

Study Guide

When meeting in Geneva in June 2017, the World Council of Churches Executive Committee received the Ecumenical Diakonia Document. It asked to develop a Study Guide to facilitate member churches and ecumenical partners to work with the document, make it their own and share their feedback with the WCC.

The WCC and ACT Alliance jointly took the initiative to produce this document in 2014, with the purpose of clarifying the understanding of ecumenical diakonia and providing a common platform for acting and reflecting together. The intention was to have a document “to be used for formation and training in ecumenical diakonia, to strengthen the institutional capacity of our respective constituencies”, and to “foster the dialogue and cooperation between churches, ecumenical partners and the WCC”. Chapter 1.1 presents the further background of the document and the directives given by WCC governing boards regarding its content and objectives.

The documents consists of eight chapters. Chapter 1.5 gives an outline of all chapters. In addition, each chapter opens with an introduction and closes with a summary. These sections may give the readers of the document an easier entrance to the themes presented, as well as to the flow of the document.

As referred to above, the **purpose** of this Study Guide is to

- Facilitate the reception of the Ecumenical Diakonia Document addressing WCC member churches, regional and national ecumenical councils, and ecumenical partners such as the ACT Alliance, the LWF and their respective constituencies and related agencies.
- Facilitate the study of the Ecumenical Diakonia Document, indicating key themes and concepts, providing tools for applying it in the context of the readers.
- Propose questions for discussion, with the aim of actualizing the issues that the document raises as related to local diaconal practice and how this relates to ecumenical partners and other networks.
- Indicate issues to be included in the feedback to the WCC.

The Study Guide plan follows the structure the document, with the division into eight chapters.

First, it gives an overview of the content of each chapter, pointing to key issues and terms. Some of these are written in **bold**, signaling themes to be discussed when using the Study Guide and addressing experiences and challenges in the local context.

Second, the Study Guide proposes questions for discussion. Other questions may be added according to the context in which the Guide is used. The questions aim at facilitating the process of making the document useful for churches and ecumenical partners involved in ecumenical diakonia.

Third, the question are also meant to serve as basis for the feedback to the WCC as regards the relevance and the use of the Ecumenical Diakonia Document.

1. Introduction

This first chapter aims at introducing the term ecumenical diakonia, It conceptualizes ecumenical diakonia from two perspectives:

- a) The first links to a **theological** understanding of diakonia, seeing diakonia as a dimension integral to the nature and the mission of the church;
- b) The second perspective is **practical**, describing how churches are engaged in diaconal action across confessional and geographical boundaries.

The first constructs the normative foundation of diakonia, using primarily insight from theology, but also other sciences. The second uses a descriptive approach, reflecting critically on concrete diaconal practice. Diakonia thus expresses a strong link between what the churches **are** and **do**. Reflection on ecumenical diakonia requires an understanding of both dimensions: the churches' being and their joint action as a worldwide communion of Christians and institutions, and the social reality in which diaconal action is performed. At the same time, this reflection requires recognition of the rich **variety** of diaconal traditions in the churches, as well as the **particularity** of each context.

Ecumenical diakonia builds on the understanding that diakonia is **faith-based and rights-based action**. These two dimensions of diakonia are intimately inter-related; they affirm each other mutually, and they urge churches and diaconal agents to engage in transformative and liberating action, developing forms of **prophetic diakonia**, defending human dignity and promoting justice and peace.

Chapter 1 also introduces some of the situations that challenge ecumenical diakonia to renew its action in today's world, pointing to **profound changes in the aid and development landscape**. It next indicates some **changes in the ecumenical landscape**, and themes that can guide the renewal of ecumenical diakonia

- a) Advocacy and prophetic diakonia as signs of hope;
- b) Public theology and diakonia;
- c) The pilgrimage of justice and peace.

Not all churches use the term diakonia when describing their social and caring ministry and their engagement in the themes indicated above. The material presented in this document points to advantages of applying the diakonia-language in line with what has become ecumenical practice. Chapter 1.4 presents a list of document on diakonia, showing how the ecumenical movement has been reflecting on this theme. At the same time, this list serves as a resource for further study.

Questions for discussion:

- a) How is the term diakonia used in your church/organization? Are there diaconal institutions, or actors?
- b) What other terms are used to designate activities and engagements that this document describes as diakonia?
- c) Is diaconal work included in your partnership with ecumenical bodies?
- d) Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of your engagement in ecumenical diakonia.

2. The History of Ecumenical Diakonia

This chapter aims at telling the history of ecumenical diakonia, acknowledging that churches and Christians throughout the history have been, and continue to be engaged in diaconal work. This is also the case when the term diakonia is not a part of their vernacular.

The roots of diaconal practice go back to the times of the New Testament. Practices of sharing resources and caring for persons in need, within and outside the fellowship of believers, have always been considered an integral part of Christian discipleship and mission. This chapter seeks to point to the **continuity** of ecumenical diakonia, throughout different historical periods, responding to different external and internal challenges.

Diakonia has played an important role in the formation of the ecumenical movement; its mandate and work continue to challenge and stimulate ecumenical cooperation. Similarly, the ecumenical movement has contributed to the formation of ecumenical diakonia, its self-understanding and practice. This chapter seeks to identify key concerns in this process, in particular the growing awareness of diakonia as **faith- and rights-based practice**, recognizing the **ecclesial**, **holistic** and **prophetic** dimensions of diakonia. It invites readers to reflect how this is experienced in their local context, in the life of the churches and in the cooperation with diaconal agencies.

Further, this chapter presents **organizational structures** of ecumenical diakonia, reflecting different historical contexts and social challenges, how diaconal agents have sought to provide humanitarian aid, inter-church aid and development work. It explains the role of diaconal institutions and organizations, in ecumenical diakonia often named **related agencies** or **specialized ministries**, and the efforts of establishing multilateral cooperation, as represented by **ACT Alliance**.

Questions for discussion:

- a) In your context, how are churches and diaconal organizations or agencies working together in ecumenical diakonia? (Check the ACT Alliance membership list at <http://actalliance.org>). How is the local ACT Alliance working?
- b) What are the focus areas of diaconal action in your context? What are the main reasons for involving in these areas of action?
- c) How does diakonia and development work relate? In your view, what is converging and what is different when comparing them?
- d) How is the faith- and the rights-base of diaconal work expressed and held together? Give examples from your church/organization.

3. **Diakonia in Today's Polycentric Ecumenical Movement**

The purpose of this chapter is to give an account of important trends in today's ecumenical landscape, and to reflect on how they influence and set themes for diaconal work.

The term **polycentric** reflects the fact the center of gravity of Christianity has moved toward the global South, focusing on new experiences of Christian faith, often conditioned by the struggle for human dignity, justice and peace. New forms of ecumenical life are emerging, urging the traditional ecumenical organizations, such as the WCC, to rethink their role and mission. This chapter invites readers to discuss how this development are experienced in their context.

The WCC Busan Assembly in 2013 affirmed the challenges of this new moment, inviting “Christians and people of good will everywhere to join in a **pilgrimage of justice and peace**”. The invitation reflects an understanding of a servant church, mandated by a holistic mission, “evangelism and diakonia done in Christ's way”. It implies a commitment to the social reality of vulnerable and marginalized communities, often described as **the margins**, and to their insights and expressions of faith and hope.

This approach encourages churches and diaconal actors to be innovative, and “to re-imagine diakonia from vantage point” of the margins, supporting a “**diakonia from below**”. At the same time, it urges diakonia to be bold, both in action when providing services, and through advocacy and public witness, searching to develop forms of **prophetic diakonia**.

Questions for discussion:

- a) How is you context being changed by new religious movements, new churches, different theologies? How do they affect the life of your church/organization and your social outreach?
- b) Does the concept of polycentrism make sense in your context? How do you assess your relation to the WCC, other ecumenical organs and bilateral partners within this new context?
- c) How has your church/organization responded to the WCC invitation to a pilgrimage of justice and peace? What role has diakonia, and how can diaconal action become better integrated when engaging in this pilgrimage?
- d) How can diakonia assume a prophetic and innovative role in the mission of your church/organization and the performance of ecumenical cooperation?

4. Theological Reflection on Diakonia

This chapter aims at understanding diakonia from a theological perspective. It is based on the view that diakonia is an integral part of **the church's nature and sending** (mission) into the world. It acknowledges the fact that some churches traditions do not apply the term diakonia; even so, it claims that the substance, to which the concept refers, is widely shared by churches, and part of what **ecumenically** is confessed and taught.

The use of the **diak-words** (*diakonia*, *diakonos*, *diakonein*) in the New Testament provides insight on how the biblical authors apply them when describing the ministry of Jesus, as well as the vocation to be his followers with a mandate to serve. The chapter provides some tools for interpreting these biblical concepts theologically in a **Trinitarian perspective**, which fixes the understanding of diakonia to the three articles of Christian faith, and to the Christian faith in the Triune God, the Creator, Savior (Liberator) and Sanctifier (Giver of Life).

Following this perspective, diakonia is an integral part of the mission of the church, and at the same time, organic rooted in the all aspects of being church. Diakonia can be described as the **"liturgy after the liturgy"**, of sharing the gifts of communion in a way that empowers for **discipleship** and service. Such service can be spontaneous and individual; often it will take the form of **organized diakonia**, activities and services that aim at assisting people in need, defending human dignity, and uplifting the rights of the marginalized.

Questions for discussion:

- a) Is the term diakonia and deacon used in your church/organization? If yes; how are they used? If no; which terms are used that correspond to what the document defines as diakonia?
- b) Chapter 4.2 presents the biblical use of the diak-words (for instance Mark 10:45; Acts 6:1-6; 1 Timothy 3:8-13). How are the diak-words being translated and interpreted in your church tradition?
- c) The WCC Vancouver Assembly 1983 stated that diakonia as "the church's ministry of sharing, healing and reconciliation is of the very nature of the Church". Discuss this statement and its relevance in your context. How can this understanding of diakonia be stronger be expressed in the life and mission of your church/organization?
- d) How is the relation between diakonia and proclamation understood and practiced in your church/organizations? How is this issue communicated when collaborating with international diaconal agencies?

5. The Changing Landscape of Diaconal Action

The main aim of this chapter is to present trends in today's globalized world that change the landscape of diaconal action, and therefore call for strategic analysis and innovative practice.

One of the alarming effects of globalization is **growing economic inequality** that causes new forms of poverty and social conflicts; another is **climate change** that threatens to aggravate life conditions for many already being poor and marginalized. These trends are accompanied by changes in the political arena, with more freedom for the powers of the market, and less focus on international solidarity. Many agents of ecumenical diakonia report that their work is being hindered because of **shrinking public space**. Is this the case in your context?

The United Nation Agenda 2030 and the **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs) represent an important opportunity for action, due to their position as public agenda both for governments and of civil society. This chapter gives an account of how the WCC together with ACT Alliance and partners have been engaged responding to this agenda. It presents some priority themes for ecumenical diakonia: migration and refugees, economic justice, climate justice, gender justice, and health justice. Readers are invited to reflect on the relevance of these themes in their context.

A core concern of this chapter is to motivate agents of ecumenical diakonia, in particular local churches and diaconal organizations, to involve in activities related to the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. This includes **strategic planning** and **networking**, and of **setting priorities**.

Questions for discussion:

- a) Discuss the positive and negative effects of globalization in your context. How do they affect the life and the diaconal work of your church/organization?
- b) How has the UN Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals been received in your context? Have churches and other faith-based communities taken a role in responding to them? How can your church/organization be more committed?
- c) The document presents different just causes to which it invites churches and diaconal agents to be committed (migration and refugees, economy, climate change, gender, health). What is the status of these causes in your church/organization?
- d) How to collaborate with churches and diaconal agencies when working with these issues? What are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of these partnerships?

6. The Distinctiveness of Diaconal Practice

The main aim of this chapter to provide a better understanding of the distinctiveness of diaconal action, and to reflect on how this identity expresses itself in the performance of diaconal services.

The presentation draws on the insight of chapter 4 applying the understanding of diakonia as faith- and rights-based action, expressing what the church according to her nature is and does. It further reflects the description of the changing landscape as given in chapter 5.

The reflection on distinctiveness seeks to clarify **what characterizes diaconal work** from this background, pointing to its **objectives** and **core values**, its **assets** and **work methods**. In many ways, this relates to the attention currently given to **faith-based organizations** (FBOs) as providers of health and social services, and to the recent recognition of **the role of religion** in relation to development.

One important issue when describing the distinctiveness of diakonia, refers to the rich variety of **assets, both tangible and intangible**, the churches and diaconal organizations have at their disposal when engaging in diaconal work. The potential of these assets, in particular the intangible, is often underestimated. The chapter recommends an **asset-based approach** when responding to social challenges, which means mapping the diaconal assets and developing strategies of how to mobilize them in activities and engagements.

Another distinctive mark of diaconal work is its **interdisciplinary** approach when reflecting professionally on its practice. Diakonia as theory applies insight from many disciplines, from theology, social sciences and practical disciplines such as health and social work. This raises the question of how to develop a **diaconal professionalism** that is able to articulate the distinctiveness of diaconal practice, and a **diaconal language** that communicates both in an ecclesial and public setting. It also raises the issue of **building diaconal capacity** in churches and organizations, and of introducing diakonia as study program.

Questions for discussion:

- a) Use examples of diaconal engagement and organized activities from your own context discussing how the faith- and the rights-base is expressed.
- b) Identify diaconal assets (tangible and intangible) that your church/organization possess, and discuss how these assets are activated in concrete work.
- c) What kind of training and capacity building in diakonia is available in your context? How do you assess the need and the possibility of providing more opportunities of training within this area?
- d) Discuss the term diaconal professionalism. In your opinion, which elements of knowledge, of working methods and of working style does it include?

7. Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities

The main aim of this chapter is to establish a shared platform for discerning the principal challenges and opportunities, both external and internal, which face ecumenical diakonia today, globally as well as locally. It reflects the changed socio-political landscape as described in chapter 5, at the same time it seeks to identify concerns and principles that should guide churches and diaconal agents, applying the understanding of the distinctiveness of diakonia as elaborated in chapter 6.

A critical issue for many actors of ecumenical diakonia is limited access to financial resources. Both churches and agencies experience increasing difficulties in having their diaconal activities funded. In this situation, the theme **ecumenical sharing of resources** regains relevance; it urges churches and diaconal agents to find new ways of working together.

This leads to the next concern: How to organize ecumenical diakonia? When churches organized humanitarian and inter-church aid in the aftermath of World War I and II, it took the form of **multilateral** cooperation. The WCC and the LWF played both key roles in organizing and implementing the work, often in cooperation with regional and national ecumenical bodies. Since diaconal agencies, most of them rooted in the global North, have grown in strength, **bilateral** cooperation has become the preferred approach, also by many partners in the global South. Acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches, it is timely to discuss the kind of opportunities they present in the current situation.

This discussion should include a critical reflection on **partnership**, and on how to develop and implement sound principles, being honest to the difficult issue of **asymmetrical power relations**, and to the distinct competence and potential of each partner.

The issue of partnership opens for wider forms of **networking** and of working with others, in particular with other agents of civil society, both secular organizations and those representing people of other faiths. **Diapraxis** has become a strategic approach and method in many contexts, witnessing to importance of establishing arena where different religious actors together can engage in promoting common good.

In many contexts, the question of how to work with governmental authorities is a sensitive issue that requires critical discernment. The **public** character of diaconal work, and its aim of promoting common good, implies open working relations with public authorities and government. This requires critical and constructive attitudes, and bold commitment to **advocacy and public witness**.

Questions for discussion:

- a) The document states that funding for ecumenical diakonia is shrinking. Does your church/organization experience this trend? What are the consequences? What measures are taken in order to deal with this situation?

- b) The document discusses the strengths and the limitations of bilateral versus multilateral partnership in ecumenical diakonia. What are your experiences regarding this issue? How can the strength of both approaches be better applied?
- c) The documents urges diaconal agents to network and cooperate with secular organizations and with people of other faith. What are your experiences, and how can this strategy be strengthened in your diaconal work?
- d) How is advocacy and public witness integrated in your diaconal work? Discuss strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

8. The Way Forward

As stated in chapter 1, the document *Ecumenical Diakonia* intends to foster the **dialogue and cooperation** between churches, ecumenical partners and the WCC. This final chapter propose some themes, encouraging all partners to address them and include them in their working plans, at local, regional and global level.

This call is motivated by conviction that our times in the perspective of faith may be a **Kairos moment**, a time loaded with promises of a new and better future, in spite of the many negative developments that cause suffering and fear. It urges all partners to involve in critical reflection and innovative practice that announces hope with justice and peace.

Following the presentations in chapters 4-6, the three following **affirmations** are stated:

- a) Affirming diakonia as a shared vision and mandate;
- b) Affirming the diversity of gifts;
- c) Affirming justice as a priority.

These affirmations are basic in the construction of a **joint understanding of ecumenical diakonia**, and of developing a solid **platform** for dialogue and cooperation.

Next, the document points to four focus **areas to be strengthened** in the process of fostering dialogue and cooperation:

- a) Strengthening structures of shared action;
- b) Strengthening networks of cooperation;
- c) Strengthening communication;
- d) Strengthening diaconal capacity.

Strengthening implies affirming existing relations and cooperation, at the same time admitting shortcoming and tensions. The presentation of contemporary challenges and opportunities in chapter 7 may be helpful when setting the agenda for discussing these issues, however in a way that points to the **local context** and makes it possible to evaluate the practice of ecumenical diakonia.

Added to this discussion is raised the question of diaconal practice and **code of conduct**. It aims in the first place at raising ethical awareness and ensuring that vulnerable persons are safeguarded when performing diaconal activities. It therefore recommends the establishment of routines that include codes of conduct. In addition, it points to the importance of developing working styles of mutual respect in all relationships, including as we engage and collaborate in ecumenical diakonia.

Questions for discussion:

- a) Discuss the challenges presented in 8.3, 8.4 and 8.5. Does they correspond to your experiences and vision for ecumenical diakonia?
- b) Discuss how to strengthen structures of shared action? What do you see as the role of your church/organization in this process?
- c) Discuss how to strengthen communication among actors in ecumenical diakonia.

- d) Discuss how to strengthen diaconal capacity and to build competent leadership within the area of ecumenical diakonia.

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