



Diaconia – an opportunity to promote courage in Europe today

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Check Against Delivery

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Eurodiaconia is a network of diaconal organisations who provide social and health care services with a Christian basis and who advocate for social justice across Europe. The network has 44 members in 32 countries across Europe and this represents over 30 000 services, local organisations and actors. Our members are drawn from the diaconal departments of churches, are church related providers of social and health care services or ecumenical providers of services or advocates for social justice.

Being specific about categories is never easy in Eurodiaconia – our members are not just service providers and not just social advocates and the relationship between churches and diaconal organisations in some countries is complicated. Nonetheless, our members are committed to social justice in the Christian tradition and care for the most vulnerable in our societies and communities and so from Iceland in the north to Armenia in the southeast, we have a network that shares a common vision as the leading network for diaconal work in Europe, developing dialogue and partnership between members and influencing and engaging with the wider society. We do this to enable inclusion, care and empowerment of the most vulnerable and excluded in our society and ensure dignity for all. It is on the basis of this vision that Eurodiaconia as an organisation has the mission to represent a dynamic, Europe wide community of organisations founded in the Christian faith and working in the tradition of Diaconia, who are committed to a Europe of solidarity, equality and justice.

Eurodiaconia only exists because our members are working daily in all parts of Europe, providing social and health care services to meet the needs of people in all sorts of life situations. We know of the wide provision of services for elderly people, or people with disabilities, or for people experiencing homelessness but there are also services aimed at developing the economic participation of Roma people, services aiming to lessen the on-going trauma of children from conflict zones around the world, services where unemployed young people are given support to

start their own business or develop new skills, and still more. The range and scope of our members' activities is vast.

However, our members are not simply delivering services; they are also being advocates for those they serve, or indeed, empowering people to speak up for themselves, so as to bring about the changes needed to ensure that every person lives in dignity regardless of his or her status. The key to our work in Eurodiaconia is the experience of our members. As an organisation we are effective advocates because our members see the impact of policies and decisions at a micro and macro level because they work every day with the people affected. We also have to accept that in some way or another we may have contributed to how these policies and decisions have evolved. Underpinning all of this is our Christian identity and our common commitment to the provision of services with a clear diaconal approach.

I have been asked to reflect on the theme of courage. In the context of the church and diaconia there are many specifics we could go into about courage but we do not have all day so I have decided to focus on three questions:

- 1) What does courage mean to diaconia and the church?
- 2) Do we have courage?
- 3) and finally, if we have courage, what does that mean for our actions?

Lets take a step back though first of all and look at what is going on around us.

Being a European network we are very aware of the changes that have been blowing through our continent over the past six years. The financial and economic crisis has left behind it a European Union with growing social divergence at a time when there is drive towards increasing economic convergence. This is none more obvious than in the periphery of the European Union where countries such as Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain have seen increased social crisis and higher unemployment rates. Recovery from the financial and economic crisis has been slow and in some places non-existent. The social impact of the crisis has not been contained to temporary unemployment but has seen rising poverty and exclusion, cuts in budgets for essential public services including social and health care services and a mantra of austerity being chanted from Helsinki to Vienna. Even the Nordic social model is under threat! It is true that not every member state has experience the depth of the social crisis felt in some parts of Europe but there is a growing sense that there needs to be a tighter rein on public spending so as to avoid the same fate as some member states have faced.

For Eurodiaconia's members it was and is important not to see the financial and economic crisis as the only cause of the challenges facing people in Europe today. The reality is that the crisis exposed the weaknesses – both structural and circumstantial – that already existed in our society and had been gradually developing over many years. The crisis has exposed the cumulative eroding of values, of rights and ultimately of our concepts of social care and protection. This did not start because of the collapse of several banks; rather we could see that the lack of restraint

shown by banks in their operations was symptomatic of the wider challenges our societies face.

Across our membership there has been an awareness that where social and health care services used to be seen as a right for the general population and where social protection systems were designed to do just that, protect, there is an increasing rhetoric that sees such services and systems as a burden on the public purse and the people who need such support abdicating responsibility for their own well-being. Many members have commented on the increasing conditionality being built into social protection systems when it comes to accessing social transfers and in some cases such systems are coming very close to being punitive rather than protective. The provision of social and health care services is conditioned by the increasing pressure to be competitive in a market which is becoming more and more attractive to profit making entities and where commissioning authorities are often looking for the cheapest service provision rather than the highest quality due to the pressure on their budgets. To some extent this reveals the tensions between the original idea of a social market economy in the European Union and the current reality of recession, austerity and policies of economic growth at any cost.

This changing understanding of our social models in Europe as well as changing understanding and validity of the concept of a social market economy has led to an increasing emphasis on impact and results from social interventions which have been combined with an increased emphasis on the need for innovation in our sector. Whereas innovation is very positive there are times where our members are frustrated by disproportionate weight given to what is new rather than ensuring appropriate and sustainable financing for already existing and proven social services and activities. Additionally, the focus on impact is often in the short term and limited to a particular change such as finding a job, coming of certain social benefits etc. rather than the medium to long term, sustainable support that is both holistic and person-centred – an approach diaconal organisations believe is essential for real transformation, empowerment and reconciliation.

There has also been a change in the political structures. 2014 saw full elections to the European Parliament and many pledges for a European Parliament that would put the needs of the people of Europe first in its new term. Later in 2014 a new European Commission took office also with a commitment to address the human impact of the crisis and deliver growth that would be both fair and productive. By the end of 2014 a new President of the European Council was appointed in former Prime Minister of Poland, Donald Tusk, and the first time an Eastern European had held one of the leading posts of the European Union.

Europe definitely feels like a continent of change. Aside from the political changes and the slow post crisis recovery there are increasing changes in our societies as observed by our members.

Society – a time of change

As already mentioned, there is an increasing rhetoric of burden and justification when it comes to social support now. Whereas once a person with a disability or illness or experiencing a social crisis could expect to be given support until such time as the labour market was accessible or when the life crisis has passed or in some cases for the duration of their lives there is now discussion about how much such support costs and how such individuals are not as 'productive' as others. The inference that a persons' value only comes from their ability to contribute to economic productivity goes against any diaconal understanding of the value and worth of any person. Debating how much one person costs the state against another person puts us in a place where people are simply units of labour rather than part of the rich, multi-faceted make up of our societies that go beyond our employment status and productivity. This emphasis on productivity and people being units of labour has also been a message coming from the European Union in recent years, albeit perhaps not with the intention to de-personalise people, in particular in relation to migrants.

Migration is changing Europe but Europe also needs migration, we always have. Yet our members report that even though migration is encouraged, in particular to fill jobs in specific sectors, including the social and health care sector, migrants, both documented and undocumented face increasing struggles to access services and support that would aid their integration – for some, it would seem we want them to fill jobs but not to fill our communities.

Perhaps this is in some way indicative of where there are broken relationships in our societies. The financial and economic crisis saw a breakdown in trust between many people and the organisations, administrations and structures that were supposed to ensure economic and financial health alongside responsible governance. For many, trust has broken down between traditional structures and authority and in the worst scenario, such breakdown in trust leaves space for extremism and fundamentalism. But the fracturing of relationships is not just between people and state; it can also be between people. As many struggle to make ends meet and avoid an increasing burden of debt, or try to maximise their income through more than one job there can be a greater emphasis on the I rather than the we. Solidarity in our communities and societies is being eroded, perhaps because we are not seeing enough solidarity between member states across Europe but perhaps also as we seek to ensure that our own home, family or situation is secure rather than that of our neighbour.

However this more individualistic view means we can be blind to the existing and emerging gaps in our societies. Across our network members report that there is an increasing number of people whom there is no clear support or service or for whom accessing the social protection system is like a surreal nightmare! Many of our members seek to serve those who have been falling into these gaps but often the services needed are not publically financed and so our members have to be creative in both their provision of the service and in their integration of that service with others.

So where do these changes in our society leave us? It could be understood that from both a positive and negative perspective. Positively, even if it is easy to paint a very bleak picture, there

is a growing understanding of the damaging impact of inequality and exclusion in our societies and the need to ensure social well-being. This is coming from both individuals and civil society as well as from some political quarters with calls for more fairness and re-balancing of social and economic goals and priorities. Negatively, there is often scapegoating and discrimination of those who need social support and often an identification of such people as reasons why our societies are broken or challenged.

Cumulatively, mistrust, tensions, gaps and negative identification and lack of solidarity can lead to a society that is looking for 'new singers with new songs'. It can seem to many of our members that we need to find new ways of talking about poverty, exclusion, care, equality and dignity. We are looking for new voices with new ideas that are reconciliatory and redemptive and redress the imbalance we see in our social and economic spheres as well as encourage a reduction of democratic deficit.

It could be assumed therefore that diaconia could be the new singer with a new song. A song that promises a vision of humanity that protects individual dignity and encourages us to be engaged in our communities with a spirit of 'Ubuntu' from which will emerge a new form of solidarity based on interdependency. We talk so much of transformation and of diaconia as an alternative form of power that being the ones who bring this practically should be without question.

Yet responding to the changes in Europe and in our societies means that we in diaconia may also have to change.

I have given you a rather long reflection on Europe today and what many of our members see as the challenges... but I think that it is important to know this.. because this knowledge, this awareness of what is happening around us and where it originates is part of and parcel of being courageous.. If we are going to be courageous in our society then we need to know what is going on in that society. That is why at Eurodiaconia we work so much with members to get their experiences and opinions as to what is happening in their daily reality – both politically and practically.

So now let me go back to that first question – what does courage mean to the church and diaconia.

My first answer is that courage requires us to do more than provide services. It is no longer enough for us to feed the hungry or heal the sick... Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it this way: *"Christians shouldn't just be pulling people out of the river. We should be going upstream to find out who is pushing them in".*

Courage for the church and diaconia is about being in two places at one time.. on the riverbank,

doing what we do well, providing services, pulling people out of the river.. but we need the courage now to go upstream and find out what has caused increased poverty, loss of rights, loss of dignity, etc in the first place. Courage for church and diaconia is going beyond our notions of doing good and looking for the systemic change that is needed in our societies – whether that be in our individual attitudes and values or in our systems that are shaped by our governments and our political authorities. We should not, under any circumstances, be afraid to speak out against injustice and condemn those who think that some are worth less than others, that some are merely work units and where some are a burden on our society. There is an American phrase ‘What would Jesus do’.. but I think that as Christians we have to look at this.. We are faced with immense structures of power in our society and generally, that power is not used for the common good but often for the accumulation of more power.. often expressed in prestige, position and money. Jesus did not bother with that sort of power.. everything he did was about challenging such notions of power.. rather, it was about love.. and that is diaconia, that is our Christian faith.. love.. could we have the courage to see diaconia as an alternative form of power.. would we have the courage to break into the places where power distorts the common good and communiality of human dignity and relationship? Could we challenge the modern day money lenders and power brokers who believe solidarity to be an outdated and non-profitable concept? Are we ready to give up some of the power we have accumulated or contributed to as church and diaconia in our societies and hand it over to be a force for love and service?

(if time, show some examples of ‘speaking out’ from members in the UK)

My second answer is that courage also means change. If we were really going to challenge the negative political and administrative practices in our society this could be a massive change for both the church and practitioners of diaconia. It may also be an unwelcome change to some, both internally and externally to diaconia and the church. As I said, it may involve us giving up some of our power.. but it may also mean we need to be ready to be criticised, condemned and perhaps even hated for what we are saying.. A word of caution here.. I am not saying that the church and diaconia should be partisan to a particular political party or movement – rather I am saying we should not be afraid to change from what can be seen in some quarters as a benign, gentle presence, careful not to offend to a church and diaconia that is challenging some of the basic suppositions our societies are currently operating on and rather be the radical, justice driven presence that is not afraid to be outspoken when it matters.. Christianity has the most socially radical beliefs.. do our societies know us for that or for something else?

(Jesus in temple if time)

(show examples of public support and outrage at church in UK)

So, my second question.. do we have courage to change? Do we have the courage to be something else, something more radical, more relevant... are we ready to work and engage with partners who can assist us in advocacy.. do we have the courage to give away some of our traditional power? Do we have the courage to ask for forgiveness where we may have been instrumental in causing problems in the first place?

Being stronger social advocates is a challenge for many diaconal organisations – and I think for many churches. As I said it requires rethinking our relationships with power structures as well as developing legitimacy to our advocacy arguments based on our experience of providing services and working with people in local communities and parishes. This legitimacy must also be in our knowledge of who is really marginalised in our society and what has caused that. Perhaps it can be easy to advocate for an end to extreme poverty such as homelessness. Many people who experience homelessness will find themselves marginalised and we know about it because it is often visually present in our communities. However, it is often the invisible marginalisation and marginalised that we may not know enough, if anything, about. The older person hiding their in abject poverty because of pride, the loneliness of someone with mental health challenges or the family trying to support a parent with dementia without any recourse to social services. If we are to be effective in a changing society we need to know what those changes have produced which means getting to know our communities in depth and building relationships that allow us to know and see realities.

Winston Churchill once said: *Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.*

Bringing together what has often been referred to as prophetic diaconia alongside the practical expression of diaconia in our service provision also challenges us to think about who we are as organisations, to clarify our identity and be able to talk about who we are in a language that others will hear and understand. Can we clearly articulate who we are as diaconal actors, what we do and why we do it? In an increasingly secular world can we be confident in our Christian identity and be confident in explaining what that means for the work we do?

Do we have the courage to explain who we are, what we believe and why we are doing and saying what we are saying

(example in the European Parliament/Eurodiaconia)

So to my final question..

if we have courage, what does that mean for our actions?

It would be easy to say we should have the courage of our convictions and not be afraid to be a stronger voice in society.. but that could just make us into campaigners.. and I believe that our Christian faith calls us to more than just talkers.. In diaconia we are doers... so what is it that we need to do to show this courage of our Christian conviction – where does our action plan for courage start??? Here are a few suggestions:

- 1) Define what we understand as marginalisation in our societies today. Is marginalisation always based on material deprivation or do we have new forms of marginalisation that need our attention even more such as isolation, depression, discrimination and stigmatisation? What are the characteristics of marginalisation today?
- 2) We say that there are more gaps in our society today and increased complexity in the needs of people who find themselves in such gaps but can we name these gaps? Can we identify them and try to prevent people falling between gaps or even prevent the gaps forming in the first place.
- 3) Are we ready to develop new forms of services that may shift us away from our traditional work but better represent that prophetic voice of the church that we may feel convicted to be? (give examples from Iceland and Sweden)
- 4) Bringing about systemic change, often as a result of identifying and naming gaps will need some form of advocacy from diaconal organisations – what could they be? What models for advocacy could be developed in diaconia that are representative of our values? What can we learn from other social movements?
- 5) In a changing Europe, with changing societies, what are the relationships diaconal organisations now need to develop to be effective? What models for community relations could be developed and how do we put these into practice? How do we see and view ‘the other’ in our societies and build meaningful relations.
- 6) Finally, how do we uncover a common language across diaconal organisations and actors to be able to say who we are and what we do? A re-examination of the concept of diaconia both biblically and contextually could lead us to new avenues of praxis and advocacy that could be more appropriate for our current reality in Europe.

Conclusion

In Europe diaconal organisations and actors are sometimes referred to as a movement. If this is the case, then movement often involves changing position, finding another way or setting off in a new direction. A movement should be dynamic and responsive to what is happening around it but also able to foresee emerging trends and respond accordingly.

(to be completed).