

THE IDENTITY OF THE DEACON IN THE PASTORAL CONTEXT



Manama Bible School 9-12.9 2014

Report from a seminar on Diakonia with participants from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe, ELCZ and the Diocese of Uppsala, Church of Sweden.



The Church at Manama.

Cover photo

Front row: Deacon Julianne Sibanda, deacon Bridget Ndou, deacon Maibongwe Singo, deacon Katharina Nordin Norrfjärd, deacon Abdinus Ntsenya, dean em. Solomon Vudzijena, deacon Nelia Dube, principal Michael Dube.

Middle row: Bishop Chemist Faindi, deacon Upenyu Shumba, bishop em. LM Dube, Thusanang repr Mrs Makhurane, bishop SM Dube, deacon Justice Dube, diocesan deacon Katarina Olofsgård, deacon Stig Linde, deacon Stephen Noko.

Back row: dean Kenneth Sibanda, diocesan officer Thomas Nordin, deacon Eva Berglund, deacon Elenor Kallberg, deacon Tamuka Moyo, secretary for DESC (Diakonia. Evangelization, Stewardship Committee in ELCZ) Shakemore Shoko.

BACKGROUND

Diaconal work has since the beginning of the Lutheran church in Zimbabwe been at heart and in practice in the work of the Church. One could say diakonia was the design behind the basic mission structure with its three commitments and its holistic approach: Health care, education and proclaiming the Word of God, represented by the three buildings: Clinic, school and church. Diakonia was embedded in the life and work of the Church but perhaps not known as such. When the first twinning agreement was signed in 1998 between the ELCZ and the Diocese of Uppsala, diakonia and diaconal reflection became one area of mutual concern. Since then quite a number of seminars and workshops have been held: September 2000 in Uppsala, August 2001 in Gweru “From charity to self-help”, August 2005 “The diaconate within the ordained ministry”, October 2006 “Training of deacons – a proposal for curriculum and

syllabus”. In a “trialogue” with the Diocese of Uppsala and Church of Sweden, representatives from both churches have over the years been given an opportunity to share both challenges and theological reflection on the ministry in the Church and specifically on the position of the deacon.

Since 2005 ELCZ has included the permanent diaconate in its church constitution. This came after a process of phasing out the office of the evangelist and abandoning a transitional diaconate.

After two years of training 2010-2012 the first group of ten permanent deacons were ordained at Chegatu on the 12th of August 2012. At the final stage of the deacons training it was decided that a follow-up seminar should be held within two years after their ordination. The aim should be to evaluate both training and the position of the deacon in the local parishes and congregations.

THE THEME OF THE SEMINAR

In October 2013 presiding bishop SM Dube and general secretary MM Dube visited Church of Sweden and the Diocese of Uppsala. At a consultation the presiding bishop was asked which theme he would like to be in focus at the upcoming seminar and the immediate answer was: “The identity of the deacon in the pastoral context.” The theme reflects both theological and practical challenges when introducing the new office.

It was also decided that a group of deacons from Sweden should attend the seminar to be able to share experiences with their newly ordained colleagues in Zimbabwe.

PLANNING OF THE SEMINAR

A planning meeting was held in Bulawayo between the 12th and 15th of May 2014 with representatives from the Diocese of Uppsala together with the presiding bishop, heads of the Bible Schools and representatives from the group of deacons in Zimbabwe. This meeting proved to be very important to ascertain and outline the details of the seminar. It was decided that the deacons in Zimbabwe should have a preparatory meeting in order to prepare their reports and be given a chance to meet on their own. Their meeting took place at Masvingo Bible School in July 2014. At the meeting in Bulawayo it was also decided that the book “Through the mud” – reflections on diakonia by Kjell Nordstokke should be read by the participants to serve as a common ground for the theological perspective.

In Sweden the participants met twice for their preparations. Sr. Agneta Jürisoo, former program officer of Thusanang home based care program at Manama took part in one meeting. She shared her expe-

riences and gave examples of how Thusanang work with the HIV/AIDS afflicted and also addresses other diaconal needs in the local communities in cooperation with their voluntary caregivers. She emphasized the importance of perseverance in relation to activities for the benefit of the community in order to build confidence and trust. In this regard the local congregation and the work of the deacons have already proved their importance.

OPENING REMARKS

PRESIDING BISHOP S M DUBE

Bishop S M Dube officially opened the seminar with some remarks:

Four years ago it was decided to start the training for the deacons’ ministry in the church. It was not new, but has not been uplifted like the ministry of the pastor. Diakonia is one of the main responsibilities of the church, we are limping or sick without it. Parishes and congregations should practice diakonia and give help based on Christian love. The deacons are a part of the church structure. We need to be contextual, but which model should be at hand for their work?

BACKGROUND AND IMPORTANCE OF THE DIACONAL MINISTRY IN THE ELCZ

BISHOP L M DUBE

Bishop Dube talked about the background and importance of the diaconal ministry in the Church: ELCZ have had diakonia since 1903, expressed in voluntary service from people who knew their Christian calling. Now there are ordained deacons since 2012. Some of them have faced difficulties: Who are they? What are they supposed to do? The deacons know what they are supposed to do, even if they don’t do it now. Some have also to perform as pastors.



Mayibongwe Singo shares her story of working as a deacon.

The ministry in ELCZ follows the pattern and model of Christ “not to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:45). All who follow Christ are called to be servants for his sake.

Deacon comes from the Greek word diakonos-servant/attendant. It is a servant-hood ministry for the service of the poor and the distribution of alms. Poor people and widows have no one to speak for them, to advocate. (Acts 6). The poor also need to be empowered (Mark 14:7) and they need people to speak for them and help them to stand up. Bishop Dube said that something have been missing in the Church when we haven’t been doing this. Therefore the ministry of ELCZ is now complete with the diaconate.

Bishop Dube also said that from being mentioned first in the threefold ministry deacons are now at third position. Why?

The bishop meant that there is a culture of power in the church. In Acts 6, it was the first ministry after the apostles. Deacons are given power to heal or help others, to direct them. They are those who are to help others. In the church constitution we have diakonia in some parts but it is not consistent. We need to go through the church order to include deacons at all levels.

REPORTS FROM THE DEACONS

All the deacons shared their stories from the work in their different parishes and congregations. The questions for the report were: What do they work with? What is the support and what are the challenges? Although the contexts, the resources and the circumstances were very different for the Zimbabwean and the Swedish deacons, there were similarities. They are respected in the congregations although some of the pastors/priests still



Biblestudy during the seminar.

have questions about their office. Sometimes the priests have a lower education than the deacons and there are tensions in their different roles in the parishes. The Zimbabwean deacons told about their work with taking care of orphans, caring for widows, visiting poor and sick people and how to be persistent in their work. They also reported about gardening projects and distribution of clothes. One important area in their work is also advocacy and giving legal advice. When humanitarian aid organisations leave after a while, the deacons stay on. Most of the Zimbabwean deacons tell about working for months without salaries and there are problems with transportation. Some of them walk long distances between the congregations, sometimes 3,5 hours on foot. In spite of huge challenges the ELCZ deacons continue to work two years after ordination and are proud of what they are doing. A challenge for the whole church

in the future is how to make Diakonia visible in the church structure.

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STIG LINDE, DEACON, PH.D.

Stig Linde, deacon and a Ph.D. in social work was invited as a lecturer at the seminar. He highlighted four areas that affect the diaconal role: Motives, context, tensions and hindrances and institutional support. The group discussions that followed showed many similarities in the challenges for both Swedish and Zimbabwean deacons as well as for pastors. What is the role of the ministry in a changing society? Whom should they care for? We serve all of society not only the church members. Whatever one may think of religion and Church work the act of helping the vulnerable is something that is appreciated by the community in which it operates. Maybe in Zimbabwe, the state would not

do without the Church, but how is it in Sweden? It is 14 years since the Church of Sweden was separated from the state and much of the institutional view of the church is still there. In Sweden there is often spiritual needs rather than material, but in Zimbabwe people face the opposite. Where do these two needs meet?

In Sweden there are many refugees, their vulnerability is similar to what people in Zimbabwe are experiencing. The importance of highlighting the diaconal work remains in both churches. Stig Linde stressed the importance for deacons to use the church organisation professionally.

DIAKONIA IN RELATION TO HOME BASED CARE, THUSANANG OFFICE

Deputy program officer of Thusanang Mrs. S. Makhurane and health services coordinator of the ELCZ Mr. P. Ndlovu addressed the seminar by giving a background and motives for the work of Thusanang with special emphasis on diaconal perspectives. As diaconal definitions they underlined i.a. to render selfless service, a call to identify and serve the needy, the caring ministry of the Church, working with local partners for a sustainable change. They also showed that many parts of the Thusanang program would fit in to diaconal activities and could serve as points of integration. For example counselling services, advocacy, community mobilisation, provide shelter, food and clothes. Further on they invited the deacons to take active part, as some already do, in the Thusanang program. This should also refer to the home based care programs Betseranai in the Eastern diocese and Tariro in the Central diocese.

In the comments following their presentation it was underlined that it is necessary

to find ways of integrating the work of the deacons with the work of different institutions in the ELCZ since all are part of the same church and work towards the same goal.

EVALUATION REPORT

DEAN K. SIBANDA

During the seminar it was made known that a group had been set up to tour the parishes where the deacons are deployed to find out how they have been received and how diaconal work is prioritized. The participants in the group were dean K. Sibanda, rev. T. Choverre and Mrs. S. Manasa from the head office of the Western Diocese. Since the report was not yet officially presented to the Church council it was not handed out to the seminar but some points were shared by Dean Sibanda. Key objectives of the report were: Relevance, integration, sustainability, effectiveness, training and monitoring. Each area was given a certain percentage according to the findings of the group. At one end was the relevance of diakonia, its office and program which reached a high percentage, around 80, showing that the office has been well recognized. While at the other end, sustainability reached about 10 percent referring to answers concerning the possibilities to pay salaries and support diaconal work. The report makes a division between the office of the deacon and the program for diaconal work. The office is not questioned, diakonia and the office of the deacon is an integrated part of the church. But the program has to be made sustainable to be self-supporting mainly by mobilizing local resources. To meet this challenge the need of further training was stressed.

In the following discussion it was said that pastors and deacons must find good ways of cooperating since they are com-



Lunchbreak

plementing each other. The question of a detailed job description in addition to what is already at hand was raised. As the situation is now the deacons have to do pastoral work supervised by the pastor in charge which restrains the deacons to fulfill their call and responsibility. It also leaves the diaconal work without supervision. It was also said that the period of two years is a short period for evaluation of a comprehensive program and that key objectives such as effectiveness has to be more clearly defined.

SUSTAINABILITY AND DIAKONIA – WAY FORWARD

BISHOP N. SHAVA

Bishop Shava gave a background to the office of the deacon in the ELCZ beginning 1998 when the twinning agreement between Diocese of Uppsala and the ELCZ was signed. The same year a team was sent to Sweden to study full time diaconal ministry.

The issue of sustainability does not question the permanency of the deacons office. Sustainability refers to the need to facilitate the smooth function of the deacon's

office and of the program itself.

Program sustainability means that there are measures put in place to make sure that the permanent diaconal program is self-supporting and that resources used are also permanently found locally.

For the program to be self-sustainable, some factors have to be considered:

1. The deacons, who are facilitators of the program need to be diversified in skills. These skills will assist them to be innovative, creative and engage in some income generating activities.
2. The need to be skilled in mobilising local resources so that they multiply for diaconal sustainability.
3. They need to be skilled in human resource mobilisation so that congregations and communities feel obliged to provide for the need of their fellow human beings.
4. They also need to be equipped so that they engage in prophetic diakonia and effectively becoming the mouthpiece of the disadvantaged in the society and also be able to challenge the structures which perpetuate suffering on marginalised human beings.



Sunset walk down by Tuli river close to Manama

5. There is need to impact skills meant for self- supporting so that the needy acquire skills to mobilise resources for their own needs instead of continuously depending on alms giving.
6. Train people in need in good stewardship of the God given resources at their disposal. They need to be assisted to change their mindset from that of dependence to that of independence and raise their self- esteem and fully utilise their potential.

Bishop Shava reminded the seminar that Church of Sweden was not willing to pay for the salaries of the deacons so the only way forward is the mobilising of local resources. He underlined the importance of further training relevant to their work such as how to write proposals, project management etc. He also emphasized what Bishop LM Dube said in his presentation that the inconsistencies concerning the position of the deacon in the church constitution have to be corrected. The ministry has to be properly put in to the church structure. The issue of a national coordinator for diakonia has also to be looked into.

In comments following the presentation it was said that it is a challenge for the whole church to mainstream diakonia without overshadowing the office of the deacon and to make the program sustainable. The challenge of sustainability also mirrors the desperate financial situation in Zimbabwe.

The question was also asked who will defend the deacon when he or she enters into prophetic diakonia raising the voice against corruption and political mis-management? The question highlighted the issue of further training, such as training certain skills needed in different kinds of environments. The deacons will also need a deepened knowledge of economics, politics and ecological issues and how to network with other organisations. In this regard it was also brought to attention how diakonia should be represented and visible on a national level.

CLOSING REMARKS

BISHOP LM DUBE AND BISHOP CK FAINDI
Bishop Dube reminded us of the words from 1Sam 7:12, the theme from the centenary celebration of the ELCZ: “This far

the Lord has helped us”. We learn as we continue, and we learn by our mistakes and in this way we develop a sixth sense of how to work. Love, like sharing is not real until it’s given away and shared.

Bishop CK Faindi thanked the Deacons for having said “yes” to the call to the ministry of the deacon. “The call came to you and not to everybody”. Concerning the diaconate he said: “Going back – never we can only go forward and going forward is a process.”

FINAL THANKS

With great hospitality, a well-planned seminar and excellent food, the participants were well catered for at Manama Bible School. The discussions and sharing of experiences were vivid and openhearted with an effort to be constructive and focus on possibilities as well as difficulties. Between the plenary meetings we shared in worship, prayers, a pilgrimage walk in silence as well as in social gatherings.

It was said in a report from an earlier seminar that ELCZ in spite of many challenges has gone at length implementing the diaconate in order to shape its ministry in accordance with the words of Jesus in Luke 22:27 “I am among you as a servant”. The seminar in 2014 was no exception from this effort to respond to the call of Jesus.

Uppsala 20.10 2014
Katarina Olofsgård
Thomas Nordin

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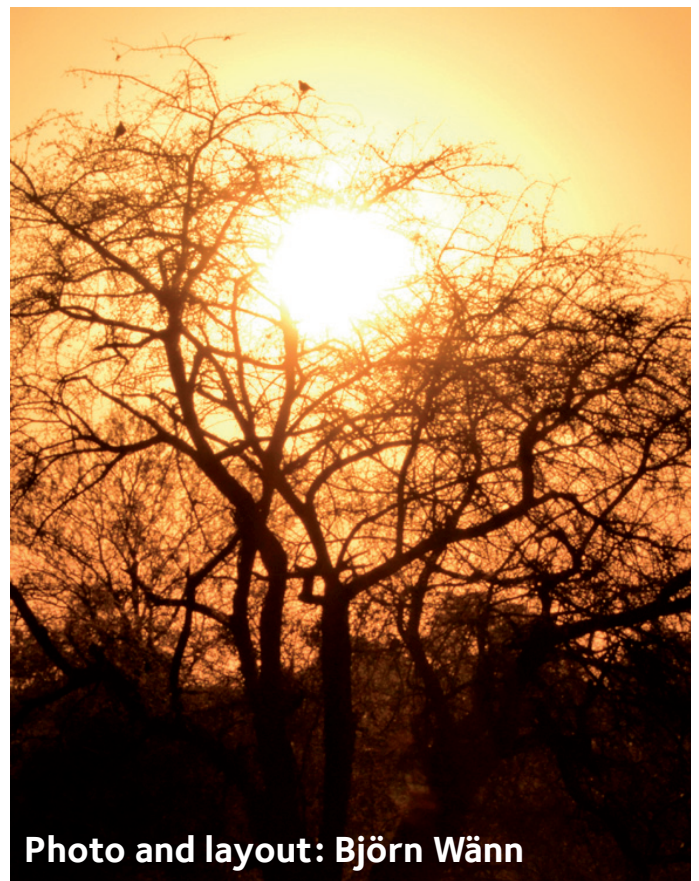


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