

Diakonia against Poverty

I The Social Welfare Service of Protestant Churches in Wuerttemberg

All of Diakonia's work is based in the Protestant conviction. We strive to fashion ourselves after God's unconditional love as embodied by Jesus Christ. Diakonia addresses the wants and needs of others based on the Christian view of mankind. This view includes the belief that every human being is vulnerable, and needs love and forgiveness. Some are in greater need of help than others. Diakonia carries out its mission to practise charity in the model of Jesus Christ by offering a wide range of support, including practical aid and legal representation.

The services of Diakonia typically offer their assistance in the proximity of residential areas. This means that Diakonia is present all over our country Wuerttemberg in the south-western part of Germany. The way the Diakonia network is set up ensures that cooperation with the different services and service units of Diakonia in Wuerttemberg is close and excellent.

More than 40,000 are employed within Diakonia in Wuerttemberg, they do their work in more than 2,000 services and social work units. Another 30,000 voluntary workers are committed to activities within Diakonia. The Social Welfare Service of the Protestant Churches is the umbrella association gathering all the social service institutions and entities that exist within the Protestant Churches in Wuerttemberg. The Baptist and Methodist Churches belong to them also. The Service is charged with four decisive tasks to fulfill:

It represents all of the church's social work. Thus, its responsibility includes supporting church communities with the implementation of their diaconal mission and tasks.

Representing all of its members, it serves the members's diaconal work and service units. More so, it serves as a converging or focal point for the members' interests and services and represents these when addressing German politics or the Church as such.

As a welfare service agency, it is partner vis-à-vis the German government and is consulted on issues pertaining to the requirements and needs of the German welfare state. As an organization following Jesus' teachings, it serves as an advocate on behalf of people in need and of the underprivileged in politics and society, especially those who are being discriminated against. It is committed to fighting societal causes of poverty and discrimination and strives and works for more social justice.

Altogether, Diakonia in Wuerttemberg looks after and supports more than 270,000 people, many of them live in homes run by a Diakonia service unit. Diakonia is active in the fields of work as follows: Welfare for handicapped people; care for the sick; care for old people; support for the unemployed, for the homeless, for the heavily indebted, and for other poor people in society;

support for drug addicts and those at risk; support for migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, especially when discriminated against; support for girls and women in distress.

In-patient service units, outpatient units, as well as day services and individual care for persons - all that is within the range of offerings provided by Diakonia.

Diakonia creates jobs on the market that is sponsored by the government. The „employment companies“ of Diakonia belong to the sector of publicly subsidized work. They try to qualify unemployed people and to empower them in cooperation with private industry for a change into regular employment. They also improve the occupational integration of the long-term unemployed. Also, Diakonia provides special shopping centers for the poor.

Diakonia runs schools and job training for young people. In earlier years when we had conscription in Germany Diakonia offered placement for conscientious objectors. They had the chance to do civil service instead of military service for a legally prescribed time.

Nowadays a lot of young people spend a voluntary social year after finishing school as a service to the society and an orientation in finding out the best choice of a profession for themselves.

A wide range of voluntary service done by people of all ages is a kind of quality label of Diakonia. Volunteers are informed and attracted by advertising in the congregations and diaconal services. They get an introduction to the service, they will work at. They are rewarded with personal liability and accident insurance, reimbursement of expenses (costs of traveling from home to the place of voluntary employment and back home) and further training programmes, they participate in regular meetings with colleagues and professional companions. The volunteer's social service contains great potential for creativity and is welcome as a completion of the professionals. They make a contribution of high value to the social culture in the society.

International Tasks

The Diakonia in Wuerttemberg is a member of The Protestant Agency for Diakonia and Development of Germany's Protestant churches. The agency carries out the church's mission through its aid programmes „Bread for the World“- Protestant Development Service and „Emergency Aid“. „Emergency Aid“ provides emergency services and disaster relief in crisis situations worldwide. „Bread for the World“, the development and relief agency supports long-term development projects and empowers the poor and marginalised to improve their living conditions in more than 90 countries all across the globe. An essential feature of the projects is the close and continuous cooperation with local, often church-related partner organisations. Upon request, „Bread for the world“ provides them with specialists and volunteers. „Bread for the World“ is member of ACT Alliance, „Action by Churches Together“, one of the biggest alliances for emergency relief and development help worldwide. Every year the offerings of all protestant congregations in Germany at Christmas time are dedicated to „Bread for the World“ : about 60 Million Euro are collected yearly.

Means of Financing

Own resources and Social Security Funds: Diakonia delivers many forms of assistance which the people needing help pay for themselves. German Social Security assumes a part of these expenses and thus take some of the burden off those who need assistance. For instance, intensive care in an old people's home, or at the old person's home, is being assumed in part by the health care insurance mandatory in Germany. Our Social Security helps finance the rehabilitation measures and rehabilitation hospitals run by Diakonia. The German Federal Employment Office supports the Diakonia service assisting unemployed people.

Subsides from Public Funds: Part of the expenses are being supported from public funds (federal, state and municipal level). For example, the state pays for a part of the costs occurring in treating drug or alcohol addicts or for women struggling with pregnancy (regarding abortion). Or, the municipalities pay for integration services for handicapped and give additional funds benefitting mentally, or psychologically ill people or those heavily indebted.

Church Tax: Every member of the Protestant Church in Germany has to pay a church tax (collected in lieu by the German Internal Revenue Service). This tax is levied according to the member's income and/or salary. The majority of consultancy services and contact points of diaconal district services are being funded by this church tax. Child day care centers receive supplementary funds. Furthermore, assistance for immigrants from former Soviet Unions, for foreigners and for refugees are being financed.

Donations: This kind of financial means is becoming increasingly important. Thanks to donations, Diakonia is able to help those who do not have a rightful claim for help and for whom nobody feels responsible. Poor people get meals at low costs in the so-called „Vesperkirchen“ - food churches- and they get free medical aid. Or they can buy food at very low prices in special shops. Families with handicapped children also get help in a non-bureaucratic way. Without such donations it would not be possible to assist people after catastrophes in Germany and abroad.

II Mercy and justice

So far, this is a glance over Diakonia in my country as it is constituted today after a long development. Please, let me have a look back. When I came to South Korea for the first time in 1994, we were invited by PCK to discuss questions concerning social responsibility of the Church. „Meeting and sharing for social service of the Korean and German Church.“ How ist Diakonia established within the Bible and what ist the meaning of Diakonia for life and organisation of a congregation? Which structures does the social commitment of the Church necessitate?

These were questions that our churches in Germany and Europe were dealing with at that time as well. In 1996 we came for the second time and were guests at the inauguration of the Institute of Diakonia Science at Hanil University & Presbyterian Theological Seminary. With us, we brought a declaration that had been issued by the Conference of European Churches in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, in 1994: „Towards a Vision of Diakonia in Europe.“ Thus, our Korean friends were included in a vast ecumenical movement: It was our goal to cement the standing of Diakonia in the Church. Let me quote a sentence from the Bratislava Declaration: „Diakonia is an extension of worship into everyday life.“ The proclamation and celebration of faith on Sunday has an impact on the everyday life of church members. During the week, the hearers of the Word authenticate the Gospel and thus become doers of the Word. This takes place by love. They say „Amen“ to the Gospel they have heard proclaimed and ask for the power of the Holy Spirit. He helps them to live as disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul writes to the Galatians (5:6): „Faith expresses itself through love.“ Faith gives energy to love. This is why all Diakonia draws its power from faith in the Deacon Jesus Christ. Thus the social work of the Church is always dependent on the help of the Holy Spirit in order to be a witness to faith in love, that is: true Diakonia.

In this line the Bratislava declaration continues: „Diakonia, which is an essential aspect of Christianity, acts in the belief that poverty, unemployment and isolation are not inevitable.“ At the same time the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany and the German Bishop's Conference have prepared the statement „For a Future Founded on Solidarity and Justice.“ The statement was published in 1997, it was prepared following a broad-based consultation process in the churches and their congregations, which went on since 1994. The publishers, the highest representatives of the Churches in Germany were full of sorrow. „Traditional social culture is undergoing great change due to industrialisation and urbanisation, and has in some points disintegrated. Material desires and selfishness are increasing and threatening solidarity and social cohesion. - Guided and encouraged by the Christian understanding of the human being, the biblical message and Christian social ethics, the churches want to make their contribution to the necessary reorientation of society. It is their concern to facilitate a common understanding of the foundations and perspectives of a public and social order that is humane, free, fair and based on solidarity. This should lead to a common effort being made to found the future on solidarity and justice. The churches do not see it as their task to give detailed political or economic recommendations. The chief task and competence of the churches is to advocate that which serves the cause of more equality and the common good... Yet solidarity and justice do not enjoy unmitigated respect nowadays. Individual selfishness is reflected in the tendency of social groups systematically to place their own interests before the common good. Some would like to take leave of the regulative concept of justice. This state of affairs is a great challenge to Churches and Christians, since solidarity and justice are at the heart of any biblical and Christian ethic.“

I want to point out two aspects of the statement. It is, first, emphasized, that the churches are not a political party. „They do not aspire to political power in order to implement a specific programme. They consider themselves especially committed to advocacy for those who are easily forgotten in economic and political planning because they cannot speak out clearly themselves: the poor, the disadvantaged and powerless, coming generations, and dumb creatures. In this way they want to set the scene for political activity inspired by solidarity and justice.“

And second: „ In biblical and Christian tradition the churches have a treasure trove that can provide cultural enrichment in the future as in the past. They stand for a culture of mercy. The experience of divine mercy, from the liberation of Israel from Egypt, is the biblical foundation for the dual command to love God and our neighbour. Keeping the suffering of others in view is a condition for all culture. Mercy in the biblical sense is not a chance, fleeting feeling. The poor are meant to know mercy as a certainty. This mercy presses for justice.“

Advocating in solidarity with the poor and standing for a culture of mercy - this is the model of the Churches and Diakonia in Germany since then.

III Inclusion and participation

In the German affluent society the subject of poverty is still taboo, to a large extent. However, there is no ignoring the existence of poverty. Among others there are two special problems: The above-average risk of **children** falling into poverty is all the more worrying as being on the fringe of poverty can easily lead to different forms of lasting deprivation. Many people hide their poverty, i.e. they would be eligible for public assistance but they don't claim it for shame, lack of knowledge or fear of the authorities. This is called „**covert poverty**“.

Christian love of the neighbour is primarily directed to the poor, the weak and the disadvantaged. The option for the poor becomes a benchmark for action. Life-enhancing dealings with the poor and the implementation of law and justice are signs of faithfulness to God's covenant. The reconciling encounter with the poor, in solidarity with them, becomes a place to encounter God. Therefore the statement of the German Churches 1997 underlined: The biblical option for the poor is aimed at overcoming exclusion and involving everyone in the life of society. Therefore volunteers are very important in protecting poor people against suspicion and discrimination.

In the following years a process of awareness rising in Diakonia led to the **concept of just participation**. In the highly developed and affluent society like Germany, effectively tackling both extreme income poverty (income under the level of social assistance benefit) and poverty in the

sense of inadequate participation in society and even defined as exclusion from society is an ethical imperative. The concept means the comprehensive involvement of everyone in education and training, economic activity, social security, and other expresses of solidarity. The Christian understanding of participation is anchored in a person's sharing in the divine reality, which is received as a gift from God. The Bible emphasises inalienable human dignity and illustrates the conviction that each individual has been provided with the ability to participate actively, using symbolism such as that of the body of Christ (e.g. 1 Cor 12). It is each individual's responsibility before others and before God to take an active part in the society. The divine gift to us of participation in God must therefore translate into active work to shape our world. Therefore a just society must enable as many people as possible to recognize their individual talents, to develop them, and to use them productively for themselves and for others. With respect to today's economic system, this means that as many as possible should have gainful employment. By definition, the concept of just participation does not limit participation to only a few aspects of society. The concept will have to be carefully reviewed at regular intervals and reinterpreted in terms of practical action in today's world. So far the Memorandum on Poverty in Germany: Just Participation. Empowerment for Personal Responsibility, published by the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany 2006. The point of view was: In the face of new challenges there needs a greater focus on poverty in church-related and diaconal ministry.

The **spirit of inclusion and participation** is the new leitmotiv of the German churches since 2014, it is the next step of diaconal development with the purpose of decrease poverty. Poverty is a lack of economic, social, and cultural resources. Poor people in Germany remain poor much too often, and poverty is much too frequently passed on one generation to the next within families, especially within families with immigrant backgrounds. So it is a challenging task for social policy and the whole society, particularly for the Churches and Diakonia to make equal opportunity a reality. This involves allowing people with poorer social beginning to receive the support they need, from early childhood onward. Let me close with an encouraging example from the city of Tuebingen, where my wife and I live. All children and minors of poor families get a so called KinderCard for free or reduced entry to open-air pool, theater and holiday offers, sports clubs, music lessons, language courses, private lessons.

„A kindly eye will earn a blessing,
such a person shares out food with the poor.“ (Pr 22,9)

Henry von Bose