of Christian responsibility.⁸

We have said for some time that the church should do more to

8. James Cone and Cornel West. *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2018), 70.

participate in making and bringing change to communities. We need to understand that the power of the church is to be used to influence change and not forget the fact that we can use the power of the gospel to bring good news to the people and empower Christian responsibilities. I agree with Castro in his statement that theologians, pastors, and folks who are doing their ministries through the church do not stand alone without anyone backing them up. The church as an empire (institution) needs to identify with the groups of people who are suffering through unjust actions. The church can use its voice to help those who are silenced. The church can use its power to stand with those who are often pushed to the margins. The church can raise and honor those who are often erased. The church can bear witness to the truth.

Communities should benefit from the church beyond just the church building; we are called to use Christ's way of ministry to serve others as we proclaim our faith without fear, because we do not just preach it, we live it. The Jesus way means standing for justice, feeding the hungry, caring for the poor and the needy, and opening doors to meet people where they are. James Cone states:

The Church of Christ is not bounded by standards of race, class or occupation. It is not a building or an institution. It is not determined by bishops, priests, or ministers as these terms are used in their contemporary sense. Rather, the church is God's suffering people. Where Christ is, there is the church. Christ is found suffering with the suffering, Christ is in the ghetto, and there also is his church.⁹

There must be many ways to make the church—not the building—accessible to God's people. Many people have failed to understand how the church keeps letting them down, while the actual gospel we preach emphasizes caring for one another, loving each other, and living according to Jesus' ministry. When I think about my ministry, I want something that will assure God's people of God's presence with them and among them. I want the people I serve to feel that God is close and not think that the Lord is inaccessible to those who are powerless, voiceless, and poor.

Diakonia and its transformative power in African communities

For a long time, African communities have grappled with complex challenges, including poverty, inequity, and social fragmentation. Diaconal ministry is nothing without the people in the community agreeing to share and live their faith outwardly, so that it can impact other people around them.

African communities have collaborated with churches that embrace the diakonia mission as a guiding principle of their ministry, which is playing a large part in transforming lives and reshaping the community. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) is one global communion of churches in the Lutheran tradition that lives and works together for justice, peace, and reconciliation

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around the world. The LWF strives to put the Christian faith into action through the humanitarian-development work of advocacy and shared witness.

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In creating space for churches to serve the public and sustain diaconal ministry, churches like the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR) have used diakonia to empower new congregations and communities through projects. The LCR dates back to 1994, following the genocide against the Tutsi. To really grasp this, one must investigate Rwanda's history, starting in 1959 when ethnic tensions arose. As these segregation issues persisted, numerous individuals fled the country, seeking refuge in Tanzania, where they joined the Lutheran Church. In 1994, refugees were permitted to come back to their homeland. Many of them coming from Tanzania established the LCR.

Diakonia was used to offer a framework for addressing issues in the community by creating capacity-building projects that sustain and elevate the livelihood of the people, which remains an important way to transform marginalized communities. These capacity-building projects have different phases of leadership in their role of increasing participation and outreach in the communities, leading to interreligious and interfaith relationships. Capacity-building projects have been a great source for outreach in congregations, which respond to the constraints of proclaiming the Word of God to address sufferings brought by poverty and

9. Cone and West. *Black Theology and Black Power*, 74.

inadequate infrastructures and resources.

The church has set intentional goals for the projects, training pastors and church leaders to understand the meaning of church mission, Lutheran doctrine, and stewardship. The LCR also trained department leaders and representatives for women and youth. These leaders are from different LCR congregations and have greatly benefited from capacity-building training. Diaconal ministry must be understood as a priority. The church's responsibility is to make sure that all the members know why we follow these teachings and understand diakonia according to our Lutheran identity.

Poverty is one of the barriers that the initiatives of the LCR have faced, making church growth and sustainability more difficult. The church has used projects, such as planting fruit trees, feeding children, women's sustainable development projects, and livestock projects, which continue to support congregations and parishioners in initiatives that improve their livelihoods and promote good agricultural practices and income-generating activities.

Space reserved for reconciliation

The focus of diakonia on service provides a shared foundation for engagement. Engaging in this ministry allows one to grow significantly from the stories and testimonies of others, which holds great significance for the development of both the church and our community. The LCR has used diakonia to foster reconciliation in the country post-genocide as they engaged in efforts to promote healing and unity.

Diaconal work focused on supporting vulnerable groups of widows, orphans, and survivors. The model aimed to restore dignity and foster a sense of community. Diakonia addressed the needs of the community through the projects that helped bring sustainability and economic growth to the people. Diaconal ministry inspired education efforts, faith-based counseling, community healing, and reconciliation. Common projects were used to gather the community in working to rebuild their country.

The Fruit Tree Project

Community discussion and training about environmental protection in the communities contributed to the development of this project. In Rwanda, environmental preservation is very

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important. The community believes that when you take care of the land, the land takes care of you. Fruit is a great source of nutrition and, when sold at the market, fruit provides a great source of income as well. The LCR congregations and communities are provided with starter trees of different kinds of fruit and species through the church's diakonia department. The goal is to benefit and protect the land with the trees providing economic relief and health benefits.

Through this project, families and congregations received about 120 fruit trees to help them produce fruit. The fruit trees were given to the families and congregations to produce enough for the families to sell fruit at the market and generate income. The LCR believes that diakonia ministries are to be led by the communities, which means the people are responsible for holding each other accountable. This encourages building relationships in the communities.

Women's Sustainable Development Projects

Diakonia ministries within the LCR are dedicated to supporting individuals in the communities and congregations by fostering health and economic growth, particularly for vulnerable populations. In 2017, the LCR prioritized initiatives to improve the lives of women and widows.

One notable effort took place in the Kayonza congregation. Ten sewing machines, along with fabrics, sewing supplies, and other essential materials, were provided to launch a tailoring project. This initiative aimed to enhance the livelihood of women by enabling them to earn income for supporting their families and contributing to the church. Through their work, the women helped the church by creating clergy garments and stoles. This collaboration strengthened the bond between the church and the community, fostering mutual support and raising awareness about the significance of such projects within the church's mission.

Additionally, this woman's project inspired the development of another initiative focused on young mothers in the community.

These young women, many under the age of 16, were given the opportunity to learn tailoring skills. The program welcomed participants from various faith backgrounds, not limited to Lutherans. Its primary goal was to empower these girls with training and practical skills, enabling them to sustain themselves and their children, thereby providing a path toward a more stable and self-sufficient future.

Livestock Projects

Another project proposed by the community for the benefit of families provided animals to the families and congregations. This project provided animals, such as chickens, goats, cows, sheep, rabbits, and pigs. It was intended to improve food security and raise income for vulnerable families.

This project has been significant to the community and the families. A system is used to distribute the animals to families and congregations. The animals are to provide food for the families, supplying well-needed nutrition from meat, milk, and eggs. Other animal products are sold in the marketplaces, bringing money to the families to elevate their economic status and provide employment.

Additionally, the project emphasizes the importance of farming. Animal waste from livestock, such as cows, chicken, and goats, is utilized as fertilizer for family gardens, which are cultivated to grow food and thereby support both sustenance and agricultural productivity.

Feeding Children

Rwanda has faced significant challenges following the genocide, one of which was a large number of orphaned children. In response, the LCR, through its diaconal ministry, set out to care for these vulnerable children, welcoming all regardless of their religious background.

Poverty has been a significant cause of child malnutrition, as many families lack the resources to provide their children with nutritious food, which hinders their growth. One parent described the struggle: “We often don’t have enough food for the family, sometimes only managing one meal a day, which we usually have in the evening to help us sleep. Our children are not getting the nutrients they need.”

To address this issue, the LCR partnered with local government to teach families how to prepare affordable, nutritious meals using accessible ingredients such as fruits and vegetables. These sessions helped families learn to create healthy meals with the resources they had. Additionally, the church established a feeding program to supplement children’s diets. Once a month, children from different families gathered at the church to receive food, such as eggs, milk, and fruit. This program not only improved the children’s nutrition but also strengthened the community’s connection to the church, leading to increased attendance and growth.

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Challenges

Even though diakonia has a chance to bring great transformation to the mission of the church, there remain challenges that make it hard for the mission of diakonia to advance.

- *Cultural and Social Diversity.* The Bible is the holy book, and most churches use the Bible as the point of reference for their diaconal ministries. However, diakonia faces resistance in some of the African settings due to diverse cultures, languages, and social structure. The misrepresentation of biblical texts originated from the time when the communities were given instruction about the Bible readings that contradict other cultures and traditions.
- *Economic Constraints* are another challenge. Diakonia is a call and instruction from Jesus that calls for serving, caring for the community, and not leaving those who need our help behind to suffer. However, many African churches are operating in a challenging economic environment with limited financial resources that makes the implementation of the diaconal ministry difficult.
- *Theological Misunderstandings.* As much as there are many texts and biblical testimonies that talk about diaconal ministry, others show how even Jesus was faced with challenges when it came to people in his community understanding his values of welcoming the least and those in need.

Consider Mark 9:38-40: “John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop

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him because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.'" Here the disciples are treating Jesus' ministry and mission like their own exclusive club, talking about stopping someone who was using the Lord's name to help others, and they see no problem with that. They almost seem proud, "We tried to stop him." They are so wrapped up in stopping this person that they forgot that he was using the Lord's name in his work.

If we ever wonder what not to do when it comes to diakonia, this text should serve as one of our guides. God understands that we need all the help we can get. We need to know the value of allies in building the mission and work of the community. We are in a great position to welcome and embrace all of God's children regardless of whether or how they follow Jesus the way that we do.

The Bible is our source of authority when it comes to diakonia. Throughout the gospel, there has been an emphasis on serving others and making service the center of the Christian life. For Christians, whose lives are modeled around Jesus and his ministry and mission, many of us hope that we can do at least a fraction of what Christ has done for us and the world.

Conclusion

Diakonia has played a vital role in transforming the lives of people in our communities and fostering the growth of churches. Jesus calls us to serve because the hungry, naked, and imprisoned are our brothers and sisters.

By merging the field of diakonia with the theology of mission, diakonia becomes the guiding tool for churches in Africa that are committed to service and justice. Diakonia continues to transform communities and stimulates growth within the church. Churches are encouraged to embrace their call to transformation and to embody the gospel of love, renewal, and hope, which is shaping the future of mission and service.