

Diaconal mandate

Diakonia (the Greek word for 'service', 'relief', 'support') belongs to the very essence of being church and is an integral part of its mission. The Christian faith proclaims God's commitment to restoring all creation bringing reconciliation in every dimension: material, human, spiritual, and relational. Since the formation of the earliest Christian churches, Christians have preached with words and demonstrated faith and Christian values in care for others and social practice. Preaching and practicing thus forms a dual basis of witness to Christian faith. This connection between what the churches are and what they do is called '*diakonia*'. The diaconal mandate refers to the obligation of churches to connect what they are with what they do, that is, to align their actions with their core identity and values.

Among the many Biblical texts concerning *diakonia* it suffices to point out two. In Luke 4:16-21 Jesus identifies an old vision from the Jewish tradition with his own sending, and his proclamation of the Kingdom of God. The sending to the world involves bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming freedom to prisoners, and setting the oppressed free, forgiveness of sins, and healing of physical and social ills. In John 10:10 it is made clear that the Kingdom of God is about life: "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full." These, and other Biblical texts, outline the meaning and motivation of *diakonia* as a response to the brokenness that exists in creation, in human beings, in relationships and in the structures of societies. Churches and individual Christians seek to follow Christ's example by restoring broken relationships in ways that uphold human dignity, promote agency, and protect the rights of all people.

In discussing the context and identity of *diakonia*, the study document *Diakonia in Context* (Nordstokke 2009) points to the crucial aspects of *diakonia*:

- 1. Faith-Based Expression**

Diakonia is a response to faith and discipleship. It is grounded in the Christian belief in God's love and is a natural expression of living out one's faith.

- 2. Church Practice**

Diakonia is integral to the life and mission of the church. It is not an optional activity but a core expression of the church's identity.

- 3. Holistic in nature**

Diakonia affirms that people are not merely economic beings or beneficiaries of aid, but relational, spiritual, emotional, and physical beings created in the image of God.

- 4. Contextual Response**

Diakonia takes its starting point in the lived realities of people—responding to suffering, injustice, and needs in specific social, cultural, and political contexts.

- 5. Seeks transformation**

Beyond service, *diakonia* speaks truth to power and challenges unjust structures. It seeks social transformation and systemic change.

- 6. Inclusive and Community-Building**

Diakonia works to include the marginalized and build just and loving communities. It breaks down divisions and nurtures solidarity.

- 7. Affirms Human Dignity and Promotes Empowerment**

Diakonia recognizes every person's inherent worth and rights, particularly the marginalized. It supports people in becoming active participants and agents of change in their own lives and communities.

8. Part of God's Mission (missio Dei)

Diakonia is part of God's ongoing work of healing and renewing the creation .

Some important organizational and partnership principles and programmatic characteristics follow from this understanding of *diakonia*¹:

- a. Diaconal action is holistic, addressing not only material needs but also the spiritual, emotional, and relational dimensions of life. It recognizes that true transformation involves both external conditions and inner healing. Rooted in faith, *diakonia* integrates service, justice, and care into one united response.
- b. Diaconal action engages local churches and faith-based actors, recognizing and building upon material and immaterial assets of local communities in joint action. Supporting local church and community capacity and using local assets, corresponds with and realizes the foundational calling of all churches and Christians to *diakonia*.
- c. Diaconal actors must ensure that people and communities in situations of crisis and vulnerability are not passive recipients of aid but agents of change in their own lives. They must participate in diaconal actions and decisions affecting their own communities.
- d. Diaconal action, as the church's expression of love and justice in the world, goes beyond meeting immediate needs. It includes both practical service and advocacy, because addressing suffering without challenging the structures that cause it, leaves the deeper problem unresolved. Rooted in a biblical vision of justice and human dignity, *diakonia* seeks not only to relieve symptoms of poverty and oppression but to transform the systems that perpetuate them.
- e. In so far as systems and structures point beyond local perspectives, diaconal action involves both national and international advocacy. This level of engagement often requires engagement in alliances, which in turn may help to enlarge local impact. In all kinds of engagement, though, the diaconal action revolves around local actors.
- f. *Diakonia* takes as point of departure the dignity and integrity of each person to express their faith according to their convictions and traditions. A diaconal approach affirms the rights-based approach where poor and marginalized people and communities are at the center as rightsholders. Therefore, a diaconal action affirms the freedom of religion or belief for all and all other human rights, as expressed in the international conventions UDHR and ICCPR.
- g. Faith-based and rights-based approaches are distinguishable but not exclusive approaches. The relation between faith-based and rights-based approaches is a distinct mark of *diakonia*. The two correspond and the relation is dynamic. The faith-based approach gives depth and passion to human rights, and rights-based approach sharpens the understanding of faith to address e.g. structural challenges. Together, the two approaches correspond in affirming the dignity of every single person.
- h. Diaconal action is and must be unconditional and must not be instrumentalized to become a tool for participation in religious activities. *Diakonia* therefore distances itself from proselytism. By 'proselytism' is meant the use of coercive or manipulative means as a way of converting individuals, pressing them to religious practices or choices. Coercion, manipulation

¹ See *Called to Transformation. Ecumenical Diaconia*, (WCC and Act Alliance 2022) as well as the Act Alliance *Code of Good Practice* (2024):

and pressure violate the dignity of the individual and is always unethical and harmful and contradicts *diakonia*.

- i. Diaconal action must be prepared to clearly articulate its faith-based identity and the role that Christian spirituality and tradition play in shaping its purpose and practice. This includes ensuring that individuals and communities have access to information about the meaning of '*diakonia*', the objectives of the organisation, and the channels available for providing feedback or submitting complaints.

In sum, *diakonia* is holistic, participatory, faith-based, and rights-affirming. It integrates care, justice, advocacy, and service in response to both immediate and structural needs. Rooted in local churches and communities, it prioritizes dignity, transformation, and long-term sustainability.