

IDF Study Conference, Lourdes, September 7, 2017

Dr. Kjell Nordstokke

## **Salvation and Healing in a Diaconal Church**

From an Evangelical Lutheran Perspective

### **1 Opening remarks**

Thank you for the invitation to present the theme “Salvation and Healing in a Diaconal Church” at this important event. You have asked me to do this from an Evangelical Lutheran Perspective, which I interpret as a generous ecumenical gest, and especially when meeting here in Lourdes. Some might consider this place exclusively Catholic, due to its history and role. You testify to the view that it is possible to be Catholic and ecumenical, a view that I share, committed to be Lutheran and ecumenical.

Especially as people engaged in diakonia, challenged to reflect on the diaconal mandate of the church, focusing on the themes of salvation and healing, we recognize the importance of working together across confessional boundaries building networks of cooperation. Today’s world and its social and human needs oblige churches to be ecumenical in their diaconal outreach. Diakonia and ecumenism affirm each other mutually; in the same manner that diakonia has been and continues to be a driving force for bringing the churches together, we are increasingly convinced that ecumenism provides a new opportunity for bringing salvation and healing to the world.

This conviction was publicly manifested in Lund, Sweden, in October last year when the leadership of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation jointly commemorated the Reformation as 500 years of moving from conflict to communion. On that occasion, Caritas Internationalis and the Department of World Service of the LWF signed a Declaration of Intent, titled “Together for Dignity and Justice” with the aim of strengthening cooperation and commitment to the promotion of human dignity and social justice.

L’Osservatore Romano wrote on 31 October 2016:

“The Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church have taken further steps towards reconciliation and moved forward in the field of joint service to express and strengthen their commitment to the quest for unity.

This is expressed in the Lutheran-Catholic study document “From Conflict to Communion”, in which the 5th ecumenical imperative calls for joint diaconal action. It says: “Catholics and Lutherans should witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world”. § 243 reads: “Ecumenical engagement for the unity of the Church does not serve only the Church but also the world so that the world may believe”.

As two global Christian organisations working for human dignity and social justice, we decide to join hands. To bring hope. To witness and act together, without being exclusive. And to invite our members to engage with their counterparts and friends locally”.

From this background, I am both honored and happy to be here and share the task of presenting a lecture on the theme of this conference with His Eminence Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, the President of Caritas Internationalis. It is my prayer that our being together here will affirm the ecumenical imperative call for joint diaconal action, as expressed in the document “From Conflict to Communion”.

## 2 The Diaconal Church

In our Evangelical Lutheran tradition, we understand diakonia as the social ministry of church. It includes a rich variety of engagements and activities, both at the level of the local congregation and of specialized institutions. Health care and social welfare are main areas of action, as well as initiatives aiming at defending human dignity and promoting causes of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. From this perspective, it has been recognized over the last years that diaconal action must be rights based, bold in its defense of human dignity, and, when necessary, be prophetic.

In my understanding, three basic impulses motivate the call for diaconal action, all of them with implications for the understanding of the diaconal church:

The **first** is our faith in a caring God. God cares about creation and every individual human created in God’s image. The biblical narratives witness to God’s intervention in history and in ordinary human life to save and heal; the gospel stories highlight this message. Jesus heals the sick, uplifts the stigmatized and downtrodden, he invites them to communion at his table, and empowers them to be his disciples.

Our faith in God convinces us that we are included in the call to discipleship. As Jesus was sent by his Father, he sends his disciples into the world (John 20:21), empowered to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom and to serve as Jesus served. The diakonia of Jesus is therefore the model and the main source of inspiration for the diakonia of the church and of all her believers.

The **second** impulse comes from the world in which we live. Human suffering and injustice of different kinds challenge and urge us to act, to assist people in need, to defend their dignity and human rights. This call to action expresses itself in different ways. The immediate and often spontaneous reaction is the emotional side of it. As human beings, we are created with antennas that cause compassion when seeing a person suffering, as tells the story of the Good Samaritan, “he was moved with pity” (Luke 10:33). This deep emotion of compassion moves, and it empowers for diaconal action. Here we should note that compassion (or “pity” as the NSRV reads), does not mean pitying in our modern sense, as a movement from above leading to a benevolent action of the well-established in favor of the helpless. It is good to remember that the Samaritan was an outcast; his action rather expressed help from below, announcing the importance of mutual care and courageous solidarity across social and religious borders.

Compassion thus leads to a second moment, that of ethical reflection: What would happen if we bypass a person in need? The most important question is of course, what would happen to that person? The story that we referred to, described the victim as “half dead” (Luke 10:30). If nobody helps him, he will most likely die. From an ethical point of view, this is not acceptable; everybody would agree to this principle. This view is expressed in the legislation

that travelers – for instance car drivers – are obliged to stop and assist victims in the case of an accident.

The way Jesus presents this matter, the demand to act goes beyond the ethical, in its deepest consequence, it has spiritual and ecclesial implications. Jesus links action to save life to the question of what to do “to inherit eternal life”. The irresponsible reaction of the priest and the Levite illustrates the shortcoming of a religious practice that limits service to cultic routines and is not moved by what can be seen on the way home from temple service. The church that ignores the humanitarian and social challenges from the world in which we live, runs the risk of ignoring her vocation as diaconal church, and even more, her intrinsic identity as body of Jesus Christ.

The **third** impulse comes from the conviction that action makes a difference. The victim assisted by the Good Samaritan could recover and return to normal life. To provide food for a starving person increases the chances of survival. We are convinced that all different forms of diaconal service have the potential of making the life better for people in need; thereby also the world can be a better place for all to live in. Structures that exclude people can be built down. It is possible to change attitudes and practices that stigmatize and exclude people. Sick persons can have the illnesses treated, and learn to master their health challenges. The diaconal church is mandated to testify to the hope of a better future, and through diaconal action bring signs of transformation, reconciliation and empowerment - in our view, the basic directions of diaconal action.

Summing up, **the diaconal church** is moved by these three impulses. They affirm diaconal action as faith-based and rights-based. The concept of diakonia helps us to see the connection between what we **are** and what we **do** as churches. At the same time, it orients agents of diakonia of **how** to perform services, to opt for work methods that uplift the rights and the dignity of the poor, and promote processes of transformation, reconciliation and empowerment.

The World Council of Churches affirmed this understanding of the diaconal church at its Sixth Assembly in Vancouver in 1983. The message from this assembly describes diakonia as “the church’s ministry of sharing, healing and reconciliation”, belonging to the “very nature of the church” which “demands of individuals and churches a giving which comes not out of what they have, but what they are”.

In other words, to be diaconal is not something that the church opts for, in cases of external challenges, or when engaged Christians decide to establish some diaconal activities. What brings diakonia into being is the gracious action of the Triune God, the Creator, the Savior and the Giver of Life, who calls the Church into being and empowers people of faith to participate in God’s mission of healing.

### **3 Salvation and Healing**

After this brief presentation of the diaconal church and of diaconal work as faith- and rights-based action, we now move to the next issue: how do we understand the topics of salvation and healing as part of the diaconal ministry?

Here a preliminary remark is required: Diakonia is a **public** ministry; this belongs to its very nature. Theologically this view is grounded in the theology of continued creation (*creatio continua*) and the understanding that God calls God's people to be co-workers in God's care for all creation, in particular for people in need, irrespective of faith, ethnicity or social status.

The authors of the New Testament gospels present the diakonia of Jesus as a public ministry, as for example in Luke 6:17-19:

“He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.”

Jesus incarnated in everyday life; his diaconal ministry was not restricted to religious confines, but was performed in the public, as Jesus himself confirmed: “I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret” (John 18:20). This is also the case of the seven signs in the Gospel of John, they take place where ordinary people are living and moving, the first during a wedding (John 2), the last at a graveyard (John 11).

Following the example of the diakonia of Jesus, also the saving and healing ministry of the diaconal church must be public. There is always a temptation to “churchify” diakonia, either to reserve its focus to those that belong to the church, or to restrict its activity to the ecclesial space. Such a practice would not be in line with the biblical foundation of diakonia.

Furthermore, as public ministry diakonia aims at promoting **common good**. Its purpose is not to promote the social-political or even the religious position of the church. For example, when engaged in humanitarian aid and refugee work, there shall not be a hidden church agenda of recruiting new adepts. What moves the diaconal action is the commitment to save human lives, to defend human dignity and to contribute to practices of welcoming refugees, affirming their right to hope for a better future.

This responds to the second impulse that we referred to above: the challenges from the world in which we live. When responding to them, diaconal action must be ready to move out of the ecclesial comfort zone. In my view, this is what the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* urges us to do, reading “the signs of the times”. The reading implies analyzing the socio-political reality, identifying the root causes of suffering and injustice, and discerning the powers (or spirits) that promote common good from those that aim at self-interest and increased inequality and suffering in the world.

Recognizing that diakonia as public action, envisages common good, the following question becomes urgent. Will diakonia, when offering services, for instance related to health and social work, thus moving from a safe ecclesial space with its internal religious language to the public arena that in times as ours generally is secularized, have to leave behind religious terms such as salvation and healing?

The development of professional diaconal institutions and service seem to have led to a certain secularization of diaconal work. The links to the church, as community (local congregation) and faith base, have been loosened. Close cooperation with public authorities

that often will finance the professional diaconal work, has caused an adaption of the public (secular) logic of performing health and social work that most often excludes religious terms. The consequence has been, in my view, a silent evaporation of terms and symbols that express the faith-base of diaconal work, including concepts such as salvation and healing.

Does this mean that terms like salvation and healing are not relevant in modern professional diaconal work? I assume that most of us would say that they are; nevertheless, as diaconal actors we recognize that it requires critical reflection when applying them responsibly in health and social services.

Firstly, we clearly acknowledge the risk of abusing these terms - which is the case when some proclaim healing as an easy way out of complicated health challenges, ignoring the insight of modern medicine, or proclaim salvation as if the religious/spiritual dimension of human life is the one that determines wellbeing or suffering. In many parts of the world, religious movements and churches are growing because they promise prosperity and healing to their adepts. They establish ministries of deliverance, promoting a kind of worldview that reduces reality to a battle of spirits.

We rightly question such claims and practices, not least because we know that suffering often is added to suffering when people experience that such promises of salvation and healing are not fulfilled.

Secondly, we also oppose theological positions that view illness and disability as disruptions of God's good creation, and that healing therefore is needed in order to experience the fullness of life. This is a cruel theology of power from above; it downgrades the human dignity of people living with health challenges, in particular differently abled people. It promotes an understanding that equals health with perfection, which is profoundly anti-evangelical.

This said, questionable practices of healing should not discourage the church from establishing responsible ministries of counseling and spiritual accompaniment that address the issue of healing. Some churches, for instance in Africa, are trying to establish such services. It appears as an important task, in the spirit of ecumenical sharing of resources, to learn from and with each other. In particular, here in Europe where our mindsets often are barred by the epistemology of Enlightenment, we need to be open for more holistic practices, not leaving our critical questions aside.

The biblical view of health is holistic, encompassing the physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being. Well-being is not the same as perfection; it is rather the ability to flourish as a human being in meaningful relations to one's environment, to God and to oneself. From this perspective, diaconal work includes salvation and healing.

Let us look closer at these concepts. The English word *salvation* comes from Latin *salus*, which means health and well-being. The first thing to note is therefore that the term itself is not restricted to the religious realm; it encompasses all dimensions of life. It affirms a holistic understanding of being human, acknowledging that none of the dimensions should be ignored when life is challenged, and that suffering within one of them normally will affect the others.

In ancient Rome, *Salus* was the goddess of safety and well-being, of both the individual and the state. In my view, it is fascinating that the early Christians announced *salus* (salvation) as

a free gift in Christ. I interpret this as a courageous move into the public space, recognizing the multi-dimensional condition of human existence, reading the signs and terminology of the times, expanding their meaning so they could carry the message of the Good News and newness of life in Jesus Christ.

The church announced salvation and healing in words and deeds. The deacons attended to the needs of the poor and sick. We still remember St. Lawrence for his dedicated service in Rome that made him a martyr in 258. A hundred years later Saint Fabiola established hospitals and committed herself to care for the sick and dying. These examples tell that the church did not proclaim salvation and healing as an easy way out of human suffering, but as a horizon of divine love and care that motivated the people of God, men and women, to engage in practices of care and healing.

The biblical stories about healing would certainly inspire them. Their faith would remind them of the uniqueness of Jesus and the healings he performed. They would never be able to imitate his work, as already the disciples recognized after descending from the mountain of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:16). Even so, Jesus called them to a healing ministry, urging them to have confidence in his name, energized by God's empowering Spirit.

Here we must add some words concerning the meaning of healing. In our modern and Western world, healing is often understood as a supernatural miracle, setting aside scientific knowledge. This is not the main theme in the Biblical understanding of healing; here healing rather is seen as restoration of broken relations. While illness for us is an issue of defining a diagnosis and proposing medical treatment, it was at the time of Jesus something much more. A blind was possessed by darkness, a leper unclean, any sick person was considered a risk to be infested by sin and guilt, and therefore a risk to the community. The right thing to do was consequently to keep distance, to exclude and stigmatize.

The healings of Jesus are a prophetic rejection of such attitudes and the practice of social and religious exclusion that they justify. Jesus is categorical in rejecting the link between sin and illness when hearing the way his disciples comment on the fate of the man born blind. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9:3). This introduces a wonderful story of healing, and I shall use it to illustrate the meaning of salvation and healing in a diaconal church:

It starts with Jesus defending the dignity of the blind man. This act goes far beyond pitying a poor person, or manifesting empathy. It implies boldly to claim the other person's rights, in the first place to be a subject in his own right and in the relations to those around him. This affirms diakonia as rights-based action.

Secondly, it presents Jesus getting in direct contact with the blind man, "he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes" (John 9:6). The finger that touched ground, mixed saliva with earth, and then was laid on the eyes of the blind, expresses crossing risk zones, ignoring religious and social conventions. Theologically, this act announces the coming of the Kingdom of God, incarnated in human life. For diaconal practitioners, it is a call to get close to human experiences of suffering with signs of solidarity and hope.

So far, no healing has taken place. The third moment in this story comes when Jesus orders the man to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. Jesus empowers the man to be a subject, not

just a passive object, in the process of healing. He tells him to stand up and move. That is another important hint to diaconal practice - to apply empowering and participatory practices in its work.

What follows is said with a minimum of words. We are not told why the man took the words of Jesus seriously and went. There is no way of explaining the mystery of faith, only of witnessing what faith makes possible. Nor is there a detailed report of how the man became seeing, the author of the gospel just states: He went, he washed, he became able to see (John 9:7). The story gives no hints of how to establish rites or institutions of healing, that is not the issue here. Healing is part of the mystery of life. Whenever we recover from a disease, we are unable to explain how body and mind is regaining force. How much more are we lacking words to explain when the healing finger of Jesus has touched a suffering human being!

The fact that Jesus sent the man to the pool of Siloam, may be interpreted as recognition of contextual practices and expectations of healing. The fresh water of this pool seems to have been used for ritual bathing. The persons that are healed by Jesus are not taken out of the world, but sent back to world to which they belong.

That is not always an easy road to walk. The story continues telling that the man was not well received when returning home. The neighbors asked unfriendly questions, his parents apparently became worried and chose not to stand up for him, "Ask him; he is of age", they said. "He will speak for himself" (John 9:21). Next, the religious leadership came to examine him, claiming that a sinner had healed him. It shows that practices of healing and inclusion will meet with resistance by the powerful. This even happens today, it is never easy for marginalized and stigmatized persons to overcome mechanisms of exclusion, neither in society nor in religious communities.

The man, however, did not allow the powerful to take away from him what he had experienced - that he now was seeing, set free from the bondage of darkness. He boldly entered a dialogue with the religious leaders claiming that they were the blind, in other words, living in darkness. However, with the result that they "drove him out" (John 9:34).

In this new situation of exclusion, Jesus looks for him and finds him. The story ends by a confession of faith in Jesus as the One sent by God, bringing light and salvation into the world. In a diaconal perspective, this story places salvation as newness of life amid injustice and marginalization, not as resignation towards the powers of evil, but as a bold witness of human dignity and of God's power to uplift the one who has been down-trodden. It proclaims healing as sign of God's transformative, reconciling and empowering presence in human reality, a sign that witnesses that the power of Jesus is stronger than the power of darkness, even if we seem to be surrounded by darkness.

This is how I see the diaconal church committed to salvation and healing, in bold action to defend the dignity of the poor, sick and excluded, resisting the powers of darkness, and lifting signs of justice and peace. In the biblical language, justice and peace are closely interconnected. Justice refers to right relationships; of belonging to a secure space provided and secured by the Creator. Peace, shalom, means well-being in these relationships, to God, to one's neighbor, to nature and to one self. From the perspective of faith, God is justice and peace; God's reign brings justice and peace to the nations as promise of salvation and healing. This is what the diaconal church is called to announce in words and deeds.

#### 4 The Deacon's Ministry

I shall conclude my presentation by commenting on the distinct role of the deacon as related to the diaconal church and her ministry of salvation and healing.

Recent research has evidenced that the word *diakonos* in ancient Greek was used for a person commissioned to a role of **go-between**, as a messenger or a servant that would perform a task on behalf of his or her master. Here is not space for discussing this finding more thoroughly; I just want to conclude by pointing to the relevance of the term “go-between” when reflecting on the diaconal church and her mandate of salvation and healing as we read “the signs of the times” in today’s world.

In our Evangelical-Lutheran tradition, deacons are trained both in theology and in health and social work, with the aim of giving them a double professional qualification as competent “go-between”.

One is the ability to mediate between the ecclesial and the public space, of communicating a holistic view on being human and of promoting approaches to professional language that includes both the language of faith and evidence-based scientific language.

Another is the ability to mediate in situations of increasing inequality and social exclusion, in a world where the rules of the market seem to invade the health work and political welfare systems. The ministry (*diakonia*) of reconciliation that St. Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians 5:18, clearly includes a social dimension, which calls the diaconal church to be mediators of justice and peace, announcing common good and shared responsibility for public wellbeing.

Then there is the ecclesial dimension of diaconal go-between. Acts 6:1-6 describes the challenges of the “daily diakonia” in the church in Jerusalem, and the establishment of the order of the seven, later interpreted as the first deacons. The story relates the diakonia of the word (*diakonia tou logou*) to the diakonia of the table (*diakonein trapezais*), and to the importance of the go-between word and table, of proclaiming and inclusive diaconal practices.

Here the deacons have a distinct role; already in the Ancient Church their task was to bring the gifts of the table to the sick that were not able to attend the worship and the communion of the table. They also brought to the ears of the bishop how those at the margin of society were living, so that they constantly could remain included in the prayers and the care of the church.

The role of go-between continues to be an important diaconal task. Its aim is to hold the church together, resisting the risk of ignoring some of her most vulnerable members, or leaving them behind. Already at the time of the New Testament this task of go-between became ecumenical, crossing ethnic and geographical borders, which happened when St. Paul organized the collection of money in favor of the poor in Jerusalem, a campaign that he simply calls “the diakonia” (2 Corinthians 8-9). International diakonia, as performed today by agencies like Caritas Internationalis and Lutheran World Service may be seen as a continuity of this campaign, and an expression of the vocation to being an ecumenical go-between.

The basic dimension of all diaconal go-betweens is however, what faith affirms, God’s intervention and go-between for the salvation and healing of the world. This faith recognizes

God's saving and healing power amid human reality, it experiences healing also where no cure takes place, and liberation in Christ despite suffering and injustice. The diaconal church is empowered by this faith to proclaim Christ as Savior and Medicus, and to perform signs through diaconal action, testifying to and participating in God's mission for the healing of the world.