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Empowering Diakonia to Overcome Poverty Rev. Dr. Carlos E. Ham (Cuba).

1. Introduction

First of all, I am very grateful to Rev. Dr Young-Cheol Cheon, Secretary General of Korean Diakonia, for his kind invitation to attend this important gathering and to share this paper, based on the experiences of our work at the World Council of Churches (WCC) and at our Theological Seminary in Matanzas, Cuba.

As churches, committed to social justice, like those gathered here, the main theme of this International Conference on Diakonia, namely *'No Poverty' of the UN Sustainable Development Goals*, is indeed very relevant, if we want to be consistent with our Christian faith, particularly to the diaconal ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Latin America tradition of Theology of Liberation, rather than dealing with the notion of poverty, as 'the state of being extremely poor', the term better used is impoverishment, focusing on the process by which people are being deprived of resources, mainly as the result of unjust structures. Therefore, as churches we are called to be better aware of causes and consequences of poverty, beyond the charity mentality, in order to accompany the destitute in concrete actions of solidarity. Hence, diaconal action, by definition ought to be prophetic, namely to comfort the impoverished and at the same time to confront the root causes of injustice.

2. Diakonia in the Ecumenical Movement

The ecumenical movement in general and the WCC in particular, through its member churches, have had a very strong involvement in diaconal work throughout the 20th Century and up to the present days, both in reflection and in practice. In this area, I have been observing three phases or models of ecumenical diakonia that I have identified throughout this rich history, finding paradigm shifts. These phases will sometimes show conflicting

signs or moments of tension and in other occasions, complementing trends among each other. The phases or models, which will be explained below, are the *charity*, the *reciprocity* and the *transformative* models.

- a) ***The charity model.*** This is the *inter-church aid* period, characterized quite prominently by the transfer of funds in a rather vertical, top-down way, to support diaconal projects and persons in need. To a great extent, people were seen as *objects* of the aid, coming from the most powerful churches and church-related organizations, primarily from the global North. Diakonia was defined in this period as the “responsible service of the gospel by deeds and by words performed by Christians in response to the needs of people”.¹ This charity model runs from the early 20th Century up until the beginning of the 1980s and its effect is help.
- b) ***The reciprocity model.*** This phase is represented by the *Ecumenical Sharing of Resources*² process,³ which was developed in the 1980s, primarily by the 1986 Global Consultation on Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service, *Diakonia 2000. Called to be Neighbors*, held in Larnaca (Cyprus) and the 1987 El Escorial (Spain) Consultation on *Koinonia*. During this period, I start to observe a paradigm shift, mostly as a result of the presence and influence of voices and ministries from the churches in the global South and East. Here I begin to see emerging the notions and practices of empowerment in relation to diakonia.

In this model, which runs up to the first decade of the 21st Century, in a more intentional and collective way there is an assessment of the needs, the challenges and the problems, also on a more horizontal level. E.g. the participants at the Larnaca consultation underscored in their final Declaration “...Our diakonia now and for the future must be based on mutual trust and genuine sharing. We recognize that people and churches on all continents have needs and that our diakonia must reach out to all

¹ Teresa Joan White, “Diakonia,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. by Nicholas Lossky et al, 2nd. edn (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), accessed on 15 September 2013, <www.oikoumene.org>, p. 305.

² Dong-sung Kim, ‘Partnership and Resource Sharing’, *Ecumenical Missiology. Changing Landscapes and New Conceptions of Mission*, 35 (2016), pp. 259–70.

³ Carlos Ham, ‘Historical Review of the Sharing of Resources Within the Ecumenical Movement. Presented at the International Consultation on the Relationship Between Churches and Specialized Ministries / 4–10 September 2014, Nkopoloa Lodge, Malawi.’ (Not published).

those who suffer”.⁴ Also at the El Escorial consultation there was a deliberate attempt to overcome the false dichotomy between mission and service, within the *Life and Work* framework. Its report acknowledges, “All activities of the Christian community in evangelism, diakonia, the struggle for human dignity, healing, peace and justice belong together in the one mission of God”.⁵ Nevertheless, I observe in this period that the *we-they* mentality is still quite prominent, while at the same time, there is a stronger emphasis on resources other than financial, e.g. human, that are expected to be shared. The effect of this trend is moving towards change.

- c) ***The transformative model.*** The process leading to the 2012 Conference on *Theological Perspectives on Diakonia in the Twenty-First Century*, held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, marks this period that I call *transformative*. There is a stronger influx in relation to the notion of diaconal practice from the different WCC related mission networks and not least from the persons quite often excluded by society and even by the churches. This further worked towards achieving inclusivity and integration of the different diaconal efforts, a stronger relationship *to-each-other*; done by those from the periphery, by those on the margins (disabled, women, indigenous people, afro-descendants, impoverished), empowered to change society in a *bottom-up* approach, in an inductive manner. The effect of this model is transformation.

3. Diakonia and Empowerment

The same year of the Colombo Conference, the WCC held a *Seminar on Empowerment for Diakonia in Central America and the Spanish-Speaking Caribbean*, at our Theological Evangelical Seminary in Matanzas, Cuba. In the final statement the participants noted:

Diakonia must be based on ethical, social, political, environmental, legal and intercultural values, be faithful to the churches’ overall mission, and be inclusive in its activities, bringing together young people, children and women. Also diaconal service must promote processes enabling individuals to be capable of changing their situation

⁴ Klaus Poser, *Diakonia 2000 – Called to Be Neighbors. Official Report of the WCC World Consultation on Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service, Larnaca, Cyprus, November 1986* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1987), p. 125.

⁵ Hubert van Beek, *Sharing Life in a World Community. Official Report of the WCC World Consultation on Koinonia, El Escorial, Spain, 1987* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989), p. 45.

and of promoting the principles of an economy that is inclusive, in the form of cooperatives and associations.⁶

Reading this quote, I can highlight the following observations in relation to our topic, namely, (1) first and foremost, this diaconal endeavor is performed by the churches as part of God's mission; (2) it is interdisciplinary, involving various sciences and partners; (3) that it is inclusive, embracing all sectors of the community, not only of the congregations; and finally (4) it is empowering, enabling participation and agency for change, since, as the Statement goes on to say: "Diakonia is not conducted from a stance of absolute power, but out of power devoted to the common good. 'Serving', as an act of convenience or of absolute power, is contrasted with the meaning of service in the biblical sense".⁷

Therefore, there is a close relationship between diakonia and empowerment, acknowledging the latter as a dynamic process that enables and inspires, that enhances people's skills and self-confidence; it is a movement by which persons liberate, take back and develop the power within, in order to *unlock* their immense potential and to boost their skills, self-confidence and self-assertion. This process aims at promoting collective resistance, challenge and mobilization against dominating power relationships and systemic forces that impoverish and exclude the vulnerable people, towards positive changes in the situations where they are living, by creating justice, inclusiveness and participation towards transformation and righteousness.

In the ecumenical movement several quotes can be found that point to the crucial relationship between empowerment and diakonia, by which there is a cross-fertilization among the two, i.e. a call can be found for the churches to work towards achieving empowerment to lift human dignity, self-sustainability and transformation by the own people. An outstanding example can be this one: "Empowerment is at the heart of diaconal and justice-seeking activities and can be seen as an overarching characteristic or goal of much of the work of the churches and church-related organizations. Empowerment activities in a

⁶ WCC, *Final Statement of Seminar on Empowerment for Diakonia in Central America and the Spanish-Speaking Caribbean, Matanzas, Cuba - 15-20 July 2012* (Matanzas, Cuba, 2012), p. 2.

⁷ WCC, *Final Statement of Seminar on Empowerment for Diakonia in Central America and the Spanish-Speaking Caribbean, Matanzas, Cuba - 15-20 July 2012*, p. 3.

Christian framework address the dignity of humanity and reveal to each person and group their inherent gifts and abilities so that they may actively work towards transformation”.⁸

One of my basic assumptions is that, from the perspective of the Judeo-Christian tradition, empowerment is encouraged to take place in mutuality, in partnership, in a spirit of power-sharing, a process of reaching out to the other with the love of the triune God and is, therefore intrinsically attached to diakonia, which affirms the power-service in Christ’s way. Nowadays many local churches are being empowered for diaconal work as a result of their ecclesial condition and urged by the needs of the people. Consequently, empowerment and diakonia are integral parts of being a missional church; people are emerging *self-empowered* for action becoming, beyond being objects of aid and charity, being subjects of their own destiny and of their respective communities.

So the issue here, as we address the challenge of impoverishment, is not to help the poor just to solve their needs, rather, to facilitate an empowerment process by which they can be part of the solution and not only part of the problem. One way of doing this is by implementing what I call the *Empowering Diakonia* model. This can be an essential tool not only to interrelate both the theory and practice, but also as a helpful diagnosis instrument for analysis, description and interpretation for practical implementation. Hence, the application of the model, as it interrelates both diakonia and empowerment, helps us to move from practice to theory and back to practice for transformation.

4. The *Empowering Diakonia* model

The *Empowering Diakonia* model can be defined as the driving force that leads, in our case the churches, particularly local congregations, towards self-fulfillment of those in need, to develop as social actors. The churches are called to renounce any power *over* people, but rather through God’s power to serve *with* the people, through acts of effective love, and serving human needs, for individual and social transformation for mutuality and justice. Of course, this empowerment process is not limited to the congregations, but also includes other religions and the wider communities.

⁸ WCC, *Diakonia: Creating Harmony, Seeking Justice and Practising Compassion* (Geneva, 2005), p. 7.

The model is composed by five elements, called the *Five Dimensions of Empowering Diakonia*, which include the following: visional, normative, need-oriented, contextual and transformative; and are both interdisciplinary and interrelated. In the following section a summary of the meaning of each will be noted:⁹

A. Visional – referring to the ability of envisioning future reality so as to consider action with imagination and wisdom. The vision motivates, like the view of utopia that *causes us to advance*,¹⁰ it is the engine, and the ideological foundation. According to the Judeo-Christian tradition this is crucial since “where there is no vision, the people perish” (Pr. 29:18). Furthermore, a diaconal vision is inspired and empowered by God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It relates to theological reflection, to spiritual-mystical experiences, and to liturgical practices, towards a critical analysis of reality and action, an imagination of what is feasible, seeking to achieve *another possible world*.¹¹ Hence, “In a theological perspective, empowerment has a God-given goal (*telos*) of energizing people in God’s project and realizing God’s good intention for creation and human society: of mutual love and care, and of promoting human dignity and justice”.¹² Therefore, the vision is seeking empowerment and, at the same time, empowers, in this case, for diaconal action.

B. Normative – deriving from a standard or norm, particularly of behavior and therefore has ethical connotations. It is a commanding point of reference, of taking stances, which provides meaning for the actions of a particular group. It is expressed in human core values, principles, and standards of comportment, in the judgment of what is important in life. In the particular Judeo-

⁹ Carlos Ham, *Empowering Diakonia: A Model for Service and Transformation in the Ecumenical Movement and Local Congregations*, PhD Thesis - Free University of Amsterdam (Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2015), pp. 15-17.

¹⁰ This quote is from Eduardo Galeano (1940-2015), a Uruguayan journalist, writer and novelist, who expressed: “Utopia lies at the horizon. When I draw nearer by two steps, it retreats two steps. If I proceed ten steps forward, it¹¹ swiftly slips ten steps ahead. No matter how far I go, I can never reach it. What, then, is the purpose of utopia? It is to cause us to advance”. Website accessed on 5 January 2014, <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/33846-utopia-lies-at-the-horizon-when-i-draw-nearer-by>

¹¹ Website accessed on 18 February 2015, http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/index.php?cd_language=2

¹² Kjell Nordstokke, ‘Empowerment in the Perspective of Ecumenical Diakonia’, *Diakonia*, 3 (2) (2012), p. 194.

Christian tradition, it is rooted in the authority of the biblical text, but at the same time it reflects professional effectiveness. As diaconal engagement is not an option, but part of the essence of being church, *condition sine qua non*, it is normative, essential for its mission, and therefore a faith-based empowered and empowering service.

C. Need-oriented – pointing both to material and spiritual necessities of the people requiring some course of action, focusing on the causes (asking not only what the needs are, but also why they are present in the first place) and consequences of such needs. They identify processes of empowerment and require the churches' social intervention, in order to comfort the people in need, and also to confront prophetically the powers that destroy the web of life. This dimension also considers the needs of the churches in order to address effectively and jointly the necessities of the communities, following the ministry of Jesus Christ, who was moved by the needs of the people. Hence, when his followers see the needs of others, their values are activated, from a perspective of solidarity and effective love.

D. Contextual – considering a theology and a praxis that are contextual, the churches' diaconal involvement is concerned and empowered in a particular setting, committed to the community, society in general –addressing economic and political issues- and the environment. The context provides the critical elements to assess more accurately the reality in order to exercise an interdisciplinary engagement, together with other actors and sciences. It helps to focus and fine-tune empowering action that regenerates the lives of the people.

E. Transformative – lifting a diaconal pro-action that aims at the ultimate goal of reaching *koinonia* through transformation, building inclusive communities of justice and peace that include all people. It is an open-ended creation process, where the church and other agents of change co-laborate with God, in order to incarnate the values of the Kingdom and provide fullness of life

for all creation. Hence, from the theological point of view, it is seen as open-ended, since God is responsible for the ultimate outcome or result, providing newness of life. Therefore, it is an expression of the church's faith in God, and consequently it should be dealt with humility and confidence in God's plan. For this, it is important to pursue the transformation of the churches themselves, experiencing first powerlessness, *kenosis*, by picking up the cross and following in the footsteps of the *Suffering Servant*, as an empowering process to reach *koinonia*.

In other words, this flow of the *Five Dimensions*, help us to move from a practical informed vision, taking normative stances to address effectively and prophetically the needs of the people, in their various contexts, towards transformation and justice.

5. Cuba - A Practical Experience

Cuba is a *sui generis Third World* country. Its Socialist system, even with its shortcomings, has tried to be a moral authority for more than half a century, since, unlike other similar political systems in Eastern and Central European countries, it carried out a victorious Revolution that triumphed in 1959, against the regime of Fulgencio Batista. At the same time, Cuba has suffered one of longest embargoes, imposed by the US Government, which has been condemned by the great majority of the world's nations and by various United Nations General Assemblies. After the collapse of the Berlin wall and since the early 1990s, when the country's *Secular Constitution* was adopted, the churches have been carrying out their mission no longer confined to the four walls of the sanctuaries, rather, extended throughout the Cuban society.

In this country there are signs of changes taking place where various churches¹³ are playing an important role in the society to improve the quality of life of the people. The diaconal mission of these churches has gained a new momentum, primarily for the following reasons:

¹³ Basically I am referring here to the mainline historical Protestant churches, that belong to the Council of Churches and send their students to our Theological Evangelical Seminary. Nevertheless, as it happens in other countries, we are facing a growing charismatic movement which, among other issues, are not interested in social engagement.

(a) the growing improvement of the relations between the state and the churches, by which the latter have more freedom to carry-out their mission; (b) the needs of the population have increased as a result of the economic crisis; and (c) as a consequence of the decentralization of the economy by the state, which challenges the civil society in general.

We have made some research among various Cuban ecumenical churches and as a result, the *Five Dimensions of Empowering Diakonia* can be described in these terms, as an example of how they can be worked on:

1. **Vision.** There is a shared vision embedded in their identity as churches, which provides the necessary impulse and commitment for diaconal actions. In my view, this vision lifts empowerment in order to meet creatively the challenges of the Cuban churches, which in many cases are playing an important *pathfinding* role.
2. **Normative.** Acknowledging various biblical texts, the churches are morally obliged to serve, ecumenically when possible, the most vulnerable, following the example of Jesus, who helped unconditionally those in need.
3. **Needs.** The Cuban churches are challenged by the needs of the population and are called to address them holistically, providing both material support as well as meaning and hope for the lives of the people. At the same time, the churches face needs themselves, mainly in the area of competence, in order to address these necessities in the society, in a sustainable manner.
4. **Context.** In the changing situation in Cuba, the *historical* churches (mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic) are playing a more active role in their setting, e.g. in the area of diakonia; the civil society in general is becoming a stronger actor in moments when poverty is increasing. In this context, discernment and courage are required by the churches to fulfill this mission.
5. **Transformative.** Moving towards the future, several transformative priorities for Cuba in the area of diakonia were identified, namely, strengthening the initiatives of capacity building for diakonia; enabling ecumenical networking of churches and interreligious cooperation with diaconal projects; and reinforcing dialogue among the churches, the state and with other social actors in the area of service. The Cuban churches as *pathfinders* are living a very important *kairos*, a crucial and critical time

to bear witness to the living Christ, both in words and in deeds. They are becoming relevant actors in the Cuban society as agents for transformation, empowerment and reconciliation, further developing a sense and commitment to justice and dignity. Consequently, the churches are playing a very active role as pioneers, helping to discover a new course or way, re-orienting in order to promote better human and social relationships.

In other words, reflecting on the results of this research, it becomes clear that the concept of *diakonia as pathfinder* is central in Cuba's present *kairos* as expressed in the *Five Dimensions*. The Cuban churches are called to play this role in diakonia, as humble service, juxtaposed with servility towards the state and other powers. Consequently, they are empowered not only to serve the most vulnerable people, but also being proactive in prophetic engagement, going ahead, discerning God's will for the nation, discovering and showing the way towards God's kingdom. This role is to be with the people, particularly with the "least of these", not as a political party, rather, offering care and building bridges for communication, dialogue and reconciliation. This is a "treasure in clay" (2Co. 4:7), the utopia of the gospel, it is what the churches bring to the Cuban society in order to seek transformative justice and to build communities.

In this context, I would also like to mention a concrete example, i.e. our Theological Evangelical Seminary in Matanzas, which was founded in 1946 and therefore, we are celebrating our 70th Anniversary this year. One of the most outstanding empowerment tools is our *Cuban School for Diakonia*, which meets five times in our campus five days each. We work in each academic year with the same group of students, most of them diakonia practitioners at their local parishes. We just graduated a group of 20 of them and 60 in total. Our main purpose is capacity building, combining theory and practice. We have come to realize that our theological seminaries should produce pastors and church leaders trained not only to preach and teach in the four walls of the sanctuaries, not only to do Bible hermeneutics, but also social hermeneutics. We are called to form at our theological seminaries, community facilitators that are able to interpret the Christian faith in the social-political-economic context and to lead the churches to carry-out God's mission in this environment.

This *Cuban School for Diakonia* is co-organized with the Martin Luther King Center in Havana and supported through human resources by the Diakonia Area of the Cuban Council of Churches. The students are selected by the local congregations of different denominations, since our Seminary is ecumenical. One of the contents of the *School* is to explore both theoretically and in practice this *Empowering Diakonia* model explained above.

6. Conclusion

In the flow of the church's understanding of diakonia within the WCC, it has been underlined that it reaches out to all persons, particularly the impoverished, the "least of these" (Mt. 25:40) and oppressed, to comfort them and also to confront the root causes of injustice. Because the *missio Dei* (God's mission)¹⁴ is holistic, diakonia is also deeply interrelated with *kerygma* (proclamation of the Word), *didache* (teaching), *leitourgia* (worship) and *martyria* (witness), which lead to *koinonia* (community). *Koinonia*, beyond the narrow boundaries of the church, is the result and ultimate goal of these functions or activities, which mark the presence of the church in the world. Diakonia, therefore, is not an end in itself, but rather an instrument used by God, together with others, to build an inclusive and just community, an *oikos*, a household in which the entire creation is included, enjoying the fullness of life intended for all.¹⁵

Kjell Nordstokke, in line with the arguments expressed above, reaffirms this emphasis on the community, when he stresses, "Empowerment is a process of establishing meaningful relationships. Its goal is not self-realization, as autonomous rational beings, but self-esteem activated and energized in dignified relations with others".¹⁶ Therefore, this cross-fertilizing

¹⁴ David Bosch, points out that it was in the 1952 Willingen Conference of the International Mission Council where the idea (not the exact term) *missio Dei* surfaced clearly. "Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God", he stressed - David Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 16th. edn (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 587.

¹⁵ This thought is based on the report of the WCC general secretary at the time, Philip A. Potter, to its 6th Assembly, held in Vancouver, Canada, in 1983. He said: "The ecumenical movement is, therefore, the means by which the churches which form the house, the *oikos* of God, are seeking so to live and witness before all peoples that the whole *oikoumene* may become the *oikos* of God through the crucified and risen Christ in the power of the life-giving Spirit" - David Gill, *Gathered for Life. Official Report, VI Assembly of the WCC, Vancouver, Canada, 1983* (Geneva, 1983), p. 197.

¹⁶ Kjell Nordstokke, "Empowerment in the Perspective of Ecumenical Diakonia," *Diaconia*, 3 (2) (2012), p. 124.

relationship between empowerment and diakonia seeks this ultimate goal of creating an inclusive community.

The building of this inclusive and just community is a responsibility of all humankind; where the churches have a leading role to play in this diaconal effort. As Rodolfo Gaede Neto puts it, “Diakonia is the service rendered by those who follow Jesus Christ in the perspective of the *via crucis* discipleship, being therefore an attitude of faith. It is the service provided to assist persons in situations of suffering as a consequence of the exercise of oppressive power of some people over others. It is the service with a clear prophetic dimension, pointing to the denouncing and the transformation of unjust situations”.¹⁷ In this same line of thought, he goes on to say, “diakonia is defined as the renunciation of power over the people, as a denial of that power. It is the confession of the unique power of God. It is the manifestation of obedience only to the will of God. Therefore, diakonia denies hierarchy and affirms the power-service”.¹⁸

Precisely this binomial *power-service* is a very accurate way of defining the *Empowering Diakonia* model, seeking to enable a power to serve and at the same time a service to empower that the church achieves through “an attitude of faith”, i.e. a *spirituality of transformation* that embraces the *via crucis* discipleship. The model particularly enables the people from the margins to resist and overcome impoverishment, to become protagonists and to participate actively in the building of a just and inclusive world community.

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¹⁷ Rodolfo Gaede Neto, *La Diaconía de Jesús. Aporte Para La Fundamentación Teológica de La Diaconía En América Latina* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Oficina Conjunta de Proyectos. Iglesia Evangélica Luterana Unida, 2005), p. 187.

¹⁸ Neto, p. 183.

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