

Transformative Diakonia in a Rapidly Changing World

Lecture hosted by Stichting Rotterdam, Utrecht, Netherlands

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Introduction

First of all, I want to thank the organizers of this encounter, particularly the Rev. George Hooijer, from Stichting Rotterdam and Professor Herman Noordegraaf, for their very kind invitation to participate here in this gathering. The opportunity to speak in this special occasion is indeed a great privilege and honor both for the World Council of Churches (WCC) and for me in particular. I also want to take this opportunity, when we are closing a period of work at the WCC, marked by our Assembly to thank our Dutch brothers and sisters for all the support provided to our work, especially Stichting Rotterdam and ICCO/Kerk-in-Actie.

As many of you know, the WCC just held its 10th Assembly in Busan, Republic of Korea, during 30 October – 8 November, under the theme: “God of life, lead us to justice and peace”. Among the various activities organized were the ecumenical conversations, which engaged assembly participants in sustained, in depth dialogue on critical issues challenging the churches and the world today. They were rooted in the theme of the assembly and helped participants to discern what it means to be the church together in the world today, seeking justice and peace; and the fullness of life for all creation. The results of the conversations are helping to guide future ecumenical cooperation and work.

Among the 21 ecumenical conversations there was one on diakonia, called: “Compelled to Serve: Diaconal Church in a Radically Changing World”, co-organized with the ACT (Action by Churches Together) Alliance, which we will refer to in this presentation as EC 21. From the brief description of the purpose of the ecumenical conversation we can quote the following: “The purpose of this ecumenical conversation was to invite churches, ecumenical partners and the WCC to a deeper analysis of diakonia and development in a rapidly changing world and to identify its challenges; to reflect

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theologically on the implications of the changing development paradigm, in which the ecumenical movement is compelled to engage and to witness for and serve God. The four sessions provided space for theological, ecclesiological and practical reflection on how these change factors affect churches and specialized ministries. Through group discussions, focus was on vulnerabilities, opportunities and new patterns of cooperation. The background to these discussions was provided through the reading on two key documents: 'The Changing Development Paradigm: An ACT Alliance Discussion Paper' and 'Theological Perspectives on Diakonia in the Twenty-First Century'.

Therefore, once again, our topic for today, "Transformative Diakonia in a Rapidly Changing World" is one of great relevance for the whole *oikoumene*, which I hope we can address collectively. I think that in this point in time, nobody would argue against this proposition that we are living in a rapidly changing world. Where we might have our differences is on the analysis of the causes and consequences of this evolving situation, and not least on how to address it. Therefore, following my presentation, I would like to invite you to have a brief discussion in small *buzz groups* and will reconvene in plenary again for a final discussion and concluding remarks.

In my presentation I will begin by mentioning briefly some examples on how our world is changing, further challenging the diaconal mission of the churches namely, looking how many States are diminishing their social service roles in their respective countries, the increasing flows of migrants and refugees to the global North, and finally, climate change. In a second moment I would like to propose a ***Transformative Diakonia in a Rapidly Changing World***, as celebration of life, as comforting and confronting, and as creative action empowered by the Holy Spirit. The presentation will end with some Conclusions highlighting the ecumenical affirmations and challenges that the participants at the EC 21 in Busan mentioned at the end of their working sessions. Finally, we will propose a question for a brief "buzz-group" discussion.

1. A rapidly changing world.

We are living in a rapidly changing world. Of course, there are positive changes (development of science and technology, communications, education, social media – although we also have to admit that an ample sector of the world's population do not

have access to these services—, life expectancy is raising dramatically, there is more awareness of the need to care for the environment, etc.). But on the other hand, we are experiencing destructive changes which attempt against the project of fullness of life that God, in Jesus Christ (John 10:10), has intended for each and everyone of us.

This situation is indeed unsustainable. I think that Pope Francis in his recently published Apostolic Exhortation *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, under the section “No to an economy of exclusion” describes the situation very accurately. He says in paragraph 53: “Just as the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say ‘thou shalt not’ to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion. Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality. Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape”.

This “economy of exclusion”, “with its narrow focus on self interest”, as it was mentioned in the EC 21, together with other socio-economic-political-environmental factors, further continues to create life-threatening changes in today’s world. I will try to mention just a few examples in order to further analyze how these shifts challenge the role of the churches and church-related organizations in their quest to proclaim, in words and in deeds, the good news of the kingdom of God, which means the fulfillment of “justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17) for the “whole inhabited world”. And here I underline joy, sharing the thoughts of the Latin American theologian Frei Betto, who has said: “Most people do not want to be rich, they want to be happy”².

a) Many States are diminishing their social service roles in their respective countries.

² <http://www.astanaforum.kz/en/press-center/publications/articles/474-frei-betto-values-in-the-post-crisis-economy>

1) Many of us were shocked when last September, in his annual address on the day the government presents its budget, King Willem-Alexander told the Dutch people that they must create their own social and financial safety nets, and that looking to the state for help was a thing of the 20th century. Indeed, we were stunned to hear this since the traditional welfare state has made the Netherlands famous, therefore, how is it possible that it is coming to an end?

Nevertheless, the explanation sounds convincing: “In its place,” he said speaking carefully, a “participation society” is emerging, “in which people must take responsibility for their own future and create their own social and financial safety nets, with less help from the national government.”

The people, he added, “want to make their own choices, determine their own lives and care for each other.” This, the king said, was the reasoning behind the government's decision to decentralize youth services, home care and job creation, amid billions of dollars in cuts.

This is just an example of how the world is changing, and not necessarily for the best. We observe a trend by which the country states or governments, as a result the financial crisis, caused in some cases by neo-liberal policies and privatization tendencies, no longer take the responsibility to provide the basic services to the population. As the report of the EC 21 puts it: there is a “shrinking political space”, which in some cases and contrary to what some politicians may argue tends to “limit the capacity of people and communities to exercise their social and political rights, which are pivotal to sustainable development”, as the mentioned report goes on to say.

2) Another example under the same heading of the diminishing capacity of the States to provide social service is the case of Cuba, of course, for different reasons. My generation, and others close to mine, was raised in a Socialist system where the State traditionally has been providing health care and education, free of charge, jobs, and many services. A couple of years ago, the Cuban president, Raúl Castro, announced, for the first time in 50 years!, that many Cubans would lose their jobs, particularly those serving in State run enterprises that are not profitable. Of course, these un-profitable enterprises create a situation of unsustainability that has been one of our problems for decades.

This problem, has aggravated by the world financial crisis and the US embargo, and even when the President has promised that nobody will be abandoned, it creates a situation of uncertainty. In any case, there is a process of de-centralization of the State-economy and at the same time of empowerment of the civil society, of which the churches are part. In this relatively new situation, the churches are called to serve the people, particularly the most vulnerable, while proclaiming a message of hope that provides meaning for many dis-oriented lives.

b) The increasing flows of migrants and refugees to the global North.

Precisely as a consequence of the worsening of the socio-political-economic-ecological crisis, there are increasing waves of immigrants and refugees both within countries and to the nations of the global North that at the same time create new challenges and crisis. Apart from the whole problem of human trafficking we face the tragedy of so many people that perish in the sea trying to reach “the promised land”, like that recent calamities in the Mediterranean Sea. The BBC News on 8 November announced: “People traffickers tortured and raped African migrants whose boat later sank off Lampedusa with the loss of more than 360 lives, Italian police say”.

Facing this situation, I must say, we admire the great efforts of many churches and church-related organizations, not least here in the Netherlands like ICCO / Kerk-in-Actie and *Casa del Migrante* in Amsterdam, among others. They truly live-out a diakonia that, as our WCC general secretary, Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit has emphasized, is truly a “response of the churches to the suffering of this world”, a diakonia that is an expression of faith that “embodies the signs of God’s reign and makes it visible in all experiences of hope amidst turmoil, in actions that heal and nurture people and relationships”³.

c) Climate change.

The 10th WCC Assembly produced a “Minute on Climate Justice” where it is said: “Climate change is today one of the most challenging global threats affecting especially the most vulnerable. The WCC was among the first to warn about the dangers of climate

³ Speech at the DIAKONIA 21st World Assembly held in Berlin, Germany, 1-8 July 2013, organized by the DIAKONIA World Federation under the theme: Diakonia – Healing and Wholeness for the World”.

change. Now after 20 years of advocacy, churches have helped bring ecological justice into the international debate on climate [...] Despite being a most crucial issue, climate change has lost priority on the public and political agendas. While there are some encouraging signs, nonetheless climate change negotiations at the international level have not realized the stated goals”⁴.

A similar concern was voiced at the recently held 19th Conference of Parties (COP19) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Warsaw, Poland, where representatives of faith communities called for a just climate deal to be adopted by the UN in 2015. Many observers viewing the event from ethical and spiritual perspectives commented that COP19 concluded without fulfilling expectations of the victims of climate change⁵.

2. Transformative diakonia

The WCC organized a global conference on a theology of diakonia for the 21st century held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2-6 June 2012. This conference produced the document “Theological Perspectives on Diakonia in the Twenty-First Century”, which has been mentioned in the announcement of this gathering. The text is divided in four sections, namely: (1) Church, Mission and Diakonia; (2) The Diakonia of the Marginalized People; (3) Diakonia for Transformation; and finally (4) Challenges and Opportunities. From the one on transformation, I will highlight three points, which I think are enlightening as we address today’s theme: ***Transformative Diakonia in a Rapidly Changing World***. We would like to propose a transformative diakonia as celebration of life, as comforting and confronting, and finally as creative action empowered by the Holy Spirit.

a) Transformative Diakonia as celebration of life. Diakonia is service that makes the celebration of life possible for all. It is faith effecting change, transforming people and situations so that God’s reign may be real in the lives of all people, in every here and now. Therefore, diakonia as an action in God’s love must strive to transform people, systems and cultures. God announces judgment upon those who abuse power and deny

⁴ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/minute-on-climate-justice>

⁵ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/faith-communities-advocate-climate-justice-at-cop19-1>

justice to the poor. Jesus too challenged unjust systems and practices and called the powerful and privileged who benefit from such, to repent and be transformed by the values of love, sharing, truthfulness and humility.

Through its diakonia, the Church witnesses to God's purpose in Jesus Christ and participates in God's mission. In its diakonia, the Church follows the way of its Servant Lord who claimed that he came to serve and not to be served (Mark 10:45). In Christ, the Church is called to hold forth the power of service over the power of domination, so that life, in all its fullness, may be possible for all. Therefore, the Church presents itself not only as a sign of the coming reign of God but also of the way leading to it, Christ's way (3).

b) Transformative Diakonia as comforting and confronting. Diaconal ministry also involves both comforting the victim and confronting "the powers and principalities" (Ephesians 6:12). It must heal the victim as well as the one who victimizes. It is a radical spirituality of struggle and commitment for transformation of sinful social structures and for the liberation of their victims. Without transformative work, diakonia would be a mere expression of service, subtly serving the interests of the oppressive and exploitative powers by covering up their complicity. If it does not challenge injustice and abuse of power, it ceases to be authentic diakonia. Diakonia exposes such attempts of the powerful and privileged, often done to sustain the unjust and oppressive status quo. It is prophetic action which also involves speaking truth to powers.

c) Transformative Diakonia as creative action empowered by the Holy Spirit. However, diakonia does not merely resist and confront evil but also proposes alternatives to the ways in which human beings relate with one another and with nature. To that extent, diakonia is transformative (Romans 12:2). Jesus, our Servant Lord, called those who followed him to be the salt of the earth, the light, and the leaven of the world (Matthew 5:13,14); in other words, to be agents of change and transformation. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the diakonia of the early Christian community resisted the power of the Empire by proposing alternative values and visions of the world. Diakonia, then, besides being an expression of support and help to those in need, is essentially a creative action meant to bring about the world God so desires.

Conclusions

At the end of the EC 21 “Compelled to serve: diakonia and development in a rapidly changing world”, the following statement was issued, looking forward to the work after the Assembly: “The participants affirm that churches, ecumenical partners and the WCC:

1. Must continue to network and form alliances across denominations in order to work together and add value to our diaconal work in a rapidly changing development context in which the private sector and new actors are increasingly playing a role in development and in times where migration is changing the global demographics.
2. Must respond to the shrinking political space even where it may be a new role for churches. We must claim our space through common action, advocacy and building awareness together with other faiths in civil society.
3. Must respond to the signs of the times by developing a common diaconal language. We are faith based and rights based and we need to identify what this means in practice including defining our mandate, our core values and to map our diaconal assets.
4. Must be in closer contact with local congregations and support diaconal work at the grassroots level.
5. Must respond to the social impact of gender, economic and climate injustice through networking, developing the capacity for policy analysis, and transnational advocacy in order to promote equitable and sustainable development.
6. Must continue to engage in new ways of biblical and theological reflection in order to reveal and articulate a transformational vision as outlined in the two background documents: ‘The Changing Development Paradigm: An ACT Alliance Discussion Paper’ and ‘Theological Perspectives on Diakonia in the Twenty-First Century’, in order to undergird our diaconal work in a rapidly changing world”.

I will like to end this presentation quoting the last section of the **Message of the 10th Assembly of the WCC**: “We intend to move together. Challenged by our experiences in Busan, we challenge all people of good will to engage their God-given gifts in transforming actions [...] May the churches be communities of healing and compassion,

and may we seed the Good News so that justice will grow and God's deep peace rest on the world". Many thanks!

→ **A question for the buzz groups:** How are the churches in the Netherlands addressing creatively the announcement by the king that the State welfare will be reduced?