

From Disciples the City  
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## THE ROLE OF THE DIACONATE IN URBAN MISSION

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*During supper, Jesus, well aware that the Father had entrusted everything to him, and that he had come from God . . . rose from the table, laid aside his garments, and taking a towel, tied it round him. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel.*

John 13:3-5 (NEB)

### The Towel and Basin and the Cross

In the Gospel of John symbols that express the ministry and mission of Jesus include the towel and basin and the cross.

The cross remains the deepest symbol of the full extent of Jesus' love through His suffering and death. The towel and basin, however, also symbolize His love (John 13:1). They portray the foot washing of *Christos diakonos* (Christ the servant), who assumed the form of a servant, kneeling down as would a slave to wash the feet of His disciples.

It is remarkable that whereas the church has commemorated the cross through the bread and wine, passing them on from generation to generation in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the service symbol of the

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towel and basin has received little attention. Only a few churches and denominations have preserved them in liturgical rituals. The Salvation Army is one of these exceptions. The Army has not only understood the meaning of this symbol, it has also put this meaning into practice in its world-wide diaconate.

The task of Christian churches, wherever they find themselves, is to learn to understand the language of the symbol of the towel and basin and to interpret it in cities, villages, and towns. Churches must learn that *diakonia* is a key to understanding the person of Jesus Christ and His gospel, and therefore also a key to understanding the missionary task that the Christian church is called to fulfill. In its well-known studies on the structure of missionary congregations, the World Council of Churches said much about mission as a structural principle of the church. These scholars are correct in concluding that mission must be regarded as one of the church's structural principles, and a church that is not missionary is no church. Yet, just as essential is that *diakonia* is a structural principle. A church that is not diaconal is no church.

This truth is emphasized in the book by Paul Philippi, published in 1963, *Christozentrische Diakonie*. Philippi's thesis is that one of the fundamental structures present in the gospel and the work of Jesus Christ is the diaconal, and that the diaconate of the churches can and must be understood christocentrically, since the *genus diaconum* has a place in Christology not as a secondary theme but as one that is essential. Philippi's book presents Jesus as being the deacon or servant, and it calls the churches to assume the diaconal task and to take on the form of a servant in their activities in the world.

This is important for urban mission. The diaconate may not become an epiphenomenon, relegated to a secondary position. It must be honored and allowed to manifest itself as the structural principle which it is. Urban mission without diaconate has little to do with the mission of

Jesus Christ and amounts to paying mere lip service to *Christos diakonos*.

### Needs of Urban Societies

Other chapters of this book have given the insights of anthropology, sociology, and various theologians on urban matters. In this chapter it is enough to summarize briefly some of the general needs of urban societies. These needs and problems take on unique forms in each urban society. Those who contend that the process of urbanization follows exactly the same pattern in Beirut, Jakarta, Mombasa, and Buenos Aires as in New York, Paris, and Amsterdam, simply are not acquainted with these cities. Profound differences exist in the process of urbanization, and these require careful analysis and on-the-spot research. Though this be true, there is a point to what Peter Berger states in *The Homeless Mind* when he speaks of contemporary urbanism as being an independent carrier of modern consciousness (whether in capitalist, communist, or developing countries) and a phenomenon that must be understood on its own terms apart from the specific economic context.

What are the sores that fester in urban societies? On the basis of the available literature and personal experience in the cities of the West and of Asia and Africa, the following aspects are presented as some of the most important needs of urban society.

*Anonymity and loneliness.* In western cities this is usually individual loneliness and anonymity. In the developing countries it takes the form of lonely groups whose individuals cling desperately to one another. These groups survive only with great difficulty.

*Powerlessness and poverty.* Millions of city dwellers feel helpless in the face of the futility and iron necessity that characterize a life lived in utter poverty.

*Heterogeneity.* There is a confusing variety of social settings and roles in areas such as housing, employment,

recreation, and education. This heterogeneity and the tensions and contradictory emotions that it produces, lead in many cases to a permanent identity crisis.

*The disappearance of social control.* Lack of social control often yields abnormal patterns of behavior and results in the loss of moral judgment.

*Slums.* Although great differences prevail between the townships of South Africa, the Latin American *favelas*, and the slums of western cities, all of them have in common the thousands whose housing situation is extremely difficult. They are victims of real estate speculation and insufficient government or public housing.

*Forms of injustice.* Cities are full of brutal egotism and collective indifference toward people's needs. In each city there are people and groups of people who are the victims of injustice, whether hidden or open. It is the responsibility of the churches to find where these people are, analyze their problems, and try to rectify the injustice done to them.

### Cities as a Challenge to Diaconate

Anyone aware of the profound needs and problems of city life through personal experience and study will admit that cities confront the diaconate with immense and multifarious challenges. In most modern cities, and above all in those of the "welfare states," many departments of social work and public agencies have been developed to meet human needs. In such a situation, the churches must neither attempt to take over the existing social services nor ignore their availability. In the "welfare states" the churches should attempt to fill the gaps in existing social service systems, whereas in those countries where few social services are available the churches should supply these services, at least temporarily, until such time as public agencies are in a position to take over.

At the World Mission Conference in Mexico City in 1963, George Todd told of the period in Taiwan in which

many new cities arose and of the response of the churches' diaconate to this situation. All the churches offered to collectively work together with the municipalities, and also to temporarily assume certain tasks that the municipalities were not yet able to assume. This approach by the Taiwanese churches can serve as a meaningful example for churches in other developing countries to follow. Even in those societies where the public welfare and social agencies function professionally and effectively, there remain endless gaps where either concealed or open wounds exist that need to be discovered and treated. The consequence of this approach will be a deepening and broadening of the churches' diaconal outreach.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the outreach of the churches' diaconate was limited to care for the poor. The list of projects of the Commission on Interchurch Aid, Refugee and World Service reveals that the outreach of the diaconate and interchurch aid has broadened considerably and that the methods employed have undergone significant change. Leslie Cooke's book *Bread and Laughter* is an absorbing description by the late director of the World Council of Churches' Division of Interchurch Aid of the new frontiers confronted by the international diaconate. The diaconate has learned to see the inadequacy of marginal charity and has come to be actively engaged in the attempt to change unjust situations. We have come to realize that the diaconate must not only be an instrument of compassion, important as this is, but also an agent of justice.

This shift toward a combination of compassion and justice has not been the only change in diaconal approach. Typical of more recent developments is the increasing emphasis given to the conviction that the diaconate functions best when those whom the churches seek to serve are not objects but subjects. More and more it is no longer a matter of activities *for* the poor, *for* those who are discriminated against, *for* refugees, but of assistance

for activities *of* the poor, *of* those discriminated against and *of* refugees.

### Projects and Programs

There are some specific projects and programs for which needs exist in the cities.

*Freeing people from addictions.* One question to the churches in the cities is, Do you come into contact with people in those places where they are enslaved to their sins and where their exodus from slavery must be brought about? The churches are called to answer in the form of projects and programs, which already exist in many cities.

For example, there is the work among drug addicts and the assistance offered to alcoholics. In both areas some of the most effective work is being done by and through those who were formerly addicted themselves. There are also programs for fighting prostitution by means of creating opportunities for women to return to normal life and moral relationships. Additional programs are available for juvenile delinquents, school dropouts, and children without suitable homes.

Programs and projects such as these belong to the great tradition of the modern diaconate, and they must not be permitted to fall into neglect. One of the great sins of urban societies is the lack of concern for those who are victims of addictions and other enslavements. Contempt for public sinners and willful ignorance of an indifference toward those who are being destroyed are phenomena typical of urban societies. The question, What are you doing for the victims of public sins?, remains one which Christians must never cease to ask themselves.

*Advancing meaningful community.* Urban sociologists tell us that loneliness is one of the greatest problems of city life. Anyone who knows something of contemporary urban life in the six continents of the world cannot deny that "communication poverty" is great and that it is ac-

accompanied by a large dose of egotism. This loneliness and "community poverty" presents a challenge to the diaconate in all cities of the world. Although individual contacts are of great importance in the struggle against loneliness, it is also necessary to work along with certain groups in their attempt to break out of their isolation—to work for and with groups of people who are alone: the aged, migrant workers, and ethnic minorities who need adjustment to society.

*Bridging the gaps between conflicting groups.* The American development-sociologist, Richard Dickinson, serving as an advisor to the Division of Interchurch Aid, has in his advice and writings repeatedly emphasized the need for projects and programs that aim to heal the unhealthy relations between various groups. "Relational projects" is the name he gives to such organized attempts to bridge the gaps between conflicting groups to promote a more integrated society.

Relational projects and programs are needed especially in cities where various ethnic and interest groups live next to and in antagonism toward one another. Examples of this bitterness between ethnic groups are to be found in all continents. Think of the bitter conflicts in Beirut, Belfast, and in Johannesburg and the surrounding "townships." Also, there are great tensions between various ethnic and interest groups in the cities of the United States. In the past, the diaconate has been so busy working with individuals that it has seldom recognized the healing of relations between groups as a part of its task. Such neglect is irresponsible. If the city congregations truly desire to be diaconal congregations they will have to lend their hand to the task of healing diseased relations wherever they are found.

This is, of course, a task for civil and local governments. At the same time, it is one in which the churches' diaconal organizations can and must do their part. The approach in such projects must not be to do this rela-

tional work from without and for certain groups, but to support and encourage its being undertaken from within and in cooperation with persons from within the conflicting groups who are also concerned with achieving reconciliation.

*Struggling against unemployment.* Unemployment is a phenomenon that appears in developing countries and in many highly industrialized countries. Although the causes are not the same everywhere, the results are always disastrous.

The struggle against unemployment is, in the first place, the task of governments. The government is primarily responsible for the political regulation of economic developments, for creating job opportunities together with industry, and for a just distribution of such job opportunities. Nonetheless, unemployment is also a challenge for the churches' diaconate. During the depression of the 1930s, churches in many lands made important contributions to the struggle against this social evil, and they are now called once again to this task.

The advancement of job training is a matter of great importance, above all in the developing countries. In these countries problems are created by masses of unskilled people pouring into the cities in search of work, which they will be unable to find because of their lack of training. Help in educating young people to enable them to find work is a task to which churches are called. The stimulation of projects to put people to work can also be undertaken. For example, during the crisis years of the 1930s churches encouraged the erection of public buildings providing immediate employment for thousands of workers and also serving a social or public function for years afterward.

Unemployment is demoralizing and in the struggle against it churches are called to be inventive. This, too, belongs to the outreach of the diaconate.

*Serving justice.* In his excellent book "*Overal waar mensen zijn*" (Where People Are to Be Found), Dr. J. Hen-

driks has correctly pointed out that for centuries the diaconate chose the good Samaritan as its example, but now it is time to realize that Exodus 3:7-8 has equal right to serve as an example. The passage reads: "The Lord said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their outcry against their slave-masters. I have taken heed of their sufferings, and have come down to rescue them from the power of Egypt...'"

The God of mercy and charity is also the God of justice, who defends the rights of the poor and powerless. We may not forget this in the cities. City dwellers often are people who have come from other parts of the country to the metropolis with great expectations. At the same time they are deeply frustrated, for they have been profoundly disappointed by the various unjust situations they have experienced. They came to the cities looking for something better, but instead they lost their identity and their sense of personal worth even more.

In Jakarta, a city of about 6 million inhabitants, thousands of people suffer from various forms of injustice and powerlessness. According to statistics in Amsterdam, the largest number of suicides are committed by people who suffered from injustice. The urban diaconate is called to be attentive to these situations and to actively serve the cause of justice. The following examples shed light on the forms this active service may take.

- 1) Inexpensive or free legal aid. For example, a program organized by law students in a university offers free legal aid to poor, and often powerless, people.
- 2) Helping people find housing and assisting them in rent problems.
- 3) Aiding people who have been imprisoned to adjust to normal social life.
- 4) Encouraging the development of self-reliance and group power for the powerless. The need for this has

been emphasized by David Sheppard in his book *Built as a City*, where he contends that in modern cities, above all in those in industrialized countries, it is often not poverty that is the greatest ill, but powerlessness. The same point has been made repeatedly by William Stringfellow, who points out that power has to do with having access to those who make decisions, knowing the right people, and understanding how to exert influence. He correctly maintains that the lack of such power on the part of many urban people constitutes an important need. An alert diaconate can do much to help people overcome their powerlessness. It can point out channels to be followed and can establish contacts for people. It can assist the process of forming power so that those not heard are given a voice.

Certainly it is the task of political parties to be concerned with and speak for those who are powerless and to defend their rights. Yet, unfortunately, political parties often tend to see only the large and powerful interest groups in their electorate. Hence the church may not neglect the political aspect of the diaconate. She must direct her attention to the helpless and powerless and attempt to help them defend their rights. It is encouraging to see an increasing emphasis given to political diaconate.

*Establishing projects.* With increased free time and leisure, how are these to be used? It is a problem that on the whole has received too little attention. The proper use of free time and leisure constitutes a challenge not only for governments and social organizations, but also for urban churches.

Churches in England and the Netherlands have responded to this challenge in two ways. First, church-oriented recreation areas have been established. They have been organized by self-supporting associations and offer a wide variety of services, including wholesome amusement, places for relaxation, organized sports, as well as worship, religious drama, catechetical instruction,

and adult education. In addition to recreation areas, a central organization has been formed to offer material assistance and trained personnel to local churches to aid them in serving people in their leisure time with an entire packet of services.

The challenge presented by increased leisure time must be met with centers of recreation not only in the suburb and countryside, but also in the heart of the crowded city.

Dutch theologian, Dr. Okke Jager, recently published a book titled, *Bevrijde tijd* (Free Time), which carries a subtitle *From Achievement-Society to Leisure-Culture*. He contends that Calvinist communities have developed a work-ethic that has often encouraged work-fanaticism, within which there has been little room for the advancement of the meaningful use of free time. Jager's concern is that time spent in work and time spent in leisure be integrated, forming parts of a life characterized in its totality by freedom. The diaconate in the large cities should be challenged to participate in the various experiments on the blending of work and leisure.

In considering various diaconal projects and programs, something essential must not be forgotten. Diaconate is only possible when it is motivated by agape, and agape finds its source in the love of the true deacon, Jesus Christ. Agape derived from Him is inventive, just as the service He rendered when He went about Palestine was flexible and inventive. The urban diaconate must apply the ingenuity of love in the discovery of fields of meaningful service and in the initiation of experiments.

### Concluding Recommendations

In the task of diaconate in urban mission the gap between theory and practice is great, and there are few urban diaconates that accomplish all they should. The task of diaconate in the cities is to reveal something of the greater love (I Cor. 13), the abundant justice (Matt. 5:20),

and the shalom that is beyond our understanding (Phil. 4:7). Actually, little of this is carried out. Important obstacles persist, like the flight to the suburbs. Nonetheless, the important question remains how the urban diaconate can be renewed and made into a responsible instrument. In conclusion, here are several concrete recommendations based on personal experience and study.

1) *Respect and express the unity of word and deed.* Roger S. Greenway states in his book, *Calling Our Cities to Christ*, that no evangelism has taken place until the good news has been told. At the same time, it is true that evangelism is incomplete until people have come into contact with *Christos diakonos*, Christ the true deacon, who is seen in our deeds and diaconate.

In the history of urban mission, witness and diakonia were frequently separated from each other. Evangelism then becomes a matter of verbal witness, and diaconate a matter of silent service. Yet, what was unique about the appearance of Jesus and the apostles was precisely the unity of word and deed, of witness and sign.

In the history of evangelism, the movements that have acted most fully in the spirit of Jesus Christ have been those that have persued this unity. Examples are the German *Innere Mission*, the Gossner Mission, and the Dutch *Inwendige Zending* (Home Mission). The activities of these organizations demonstrate the important interrelation of evangelization and diaconate.

Organizations for evangelization and diaconate must, as a matter of biblical principle, work together. This happens all too infrequently. Instead, often a diaconate is largely independent from evangelization or is limited to needy church members only. Diaconate in the city has to be focused on the whole environment, and for this reason, among others, the harnessing of evangelism and diaconate is indispensable.

2) *In choosing deacons and organizing diaconates, keep in mind the entire community to be served. This is important*

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if the local congregation is truly to be a body for the care and service of the community. The deacons must coordinate the diaconal task of the congregation, present proposals and suggestions, and fulfill what the sociologist of the church, Dr. G. Dekker, has termed the "signaling-function." They must signalize charismata (gifts) present among the members of the congregation and the needs in the surrounding community.

3) *Acquire insight into the total situation of the cities in which the congregations work by making local contacts between Christians, exchanging information, and using sociologists and other specialists.* The churches in the cities too often work haphazardly. To avoid this there must be an overview of the entire situation and a careful evaluation of the existing challenges. Such study can be of great help in enabling the diaconate to assume a more responsible role in urban mission.

4) *On the basis of such shared reflection and insight, each local diaconate should draw up a work plan that will define its task within the larger field of urban mission.* This will involve the selection of several projects and programs within the capacities of the local congregation, which take into consideration the charismata present among her members, and which will fit into a situation of meaningful Christian teamwork.

5) *Frequently evaluate the activities chosen in this manner and consult professional advisers.* Avoid the danger of continuing traditional programs when a change of direction and the adoption of new plans, programs, and projects are required. It has happened in the Netherlands that laborers were busy raising the dikes in old places of danger while, in the meantime, new threats that required defense were to be found elsewhere. This often happens in church work as well. The concern must be to remain flexible and alert, to play a responsible role in the whole of urban mission. In this way the example of *Christos diakonos* can be followed in the large cities of the world.