

Presentationpaper Korean Diakonia oktober 2016

Some background:

The Church of Sweden (Lutheran) has about 6.3 million members, 13 dioceses and approximately 1 400 parishes. Among the employed staff (app. 25 000 people) there are about 3 000 pastors and 1 200 deacons (app. 1000 working in parishes). There is app. 20 000 volunteers conducting an important work inside the parishes.

Since the year 2000 the Church of Sweden is no longer a State Church. But there are still some relationship between the Church and the State concerning juridical parts such as weddings, funerals and money for some of our Churches. Before the year 2000 the people of Sweden paid tax to the Church, today people pay membership fee.

Outside the parishes, (and "outside formally" the Church), as own institutions, there is 5 diakonia institutions and app. 6 larger city missions in Sweden. These institutions are also an important contribution to Swedish diaconia but outside the official Church of Sweden.

1851 Ersta Diakoni (Stockholm) was founded as the first diakonia institut in Sweden built upon inspiration from the German tradition of Motherhouses. Vårsta diakonigård (Härnösand), where I am director, was founded 1912.

How do we look upon our service, diaconal work in the Church of Sweden?

In diaconal work/service, three different levels or foci, could be discerned. If the Holy Trinity is our point of departure, we find that these levels correspond to the interrelational work of the Triune God.

1) To help. Reactive diaconal work.

Acute action of emergency. To support, e.g. with food, housing, money or clothing.

Jesus Christ is the role model. Acts of reconciliation, the deacon as a servant.

2) To give voice. Prophetic diaconal work.

The task of advocacy and change. Rights-based work, e.g. to accompany a person to the Welfare-office to defend her/his legal rights. To speak out in protest, when structures, instead of meeting their intention, tend to become inhuman. Dignifying work. The Holy Spirit gives inspiration to acts of empowerment, the deacon as an agent of change.

3) To restore. Proactive diaconal work. To be engaged in restoring the brokenness of creation. To liberate and care for the whole creation, humans as well as animals and environment, demands a way of long-plan thinking. The deacon as a steward and co-worker of God the Creator. Acts of transformation. The deacon as a go-between.

The task of Reconciliation, Empowerment and Transformation is given to the whole Church and the deacon has a special call to inspire and to lead this work.

Diaconal work can be directed towards and carried out on the three levels of
Individuals – people must always find a refuge in the Church, be seen and respected there and be offered well-considered help as the need arises.

Groups – by bringing people together, community may be created and the exchange of experience encouraged. People may then consider their own situation in a wider perspective and creativity, which can lead to the finding of solutions to problems being nourished.

Society – there are many ways to contribute to good social developments. The fundamental task is to participate in and to support the democratic assemblies and processes that already exist. Could it be that extra-parliamentary methods, lobbying or even civil disobedience might be necessary in order to challenge those in power who neglect their responsibilities? Many parishes have for example engaged in unusual practices in order to support refugees. The picture of diaconal work undertaken by parishes across the country may roughly be sketched like this: Care, Pastoral care, Treatment or Support.

Today the Church of Sweden is a clear part of the voluntary sector.

During the period of construction of the welfare system, from the 1950s onwards, society was expected to provide most of the work of healthcare, education and care, as a matter of public concern. Today Sweden like most of the rest of Europe, sees an ever-increasing number of actors within the areas of care and education. It is becoming increasingly frequent to find parishes or ecclesiastical institutions providing care either on the basis of grants for special projects, or by delegation from the public sector.

These diaconal projects are examples of efforts undertaken by ideologically based non-profit making organizations. These efforts and institutions belong within a sector that is neither public nor private, but which is sometimes called “the voluntary sector”. In the EU-context, the terms the third sector, the social economy or the civil society are used.

The sector is frequently asked for and is expected to grow. By implication, this means that new choices and initiatives face parishes and diaconal institutions. It may be a request to act as a gathering force behind or together with various local actors. It may also be a request for the parish to sponsor various projects, such as institutions for care, rehabilitation, or cafés and maybe particularly in sparsely populated rural areas a post-office or a computer center. The social debate about care and education in the future, often includes an invitation to the voluntary sector, precisely because it is not driven by any profit-making interest.

Traditionally, diaconal work has often been directed towards elderly, whether or not they have been previously known or active in the parish. Gradually, as an increasing number of parishes engage in analyses of the needs and in co-operation with other local agencies, the discussions about priorities become ever more prominent and new target-groups are identified. Temporary efforts often in the form of specific projects, also become increasingly common forms of working. A growing number of parishes co-ordinate their work with neighboring parishes, particularly with regard to give financial assistance.

When it comes to the Institutes of Diaconia (City missions included) they are already involved and an active part of the Swedish welfare system of today. Sometimes with a clear assignment from the municipality or other authority (connected with money). Sometimes as an organization in the role of a lobbyist working with groups or individuals (often so called exposed/marginalized people) and not being paid for (using money from gifts and solidarity sponsoring). Trying in this work to be a voice together with exposed groups and individuals. Somehow the Institutes of Diaconia still feels that they are conducting a lot of diaconal service and social work not really acknowledged by the Church.

Challenges in the society of today

The Swedish society has developed enormously the past few years, not only for the better. Also in our country, we face a development where an increasing number of people fail to get support from the social welfare, the gap between wealthy and poor is growing wider.

Children are brought up in a situation of poverty (according to Swedish definition). Immigration and the increasing number of refugees are highly demanding, especially to small rural local authorities with limited economy. Unfortunately this has also led to a significant increase of xenophobia and hostile attitudes towards vulnerable groups. Racist opinions and even a political party with a (hidden) racist agenda is part of the current political situation in Sweden.

The government, the state, has no longer a monopoly when it comes to welfare-service, (regulations of the European Union) entailing a growing market of private schools, hospitals and homes for care of old people. These private enterprises should mostly be purchased to the lowest price, meaning that the assignment or care itself is impoverished since private companies are making profit from what is actually run by means of common taxes.

Since the year 2000, when the strong link between the state and Church of Sweden was weakened, if not dissolved completely, our church is now part of the voluntary sector, “the third sector” and thus faces a new situation. This means that, after a long period of break, Church of Sweden again has the possibility to be an agent in the welfare-sector (as was the case until the year 1862, when the church was the most powerful agent, if not the only, concerning education, healthcare and care).

What deacons, working in our parishes today, unanimously notice, is a growing social maladjustment and an escalating exclusion of people from the labour market (especially of those with a limited work-capacity and/or immigrants). The challenge to the deacons, how to meet the diaconal task today, is formulated in the Church Ordinance 2000: *Wherever there is human suffering, it is the call of the deacon to intervene and inspire others to act responsible.*

Representatives for parishes and institutions diaconal work have a mission to put the visible, local needs, the expressions for human suffering, in a larger perspective. Then it is not sufficient to open a soup-kitchen or a shelter, just as it's not sufficient to help simply on an individual level (although, not questioning the value of this work). At the end of the day it is about help which empowers a human being and liberates strength rather than paralyzing feelings of subordination. It takes analysis of society and an internal discussion amongst the staff, within the parish or institution regarding how to prioritize. For example, concerning resource allocation within the budget, areas of responsibilities, who has the power to interpret the agenda, etc. Something which should end up in an active debate in the society.

The deacon, as the leader and source of inspiration of the diaconal responsibility of the congregation, has a vocation and a mandate (through the ordination) to be a critical voice, not only in society, but also towards a too self-occupied church. There has been a development, from “traditional” diaconal work, such as, home-visits, counselling, office hours, to an increasing focus on the rights-based perspective of the work. To represent those who are in an exposed and vulnerable position in life, means that you argue in favor of those without power, and you defend their human rights. Thereby, the deacon exercises part of the power of authority, which is at the disposal of the parish or the institution. A power pointing back at the example of Jesus. In this work of external

empowerment, a complicating issue might be when there is a lack of balance to be found in the structure of power within the church itself.

An indistinctness between different ministries, between professions or between staff and elected representatives, will restrain and hold the diaconal work back. A political, prophetic diakonia is about pointing out injustices wherever they are exercised. This shows the importance of theological reflection closely linked to the perspective of praxis.

It is an obvious challenge to the church to attack and fight against, unrighteous situations of life and the reasons and origin of this injustice, on a local, as well as on a global level.

Prophetic diakonia exercises faithfulness to the promise of the equal value of every human being and his/her dignity and sanctity. The prophetic vocation entails to reveal injustices and to fight for and defend justice, including human rights.

Diakonia has a call to build bridges, as well on the local as on the global level. Diaconal work should be a step ahead and maintain a holistic perspective – that is, to bring together, praise and grace with rights and justice and care.

All this said as a background...

So when it comes to the questions:

- 1) Vårsta Diaconal Centre is an independent foundation affiliated to the Church of Sweden with the aim of promoting Christian social and diaconal work. Vårsta is located in Härnösand, Sweden (in the middle of Sweden, 450 km above from Stockholm). We have 25 employed staff and about 10 people doing work as consultant.



- Develops practical diaconal and social work often in co-operation with others
- Is a centre of diaconal knowledge, pastoral counselling and family counselling
- Responsible for a crisis- and catastrophe center with national and international work, for ex psychosocial work in international disasters and work with people suffering from PTSS
- Work with people that has been without work for a long time, also young people and refugees as well as with people with psychological handicap, called our green rehabilitation while it is conducted in a large garden

- Work with people who needs work practice and for that we also holds a small social company
- Running two homes for elderly (53 apartments), with no care like in a hospital but offers light support and encourage fellowship
- Co-operates with churches, organizations and commercial companies
- Offers a diaconal environment and have guest rooms as well as a conference center.

2) We cooperate with all congregations in the diocese mainly with our family counselling work. We have five centers were congregations can submit people (couples and individuals) in need of counselling. The diocese puts in some money and so do every congregation as well as there is a small fee for people. Secondly we also support and educate employed people in the congregations concerning how to handle crisis and catastrophe (in large as well as in small). This education is also open for people from other dominations (people employed by hospital, police or emergency service).

When it comes to global activities we support and educate all congregations of the Church of Sweden, both national and abroad, in how to handle crisis and catastrophes and acts of terrorism.

We are also connected to a network of diaconal institutions inside Europe and the main activity inside that network in lobbyism and political social information.

3) We get a small amount of money from collections from some congregations or voluntary gifts from small groups inside congregations. We also get a small amount of money from individuals. But the major part of the money that makes the foundation running is money that we earn from projects or procurement (authorities or other is buying our services).

For example we sell supervision to a lot of authorities (inside municipality as well as staff inside prisons), we sell education to staff working with refugees and “newcomers” suffering from PTSS. We sell placements to employment office in the municipality for people that have been away from labor market and the work is about to help people find their motivation (and power) again (empowerment!).

4) We do not have a lot of voluntary people connected to our work, except for the board conducting the foundation. They support our work with putting in their expertise and time.

When we are asked to do so we conduct further education directed to voluntary people inside diaconal service inside congregations.

If you want me to describe how congregations inside the Church of Sweden is working with their voluntary people just tell me and I will complete my presentation.

5) Our challenges of today is two folded:

Firstly inside the Church...

There is a Swedish saying, "to have a stone in your shoe", meaning to become aware of something that is disturbing and unpleasant. It is part of the deacon's call and as well as

diaconal institutions role to be a harsh eyeopener, a challenge to comfort, my own comfort and the comfort of the congregation and the Church.

To most of us it is probably easier to gather and sing a hymn, listen to a sermon and pray together, rather than thinking about what the hymn, sermon and prayer actually challenge us to do. One among the tasks of the deacon, is to make the congregation aware of this connection (ora et labora), and arouse the question, how can I contribute my share? This becomes strikingly obvious when the deacon stands up during service pointing out local challenges, sometimes just outside the entrance of the church, - a temporarily living of baggars in the street, housing for asylum in a terrible condition, lacking almost everything that makes it a home, children at risk becoming homeless, poverty among elderly, scarcely having means for a proper meal a day. How often isn't it that we become blind to what is obvious?

The challenge of the deacon as well as a diaconal institution is to inspire and lead the congregation to become a vibrant community, caring for each other in prayers as in praxis. This service will always challenge our comfort and there is a risk that we choose to close our ears and eyes. That is why it is essential to look upon the Ministry as one body connecting theology, liturgy and diakonia. Likewise, the Church is one body, encompassing all the children of God, with their resources and needs.

And secondly the role of our diaconal institution is to call upon the needs of people in the society by marking out fields of work that "nobody" really is taking care of. Marking out were people (individuals or groups) is not being rightly taken care of.

Today we are fighting to be able to open a home/house for people arriving to Sweden right now with PTSS (new arrives migrants with trauma and other war damages). Especially young women with or without children and homosexuals. These categories are people suffering most also arriving to Sweden and forced to live in sometimes bad conditions (together with mostly young men from all over the world). Our aim is to have a home were we also can offer treatment, psychological social support etc.

So for me as the director of Vårsta the challenge is always to listen to the call from God as well as what the context (the society and people of today) demands from us.

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