

# **Diaconal education in Slovakia - ways to the missionary renewal of the Church**

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Let me first make an introductory statement on the title of this contribution. Both diaconal education and the missionary renewal of the church represent instruments, or ways, toward a higher goal.

What is the ultimate goal? How do we define the goal of diaconal education in the Church? What is the final goal of diaconal work of the Church in a civic society in which there are many other agents of social care?

The title of this contribution does not speak about this ultimate goal. But I believe it is important to state it clearly at the beginning of this lecture. It is necessary in order to avoid any misunderstanding.

We do not want to speak today simply about instruments which will become goals in themselves. We do not want to discuss the issue of diaconal education in order to have good programs and schools at which diaconal education is being carried out only so that we can be proud of them. And we do not want to analyze the means of missionary renewal of the Church in order to be fascinated by the inner processes of Church renewal.

We need diaconal education as one important contribution to, and a sign of, the Church's renewal because Christ living in our Churches and in our hearts wants to continue His saving and healing ministry. He wants to do this through us. He wants to do this for the individuals in our countries, in their particular situations. Christ wants to continue His mission through His *diaconia* in homes, on the streets or in the houses/institutions that will be able to minister to the needy and suffering. And He wants us to help society to grow, so that we will be closer together to the ideal of the Kingdom of God that Christ has brought to us.

Our ultimate goal in diaconal education, therefore, is to mobilize and use our talents, our charismas in the continuing mission of God in our world. The target, the object of diaconal education, and the church renewal that is closely related to it, is the suffering sister and the suffering brother, who needs help even if he or she does not know the complexity of his or her problem.

## **1. *Diaconia* is an inseparable component and a driving force of mission.**

According to the LWF mission statement "Together in God's mission: An LWF contribution to the understanding of mission" (Geneva 1988, p.5), the character of mission is determined by two fundamental themes:

- Mission is the ongoing saving work of God, the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.
- Mission is God's mandate to God's people to participate in this continuing saving work.

The Church is invited to do this mission of God in proclamation of the Word (evangelism) and in ministering to the suffering people of God (*diaconia*) regardless of their present political, moral, confessional, or social attitudes. The call for holistic mission means a permanent need to adjust the present forms of mission and the structures of the missionary Church (see more in the LWF Mission statement, p.22). Let us deal now with the one that is, I believe, missing most in the holistic character of mission.

*Diakonia* as the sign of the permanent, concrete and responsible love of God through the Church to people in need represents proof of the mission of the Church. For our region of

Central and Eastern Europe (and certainly not only for us) it means in the present time, I believe, first of all the following:

- To overcome a misunderstanding that is widespread (also, e.g., in the state-church situation: in Scandinavia and elsewhere), that social care is a task of the state and the role of the Church is only to accompany it in a pastoral way.
- To develop instruments of congregational and institutional *diakonia* which will allow the Church to contribute to the social care activities of society, and thus to confess Christ in expressing love to people in their physical, social and spiritual needs.
- To learn how to follow Christ in diaconal ministry. To develop programs of diaconal education answering the mandate of the Church and facing the social challenges of society. *Diakonia* has been described in a very convincing way by Ernst Lange as “the basic model of following Christ” (Lange Ernst: Ein anderes Gemeindebild. Erwägungen zum Problem der Kirche und Gesellschaft in Aufsätze zur Theorie des Kirchlichen Handelns, München, Gelnhausen 1981, pp. 177-194). It is basic because it is a mandate for every Christian. And it is basic because it always refers to the third person, the one in need. Christ wants to be followed through our love for “the least of these His brethren” (Mt 25:40).
- To show that to follow Christ means to give preference to the love of suffering people before our own institutional security and interests.

The missionary success, for example, of the early Church was exactly based on such a sacrificial character of love motivated by Christ and accompanied by the verbal witness to Christ.

Let me mention an example for this. Tertullian of Carthage reported a typical pagan observation toward Christians in his apology at the beginning of the third century AD. Pagans observed how Christians love each other, and not only that. They saw that the Christians were able to give comparably much more to the Church than what those who were not Christian gave to the official cult. But there was one more thing that was even more challenging. The collections made by the Christian congregations were used first of all to care for the poor, the orphans, the old, the prisoners and the needy who lived in their surroundings, and not to keep their own religious organizations running, as the heathen cults did (see more in Thraede Klaus: Soziales Verhalten und Wohlfahrtspflege in der Griechisch römischen Antike in: Diakonie – Biblische Grundlagen, p. 46).

## 2. The context of our mission in Slovakia / the context of diaconal education.

### 2.1. Heritage of the past – the Church without *diakonia*.

Around the year 1948 all the social diaconal institutions of the Churches were socialized in Slovakia. The Church was not supposed to offer such services. The socialist state in Slovakia had the ambition to be the only actor for the social care of its citizens. We know that this also was caused by an ideological goal of the system. It wanted to weaken the witness of the churches, and ultimately get rid of Christian faith and Christian churches. The churches without *diakonia* act only through words. They do not contribute to the visible solution of the needs of their people. In the past, before 1989, diaconal work in our country only could be done individually, without any organizational support.

The planners of the “socially just world” saw a place for the Church in socialist society in the following statement: **“The Church should satisfy the religious needs of citizens but shouldn’t ‘disturb’ others.”**

The Church’s existence in a socialist society was justified for the communist leaders by the fact that there were still some citizens who have religious feelings and opinions. Since they did proclaim the democratic nature of this society, these citizens were supposed to be

entitled to the religious services of the Church. According to this strategy **the aim of the churches' work should be only to satisfy the religious needs of citizens.**

Therefore the Church was allowed only to serve those who asked for services. It was at the same time watched and limited in its activities in order not to engage in mission, which was understood as disturbing those who don't ask for any religious services, since they have no religious needs. In order to fulfill this goal, the Church was not allowed to do evangelistic programs outside of the church buildings (or even inside of them) or to do any organized diaconal work. And diaconal work could not exist in any institutions of *diaconia*. External mission outreach was not allowed.

The planners of the gradual termination of the Church knew that if the Church only serves its own believers, and doesn't engage in any renewal and mission work, it will diminish and finally cease to exist.

This situation has been, for Christian theology and the Church, a powerful learning experience until now. If we had, through our programs in our congregations, only the goal to serve those who ask for services, we would be fulfilling the program of the communists: gradual dissolution of the Church.

The Church was pushed out of any socially and culturally relevant activity. It was supposed to be seen from the point of view of society as a useless organization that only deals with spiritual issues, without any relevance to reality.

There were, however, strong signs of the spiritual vitality of the faith under communism in our churches. Visitors from the west admired the churches often filled with people of all ages. There also was some room for activities of the Church in the socialist society ruled by the communist party. To use this opportunity to its limits, and to surpass these limits by our vigorous faith, was a challenge to the faith of many pastors.

The experience of the churches that lived under these conditions is therefore the following: if we only would serve those who come with their religious needs, if we organize our program in such a way that the program for our own members absorbs 100% of our time and energy, if we set aside the Great commission of Jesus Christ to "go and make disciples all nations...", if we only engage in mission by words and have no time for mission by deeds, and that means the complete mission according to the will of God, then we will be found guilty of acting according to the law of death and not according to the law of the living spirit of Christ. We also will know that those who planned the destruction of the Church before 1989 would be pleased with us.

## 2.2. **The present need and the present place for the churches' involvement in the social ministry of our country.**

Let me now spell out some of the basic changes that occurred after the fall of the totalitarian communist regime. **We could simply say that the Church lives today in an open, civic society.**

**The Church's influence on the life of our society is growing.** In Slovakia and probably also in other countries of our region after the fall of totalitarian regimes the Churches were invited to participate in the life of the society. We also could say that we are now welcome to be publicly active. We can use our chance. Let me mention a few signs pertaining more specifically to the Slovak situation.

The census in 1991 revealed, after more than 40 years, what we could call a sociological assessment of the Churches' influence in Slovakia. 75% of our citizens belonged to a church, 10% were atheists and 15% did not choose to reveal any church affiliation. Ten years later, in a new census in 2001, about 85% of our people belonged to one of the churches or religious societies (such as the Jewish faith and Jehovah's witnesses). Out of a total 5.3 million population, 3.7 million belong to the Roman Catholic Church, 373,000 to the

Evangelical Lutheran Church, 219,000 to the Greek Catholic Church, 109,000 are Reformed, 50,000 are Eastern Orthodox, 20,000 are Jehovah's Witnesses and nine other Protestant denominations have less than 10,000 members each (see more: Format 15/2003, ISSN 1336-1325, p.14ff.). These results are, after many years of suppression of the churches, a great positive surprise. The tendency of statistical church affiliation is growing.

The churches in Slovakia have received the chance to create spiritual programs in public radio and television. This is done in a spirit of ecumenism. Pastoral care in hospitals, the army, and prisons all have become new opportunities for the mission of the churches. As well, the churches have tried to regain their position in public schools. Today at all state schools up to grade 12, religion taught by a representative of a registered Church can be chosen as an elective subject. If a pupil/student does not want to choose any religious education, the compulsory alternative is ethics.

The state and the churches now cooperate in many ways. For this purpose, in addition to laws about churches, new state-church treaties on cooperation have been signed. The Roman Catholic Church started this process of preparation of the treaties. As a subject of international law, they took care of themselves. Our Lutheran Church, being the second largest in the country, did not follow their example. Faithful to our commitment to justice and equal rights from the past centuries, we invited all the rest of the registered Churches and religious societies to join with us in preparation of a treaty with the Slovak republic. The result was that in 2001 eleven Churches and one religious community (Jews) in a festive celebration signed the same text of the treaty, which guarantees the same conditions for our public activities and our cooperation with the state. The signatories on the side of the Slovak republic were: the President of the Slovak Republic, the Chairperson of the Parliament and the Prime Minister. Subsequent new treaties (indicated in the basic treaty) on "The Church schools and education..." and "Pastoral work in the armed forces..." ensued in the following years. The Ecumenical Council of Churches assisted in the entire process.

We can make an account of many positive new steps. We also know that especially in the area of public diaconal ministry and social care in the churches, we achieved much, but in many ways we are still at the beginning of a hopeful process. Are we going to continue or are we going to say, this is probably enough? Are we going to say to ourselves that we cannot do more in any responsible way...seeing our personal and financial capacities...?

Are we going to find courage for more? Are we going to offer more programs of diaconal education in order to invite people, in the name of the One who has sent us into the world, to learn how to be active in our world in His diaconal work?

God gave us freedom. We live in societies without any ideologically based administrative limitations. This is God's merciful gift to us. How are we going to use it? If we say now we should faithfully concentrate on what is the basic standard work of the Church (worship, religious education, pastoral care), we do not want to use this given freedom for the development of the full holistic mission of the Church, which will include intentional and programmatic *diaconia*, if we in the Churches decide to do so, I am afraid we may become the subject of God's judgment.

### 2.3. Ecumenical context of diaconal work and diaconal education.

**For the mission of our Churches to be successful it is important that the Christian Churches declare publicly their unity in Christ.** The people of our region who are looking for spiritual orientation need to see that the Christian Churches are united in Jesus Christ. Otherwise their decision for Christ and courage to join a church or even receive social care from a church diaconal institution might be blocked by the lack of basic unity between Christians.

Quite a few positive results have been reached in the past in Slovakia. Yearly representative ecumenical worship services televised in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, with participation of the highest state representatives, has become a regular tradition. These worship services set an example of unity for society in the beginning of each year. Lutherans signed an agreement with Roman Catholics on the reciprocal acceptance of Holy Baptism. This came into Slovakia as a positive echo to the Joint Declaration on Justification.

I would like to mention one particular ecumenical event because I believe it is significant for the ecumenical and social climate in Slovakia. I would call it the largest ecumenical happening in recent history with an influence on our society. It was the celebration of our inclusion into the European Union. When April 30 was declared by the Slovak Republic to be a day of state celebrations, our Lutheran Church (through the Ecumenical Council of Churches) invited all the other Churches to celebrate it together in an ecumenical worship service. It became the first item on the program of state activities. It was decided that this day be started at 9 am with worship. The invitation was formally expressed by three parties: The Chairperson of the Slovak Parliament, the Chairperson of the Catholic Bishops Conference, Bishop Prof. Tondra, and the Chairperson of the Ecumenical Council of Churches (myself). The worship service was directly televised and broadcast on Slovak radio. It took place in our Lutheran Church in Bratislava which seats 2500, and the Church was full on the morning of a regular working day.

Never before in our country's history did so many politicians, along with the highest representatives of the Churches, regular members of the Churches, public and youth celebrate God in one Church. The worship service had the theme: Let us share our faith in the European Union. The Roman Catholic weekly reported on its first page under the headline: "Through the doors of the Church into the European Union" (Katolícke noviny May 2004, p. 1).

*Diaconia* needs positive ecumenical support for its development. **Diaconal study programs are an excellent platform for ecumenical cooperation.** Our Lutheran diaconal study programs are generally open to students from other churches. The use of experts from other confessional church bodies in educational programs is also coming in the near future.

#### **2.4. Education for social care is a challenge to the educational systems of Slovakia.**

Without being specific, I would like to state that social care studies became very popular in Slovakia recently. Most of the existing universities, if not all of them, are offering new social care programs. Often, further specializations are developed to reflect the specialization of the requested services.

The graduates have many options when looking for employment. They can knock on the doors of state run institutions, offices of communal and state administration of the social care system, private and the church run institutions, or try to establish a new institution or a program.

The organizations established by non-state founders are entitled to receive the same type of subsidy for a client as a state run organization. Legislation is being updated, and the process hopefully will improve.

### **3. Theological principles for diaconal education.**

#### **3.1. Diaconal education should be guided by the understanding of mission as accompaniment.**

The LWF in its recent document "Mission in context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment" (LWF Geneva 2004) considers this model to be the best at this time. The Emmaus road encounter (Luke 24:13-49) was selected as the model that speaks for and enlightens a hermeneutical spiral approach to mission, an approach that is reflective of the

interaction between contexts, theology and practice (i.e., the resurrected Christ was recognized by the two apostles after a long journey, during which Jesus listened to them, asked them many questions, and had fellowship at the table and shared bread with them).

**3.2. Diaconal ministry witnesses to the One who has commissioned for service.**

This happens, however, **respecting the freedom** of the suffering and needy neighbour (or to express it in another way: acknowledging the lack of freedom of the one dependent on the services rendered).

**3.3. Diaconal education gives the Christian faith the necessary arms for action.**

Diaconal education has to offer all of the necessary social, sociological, and psychological expertise. Its specific opportunity (*proprium*), however, is in deepening the Christian motivation for ministry, awakening Christian mercifulness, empowering for sacrificial love, and opening the communion of those involved in *diaconia* as the servants and the served.

**3.4. Diaconal education encourages development of new forms of diaconal ministry and establishment of new institutions.**

In this way it contributes to the growth of diaconal work and thus the continuation of mission, and shows hope for the future.

The decisive role of an individual with courage and competence for the development of *diaconia* and the relation to the communion of the Church has been often seen with gratitude to God in the history of the Church.

A prominent example: In Modra, Slovakia, in 1905, after a decision to establish a Lutheran orphanage by the Western district of our Church, a widow living alone in a house asked for children. "Where are the children? I want to take care of them." In this way the orphanage was established and grew successfully in the following decades, receiving support from all over the country.

## **4. Forms of diaconal education in Slovakia.**

### **4.1. Congregational level.**

**Evangelical *diaconia* of The Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovakia** has supported congregations in their diaconal efforts through education in several ways:

- Workshops for co-workers and members of congregations.
- Publication of a handbook on care for the sick and elderly in the congregation, "Old age and sickness" (authors: Zuzana Kolárovská, Marie-Luise Rieger, Barbara Haug). The book contains theological motivation, psychological and sociological analysis and instruction on many practical ways of treatment and care. Two thousand copies were produced.
- A publication on pastoral ministry in the hospitals has been produced and widely distributed (Authors: Miriam Prášilová, Lydia Ileninová).
- The Bible School in Martin educates lay co-workers for congregations. The third (last) year of the study program focuses on diaconal studies.
- Religious instruction at schools contains instruction on the basics of diaconal issues as part of the regular study plan.

### **4.2. Secondary school level.**

An attempt was made to develop education of nurses in a state school for nurses. After a few years the program was discontinued. Initially the hope behind this effort was that it would be possible to renew education of deaconesses through this process.

### **4.3. Diaconal education on the university level as part of theological education.**

In the past the Evangelical theological faculty focused on education for future pastors. Today, since freedom for the mission of the Church in society has been opened, the faculty has developed further programs. The following important findings were decisive:

- We realized that it is now our duty “to equip the saints for the work of edifying the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12). That means we should also educate other co-workers of the Church (i.e. teachers and diaconal co-workers). The Church also received a church law showing ways how non ordained co-workers should be part of the Church’s mission.
- Christians should serve not only through church run institutions, but also through any other legal and morally acceptable organisations and programs in society. These Christians also need their education, especially if they are preparing for the social care or teaching ministries. Graduates of any program of the theological faculty can also look for jobs in other institutions.
- The time has also come for us to cooperate with experts in other educational programs supporting social care and teaching ministries. This was not possible in the past due to ideological restrictions.

**The following programs have been established and submitted for accreditation:**

**4.3.1: An “Evangelical social *diaconia*” bachelor degree (day program planned for 6 semesters),** started in September 2005. Presently we have a total of 18 students in three years. Three groups of subjects are taught here:

**Theological subjects:**

Students attend a selection of theological courses together with students preparing for the ordained ministry and studying for other purposes.

**Diaconal courses:**

Theological fundamentals of *diaconia*, history of social work, the deaconate as an established ministry of the Church, congregational *diaconia*, institutional *diaconia* (both elaborating on the challenges and ways of providing adequate care for e.g. the aged, disabled, poor), the organization of social care in Slovakia and the EU.

**Social care disciplines:**

Special pedagogical subjects, psychological subjects, basic care and treatment are being offered. Experts from the faculties of Pedagogy and Medicine are teaching these courses at the theological faculty (the advantage of being part of the University).

4.3.2. The previous program, after its first experiences, has been redrafted and submitted for accreditation under the name “**Social Ministry**” in September 2007.

4.3.3. The same study program “**Social Ministry**” **has been developed as “studies by extension”** and submitted for accreditation in September 2007.

4.3.4. The Master’s program “**Management of Social Aid**” (**planned for 4 semesters. a day form study**), a combination of study retreats with lectures and workshops during weekends and e-learning, has been developed in cooperation with the Faculty of Management of Comenius University. The components of this program are: theological and socio-diaconal subjects, 9 different courses from the Faculty of Management, and supervision training in four semesters in cooperation with the Society for Inter-cultural Pastoral Care and Counseling in Düsseldorf. We hope to be allowed to receive students for these new programs next year.

**Our experiences so far have shown the following:**

- The students who have been enrolled into the program have mostly shown since the early beginning of their studies a strong zeal for diaconal ministry.
- Their relationship to congregations of ECAV was not always evident.
- The students became part of the campus “student congregation” and were involved in the process of the spiritual growth.

- Parallel internships in diaconal institutions became very beneficial.
- Through the advertisement of the program and newspaper articles, awareness of the diaconal responsibility of the Church as an important part of its mission has been growing.

Questions about the future use of this education have been directed by the students to the Church first, then to other existing social care institutions in Slovakia, and also to the broader EU context.

The inter-disciplinary approach has brought a stronger awareness of the need to cooperate with other people of good will in ministering the needy.

Diaconal education in the framework of the theological faculty and under the Great Commission of Jesus Christ has become a vivid invitation for Christians to participate in God's mission.

In such a way diaconal education contributes to the renewal of the Church, learning about the crucial importance of *diaconia* for the holistic mission of the Church.

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