

For the Healing of the World – diaconal cooperation in the region

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We are meeting not far away from Bratislava to speak about diaconal cooperation in our region. Having this in mind, I think that the only acceptable way to start is to quote the Bratislava Declaration: „Diaconia contributes to the awakening and activation of the God given gift humans have to love and live in solidarity.” This definition of diaconia indeed speaks of healing of humans and through them of the world. Healing as a process which awakes in individuals those gifts which are granting them the identity of God’s children.

Representatives from European diaconal institutions met in Bratislava already in 1994 to develop a vision of diaconia in Europe. The document “Towards a vision of diaconia in Europe” is now known as the Bratislava Declaration and initiated a process that resulted in the formation of the European Diaconal Forum. Since then a lot has been said and written about areas and ways of cooperation. We need to keep this in mind when we start discussions to this topic in our regional context.

Therefore I consider it for necessary first to call to our attention the process which is already going on in Europe as far as it comes to diaconal cooperation.

Then I would like to present some theological reflections about diaconal cooperation and church as communio.

Finally I will try to identify a couple of challenges for diaconal cooperation in the region of Central and Eastern Europe.

Towards a vision of diaconia in Europe – an invitation to join a process

Bratislava Declaration in 1994 envisaged a process which since then has become a reality. Following sentences describe the main elements of this process:

"A strategy for diaconia in Europe will emphasise ecumenical co-operation between the different participants, from the local level to the international level. ... This includes, among others: strategic efforts to build a European platform or 'round table' which could promote reflection, spiritual dialogue, the sharing of experience, deepen analysis, co-ordinate resources and action and concentrate efforts on points of urgent need."

The governing bodies of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) have taken up this impulse. In its meeting in Barcelona, 20-24 March 1999, the Presidium of CEC accepted the proposal of the CEC Interim Commission "Churches in Solidarity" to develop the work in the area of diaconia "along the lines of a European Platform on Diaconia". In its meeting in September 1999 in Nyborg, the Central Committee of CEC confirmed these plans.

Since the first all European Diaconal Consultation held in Bratislava in 1994 many rapid changes in the region took place. A need for a wide dialogue about the nature of the challenges and the ways in which diaconia can meet them emerged. The Conference of European Churches (CEC) therefore launched the concept of a Diaconal Forum, which would enable a dialogue about new challenges, new tasks and new strategies for diaconia in Europe. The Forum was not envisaged as a new structure but as a space for dialogue and for the development of analysis and reflection that would lead to new agreed priorities. It was not

supposed to meet regularly, only from time to time as needs emerge. It is essentially a collaborative venture, co-organised by CEC, Eurodiakonia and The European Contact Group on Urban Industrial Mission. The planning group also included representatives of the Churches Commission on Migrants in Europe. The first meeting of the forum took place from Sept. 26 – 29, 2001 in Järvenpää/Finland.

Four areas were identified in the preparatory process which then were dealt with in four working sections of the Järvenpää meeting: 1. Values of work and employment; 2. Migration and mobility; 3. Sustainable communities; 4. Quality of life for all.

The findings of the Järvenpää meeting are vital for any discussion about diaconal cooperation. Therefore I will take this opportunity to bring them to our mind (based on Remarks from the final plenary, Järvenpää).

Diaconia is and should be a mark and attribute of the church and of every organization, a guiding motif for its mission. In some cases there are new efforts to ground congregations which are expressly diaconal in their orientation, seeking new ways to engage with the excluded and marginalized people, involving them in the total life of the church. In this way worship and liturgy move from the private to the public sphere, challenging and celebrating, worshipping and serving.

Diaconia is a mark and attribute of the church, but it also finds other expressions. For example so called institutional diaconia finds its place especially amongst those who need total care or shelter (asylum in its true meaning). But in societies, which previously only knew institutions as places to 'store' or punish those who do not fit the ideal type, institutions can be sign of a new society in action. Double strategies can be important. On the one side to influence the policies and staff training of the state institutions, on the other to demonstrate different ways of action and caring and to provide for choice. The involvement of lay people in developing and managing such initiatives as well as in non-paid work can also be seen as an important route for the strengthening of civil society. Furthermore, we should not underestimate the possibility for such diaconal institutions to be a base for supporting other social actions and social movements.

A second expression of 'diaconia outside the congregation' is the work of urban and industrial mission and of community work. This starts with people in their living and working situation and seeks to work with them on the most important issues that affect them in their living and working places. It is a form of pastoral action, which is involved in working with people to build their own self-organisations and to take their own initiatives. This work with 'forgotten people and in forgotten places' is also a form of civil society building. But the organisations are focused partly on survival strategies, partly on working for change (political or institutional) and partly on creating alternatives. Here new forms of celebration and liturgy may emerge and new forms of inter-faith dialogue take root.

Diaconia may be congregationally based or may be in some way 'outside the congregation' but the Forum identified some of the marks of diaconia for our times. We should strive to make diaconal initiatives sustainable and focus them on developing actions with people, personally and in groups or neighborhoods. This was already an emphasis in Bratislava. Diaconia should be contextual - related to cultures and local situation. International networking and learning is important but each context demands its own specific response. The focus of diaconia is on those who are marginalized and excluded and on the basis of its engagement diaconia should

encourage movement for change in church and society and in some cases, diaconia is a movement itself in church and society. Diaconia has the task of challenging and naming injustice as well as working with those who suffer from injustice.

Diaconia is grounded in liturgy (or as the Orthodox traditions have it, it is the 'liturgy after the liturgy'). On the other hand, as discovered in the Forum, there are many ways in which diaconia can have its own impact on the liturgy when diaconal concerns are integrated into congregational spirituality. The conviviality (hospitality) which diaconia seeks in its action in society may also stimulate new forms of celebration and liturgy, including new forms of inter-faith celebration. And as we experienced, liturgy may become a public proclamation of faith in an inclusive spirituality and community life, combining public witness, celebration and challenge.

Diaconia is based on communication and participation. In every aspect of diaconia, interpersonal, institutional and social the element of communication is fundamental. The values of diaconia must influence the style of communication. The aim is for communication to be open, without coercion and for it to be 'horizontal'. It means we must be critically open to the use and abuse of power and position. Such a form of communication seeks to value the other and gives priority to the participation of people and groups in the defining of their own situation and in developing the responses. This communication model is an important corrective to the use of power by many political economic and social institutions and it is an important witness of diaconia in the struggle to preserve and enhance human dignity.

Finally, diaconia has a task towards the wider society, towards the fundamental economic, political and cultural structures that shape life. This is partly expressed through the advocacy functions of diaconia. It is also expressed in partnerships with civil organisations and with groups and movements built up by diaconia. We could express it as the function of diaconia working both with and on behalf of those it seeks to serve. This role encompasses naming and challenging injustices on every level, locally, nationally and internationally. It means addressing the huge disparities of income and wealth, which mark the globalising economy, but it also means advocating the cause of those who are excluded because of race, gender, ability or age. It points to the need for all to change in order that all may live in dignity and it counters the dominant view that only those who are marginalized have the need for personal change. This action goes to the root values of modern culture and rests on our fundamental belief in the equality of people before God and of people as made in the image of God. Human dignity is indivisible.

The Järvenpää conference was followed by two follow up meetings. One in Stuttgart, November 2001 and the second in Brussels, December 2002. A third one was scheduled for October 2003. Due to the short notice upon which I was preparing this paper, I was not able to obtain the materials from the last meeting. The two follow up meetings narrowed down the wide stream of diaconal issues named in Järvenpää to three areas of possible cooperation: 1. reflection on Diaconia and the Diaconate; 2. Securing Quality of Life for All – Care in a “Market Driven“ service society; 3. Inclusion/Exclusion/Social and Human Rights: The Struggle for a Social Europe.

One part of this process is also the open hearing on diaconia which took place during the Trondheim CEC Assembly in June 2003. It stressed that Europe needs a human and social face. Only then European citizens will feel at home in the larger European Union and only then the nations within and out of the Union will reach a sustainable living together.

Those who attended the hearing were challenged by questions like: What does this mean for diaconia and its co-operations in the European context? What does “Quality of life” mean in the context of a wider European diaconal work in churches and institutional diaconia, in grassroot-groups as well in platforms? And what does “Quality of Life” mean concerning to the situation of jobless people and migrants? Among these the leading question was: How can we struggle for a good relationship between solidarity and competition facing commercialization of social services and services of general interest. Special attention was also given to Central and Eastern Europe.

So far the process in place. I am eager to hear from you, in what way the process has affected your churches and diaconal institutions? Where are the strong and where the weak points of the process? In what way is it responding to the specific needs of the Central and Eastern European region?

Diaconial cooperation as an instrument for strengthening our communio

Let me use here a well known Biblical example from Pauline letters which speaks of communication between the local churches. In 2 Cor 8-9 we read about the relief which the church in Corinth gave to the poor church in Jerusalem. In a shorter form we read about this early diaconal cooperation in R 15,25-27: “first, however, I must take a present of money to the saints in Jerusalem, since Macedonia and Achaia have decided to send a generous contribution to the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. A generous contribution as it should be, since it is really repaying a debt; the pagans who share the spiritual possessions of these poor people have a duty to help them with temporal possessions.” The closest indication we possess about the earliest practice of communion and participation is found in Paul’s directives to the Corinthians concerning their participation in the collection for the Jerusalem church: “On the first day of the week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up... so that contributions need not be made when I come” (1 Cor 16,2). With an explicit reference to the Romans Paul himself delivered the collections handed over to him “properly” (Rom 15,25) and made it more explicitly to the Jerusalem community that the collection is a sign and symbol of unity – koinonia – communio.

The motif behind this collection is the koinonia, the communion, that binds gentile churches together with the Jewish churches of Judea. This mutual sharing of spiritual goods coming from the older Jerusalem church, and of material goods, coming from the richer gentile churches symbolizes and strengthens the bond of communion that made them one church. If the local churches are not to be recoiled to themselves, if they are ready to open themselves for giving a share for receiving a share, all the local churches who are in difficulties will inevitably have a new vitality and perspective into the future.

Koinonia – communio is a gift of God in Jesus, because one establishes that with God on the basis of his personal koinonia with Jesus Christ. In the mind of Paul, human beings have a share in the koinonia which is the gift of God. The gift of God, however, consists in sharing with the other, and this is very significant for Paul’s theology of the local church. Each local church has part or share in the whole goods of salvation and each local church must contribute to the mutual upbuilding of the whole good of salvation. The local community is called to give itself away in love to others. Each local community is called to love the other local communities. For the same koinonia which lies at the heart of the local church grounds the union of one community with other communities. The blessings given to one local community, whether spiritual or physical, are in fact the good of all the other local

communities. Each church shares in the goods of all. The koinonia among individual Christians is continued in the koinonia among churches. And what concerns the koinonia-communio between the local churches are: common tradition, love, peace, brotherliness and hospitality We can not enter into a genuine koinonia without taking into account our fellow beings.

New theological investigation sees koinonia no longer independent from diakonia, but interdependently, qualificatively and inseparably related to it. (*Ottmar Fuchs: Die einigende Verantwortung des kirchlichen Amtes; in Miteinander: Für die vielfältige Einheit der Kirche, Basel/Freiburg/Wien, 1992, 309-310*). Diakonia, martyria and leiturgia are connected with koinonia and complement each other. Koinonia is the communal social ground or sphere of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, of service of God and of mankind. A local church realizes herself fully when it is a diaconal church. In the ecclesiology of Bonhoeffer we read: "The church is only the church when it is there for other people".

Koinonia and diakonia are related and are like two inseparable twins. The church as koinonia is called to share not only in the sufferings of its own community but also in the suffering of all humanity, by advocating and caring for the poor, the needy and the marginalized, by promoting responsible stewardship of creation and by keeping alive hope in the hearts of humanity. Therefore koinonia-communio in the sufferings of the poor and marginalized in our region means establishing koinonia-communio of churches in our region.

Challenges for diaconal cooperation in the region

New situation after May 2004

Some of our countries in Eastern and Central Europe have grown closer in perspective to the European Union. This factor plays an important role determining the development of relations between governments and churches/diakonia, both within the various countries and in their partnerships across borders. This is a very complex phenomenon, as it implies not only the integration of diakonia into the social welfare systems of states, but also new challenges and requirements. Especially the issue of current legal status of diaconal institutions in different countries joining the EU has to be taken into account. A process of fundamental changes may expect some diaconal institutions especially in those states where the position of the churches in the legal system will be weakened. Also the issue of non-church based charitable organizations is emerging in the accession states. What relationship will church based diaconal institutions find with them? Will it be one of competition or of cooperation?

At the same time there are other countries in Eastern and Central Europe which are very low on the EU candidate list, if they are on it at all, and often do not yet have sufficient legislative bases for diaconal development. These phenomena create a new dividing line within Europe, and don't contribute constructively to the diaconal exchange within Eastern and Central Europe.

Strengthening the role of churches in shaping the social and cultural profile of the society.

The communist regime quite successfully pushed the churches out to the margin of social processes. Religious people in our society are either conservative believers who have the tendency to separate themselves from all processes in the society. Or they see the role of religious faith only in maintaining certain traditional profile of the family. Others do not believe in any ability of the church to effectively and positively contribute to the

transformation of the society. Churches have to redefine their role in the society and persuade all types of religious believers about the potential of the church to participate in the transformation process of the society.

As an inspiration and example how churches can respond to this challenge, I would like to mention the “Sozialwort der Kirchen” in Austria. A four years long process collecting data from the grass roots level of the diaconal work ended in a publication of a 100 page document addressing the most burning social issues in the Austrian society today – from unemployment, through the power of media to the question of migrant workers. I believe that this is a good step towards diaconal self-reflection of every church in every country. At the same time it is a good opportunity for regional cooperation in which diaconal institutions may exchange the findings of the data collection process and benefit from them as they design strategies for their respective countries.

Social inclusion of the Roma people

Sociologists agree (M. Kováč: Church and Religiosity of Roma People, Bratislava, Inštitút pre verejné otázky 2002) that Roma people can be divided in two groups as far as their religious behavior is concerned. One group can be defined as religiously passive, integrated in traditional confessions of the majority population. The influence of church institutions on this type is minimal. The second group is religiously very responsive and reacts enthusiastically to all new religious impulses. These people tend to undergo through several conversions in a few years period and their confession has several layers. In general religiosity is considered to be one of the most important parts of personal and social life of Roma people. Sensitive addressing of this fact from the side of churches and their diaconal institutions might develop a strong potential among Roma people for social transformation in this part of our societies.

Decreasing funding from partner organizations

Finally the issue of decreasing financial support from partner organizations for diaconal work in our region has to be mentioned. In what way can the regional cooperation minimize the negative effects of these developments? How can we help each other in fundraising activities in our own settings? Can successful examples of financial independence on the western European churches be named?

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