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## AT THE BANKS OF THE RIVER: THE WORK OF EURODIACONIA<sup>1</sup>

*Nas margens do rio:  
o trabalho da Eurodiaconia*

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**Abstract:** In this article the European network Eurodiaconia is presented. The development of social services in Europe takes place against a backdrop of social and economic change as well as changing relationships between churches, Diaconia and citizens. Diaconal work continues to be shaped in the provision of services but there is also increasing emphasis on advocacy and being prophetic. However, one of the biggest challenges and opportunities for Diaconia in Europe is how to preserve, promote and define our diaconal identity in an increasingly multicultural and multi-religious as well as secular, context. Learning from diaconal work in other parts of the world may contribute to the different possible approaches to these challenges and opportunities and in 2015 Eurodiaconia will start to do this with partners in Brazil.

**Keywords:** Eurodiaconia. Diaconal Organisations. Social Policies.

**Resumo:** A rede europeia Eurodiaconia é apresentada neste artigo. O desenvolvimento de serviços sociais na Europa acontece diante de um pano de fundo de mudança social e econômica além de mudanças nas relações entre igrejas, diaconia e cidadãos/ãs. O trabalho diaconal continua sendo moldado pela oferta de serviços, mas há uma ênfase crescente na advocacia e em ser profético. Porém o maior desafio e a maior oportunidade da diaconia na Europa é saber como preservar, promover e definir nossa identidade diaconal num contexto crescentemente multicultural e multirreligioso, além de ser secular. Aprender do trabalho diaconal em outras partes do mundo pode contribuir para as diferentes abordagens possíveis a esses desafios e essas oportunidades, e em 2015 a Eurodiaconia irá começar a fazer isso com parceiros no Brasil.

**Palavras-chave:** Eurodiaconia. Organizações diaconais. Políticas sociais.

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## Introduction

*Christians shouldn't just be pulling people out of the river.  
We should be going upstream to find out who is pushing them in.*  
(Archbishop Desmond Tutu)

When it seems as if there are so many people falling into these metaphorical rivers that the great Archbishop Tutu spoke about it is natural for people to react by becoming lifeguards, throwing whatever we can at the situation, lifebelts, rafts, anything that will keep people afloat until such time as the river slows down and people can get themselves out of the water. After all, isn't that what we want: people helping themselves to a better situation – lifting themselves out of the water, help to self help?

But the heart of this quote from Tutu is not about the river but about what is going on elsewhere – what is happening upstream, on the river bank. What is happening there that is causing so many people to fall into the river? This is the challenge Tutu is giving us; to go beyond our traditional understandings of help and assistance and look at where there are structural and even moral failures that find people falling into the river. We need to look beyond the river and look at the river bank.

That is what Eurodiaconia tries to do.

Eurodiaconia is a Europe wide organisation of churches and diaconal organisations. We have 45 member organisations in 32 countries across the European continent. Founded in 1996 following a merger between two existing European diaconal organisations Eurodiaconia has grown into a lively, dynamic network. Our members come from the Anglican, Protestant and Orthodox Christian traditions however we are seeing the emergence of more ecumenical organisations which can include new expressions of churches and Christian community. The members of Eurodiaconia encompass churches such as the Church of Iceland and the Church of Finland who have deacons working in parishes and who are also active in debates concerning different aspects of social policy in their countries. Other members are diaconal organisations established by churches to provide social services on behalf of the church. These range from highly professional social service provision, often as part of a service contract with the state, to services run by volunteers in local communities. Other members are organisations with a clear Christian basis and relationship to the church but are not an agency of the church. Bracke Diaconia in Sweden is the largest not for profit social services provider in Sweden, Diakonie Deutschland, one of our German members is the second largest provider of social and health care services in Germany (Caritas Deutschland is the largest), Helsinki Deaconess Institute is the largest not for profit provider of social services in Finland, Kerk in Actie in the Netherlands mobilizes thousands of volunteers each year to develop social work in parishes and our French member brings together over 350 protestant church organisations from across France. Our membership extends into Eastern Europe with members in Hungary, Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Serbia, Poland, Slovakia and Armenia. In Serbia our member is leading innovation in providing services for Roma people and in Armenia the development of social entrepreneurship, vocational training and support for Syrian

refugees is among the many projects they manage. Historically, the Protestant tradition has been at its strongest in the countries of northern Europe but for many minority churches in Europe, such as in Spain, Italy, Austria and others their diaconal work is hugely important for their presence in society and as an outward presentation of the liberation and witness of the protestant tradition. This we believe we share with our brothers and sisters in South America.

Our vision is that as the leading network for diaconal work in Europe, we look to develop dialogue and partnership between members and influence and engage with the wider society. We do this to enable inclusion, care and empowerment of the most vulnerable and excluded and ensure dignity for all. Our mission is to represent a dynamic, Europe wide community of organisations founded in the Christian faith and working in the tradition of Diaconia, who are committed to a Europe of solidarity, equality and justice.

Eurodiaconia is a registered not for profit organisation in Belgium. We are governed by the Annual General Meeting of members who decide on our strategy and finance and who elect our Supervisory Board of 7 representatives of members who are responsible for directing the work of the network throughout the year and giving direction to the secretariat. The Secretariat is based in Brussels, Belgium and consists of 8 members of staff. They are led by the Secretary General and carry out the day to day work of the network, whether that be organising events, ensuring good communications with members and the wider public, undertaking advocacy with the European Parliament and other European institutions or developing projects with our members. Our funding comes from two main sources. Since 2008 we have had the privilege to be recognised as a key partner of the European Commission (the ‘civil service’ of the European Union) and this has resulted in our establishing a Framework Partnership Agreement with the European Commission that provides us with financial support. The partnership revolves around enabling our members to be active in social policy debate at European, national and local level as well as providing evidence and examples to the European Commission of where current social policies do and don’t work or where innovation in social services or social protection systems can bring about improvements. This partnership accounts for around 75% of our total financing.

Our second source of financing comes from our members, who pay a membership fee to be part of the Eurodiaconia network. Some members also give a solidarity contribution to the network, particular our larger members and we have an agreement across the network that finance should never prevent a potential member joining the network. Where possible we also apply for grants and projects to support specific areas of our work.

## **So what do we do?**

Our work is organised into three distinct but overlapping areas 1) Developing and enabling membership engagement and partnerships, both internally and externally, that develop praxis and extend resources, 2) Creating a network of competence

to impact relevant social policies at national and European level and 3) supporting the development of approaches and thinking on Diaconia in Europe today.

*Developing and enabling membership engagement and partnerships, both internally and externally, that develop praxis and extend resources*

Our members are providing services across Europe but they are not all providing the same services in the same way. In some countries they have developed new approaches to some services and it is good to share those with others. Therefore we arrange meetings of members to focus on specific areas of their work so they can present their approaches and share ideas and discuss challenges. In 2015 this has included, but is not limited to, looking at how our members support people with high levels of personal debt, how to develop new ways to support young people at risk of social exclusion, how to develop and increase the quality of care for older people in a residential setting and in home care, gathering good practice in supporting people with Alzheimers and dementia, gathering good practice in supporting Roma people, a traditionally discriminated against group in Europe, with access to education, housing health care and employment and looking at how diaconal work is carried out in urban areas with a high risk of social exclusion and crisis.

How we do what we do, the practical work, is really important for our membership and our network meetings, workshops and seminars are important moments for sharing and also identifying possible partnerships. We also provide resource materials for members to support their work. We have several online toolkits available to support the development of social innovation in our members and to giving assistance in finding funding for members work. We also produce several publications a year, our most recent being on good practice in working with people with dementia.

But providing services is only part of the picture. The provision of services in Europe is regulated by various laws at European and national level. These include how services are financed and the legal framework in which they can be offered. Many of our non-Church members are not for profit organisations that have Christian values that inspire them to service of the vulnerable in our societies and Europe has a long tradition of having not for profit organisations engaged in the provision of social and health care services both inside and outside of the formal social protection systems. However, our members are increasingly challenged by legal, financial and operational frameworks that are designed for 'for profit' companies and entities and where the specific nature of not for profit organisations as being values focused rather than profit focused is forgotten or minimized. For many of our members they feel they are forced into a conflict between their values basis and the need to operate in a competitive environment that does not recognise their specific nature or purpose.

So our work on the practice of Diaconia also looks at these issues and how we can ensure that the financial, legislative and operational eco-system for social services provided by our members actually enables them to this precious work rather than prevent them. Some of the legislation is established at national level but there is increasing work at European level on this issue and so we engage with the European

Parliament and the European Commission to ensure that not for profit social service providers are part of the considerations for any new legislation.

## **Creating a network of competence to impact relevant social policies at national and European level**

Working on a social services ‘eco-system’ overlaps the provision of service and the laws and policies that govern them but that is not the only advocacy work we do. Our members are not simply delivering services; they are also being advocates for those they serve, or indeed, empowering people to speak up for themselves, so as to bring about the changes needed to ensure that every person lives in dignity regardless of his or her status. For example, in 2009 we started to survey members on what they felt was the long term impact of the global financial and economic crisis. Many of our members told us they needed to start more services to support people with high levels of personal debt which could lead to them losing their homes or descending into extreme poverty. As a result, we have been looking at how the European Union can work to reduce personal over indebtedness and worked with them on a study looking at the different processes for debt support in the 28 Member States of the EU. We also organised a meeting with Members of the European Parliament to discuss our members concerns and also arranged for some of our members to present their work to key European decision makers. This last point is an essential part of our advocacy work for good social policies. The key to our work in Eurodiaconia is the experience of our members. As an organisation we are effective advocates because our members see the impact of policies and decisions at a micro and macro level because they work every day with the people affected.

That is why we believe in Europe that Diaconia must not simply provide services but that we must speak out against the systems and structures that have caused more people to be in debt (for example) in the first place.

Our advocacy work is important. Social policies cannot be considered ‘second rate’ after economic policies and in Europe, as in other parts of the world, the impact of the financial and economic crisis has resulted in increasing inequalities. This is what Archbishop Tutu is referring to. As Eurodiaconia we believe in pulling people out of the water – providing services – and traveling upstream to see what has been pushing them in - structural and political deficiencies.

The global financial and economic crisis has left an impact on all our countries, regions, local communities and quite likely our family and personal lives. Political leaders are constantly searching for ways to improve the situation and increase prosperity and growth to a pre-crisis level. This has been particularly true of the Eurozone, the group of countries for whom the Euro is the common currency but can be applied to the European Union as a whole. Consequently, one could be forgiven for thinking that only financial resources matter for society. Political focus has been on ensuring financial and economic stability, redressing imbalances, but this misses the need to address the social imbalances that have also emerged as a result of the crisis.

Focusing only on the financial and economic imbalances at the expense of the social imbalances is regarded by many of our members as a foolish and dangerous approach. Just as the financial and economic challenges in one country have had a knock on effect in many other countries, so will social imbalances. Just as the financial and economic challenges Europe faces are being addressed at a European level so must the same be done for social challenges.

At the 2012 Eurodiaconia Annual General Meeting our members came together to call for “policies and actions that enable inclusion, care and empowerment of the vulnerable and excluded in society while ensuring dignity for all”.<sup>3</sup> This call forms the heart of Eurodiaconia’s AGM Declaration “Protecting Europe’s Most Precious Resources at a Time of Crisis”. Based on contributions from Members of Eurodiaconia on the reality of working diaconally in the current climate, as well as pulling together our policy work in several areas, the declaration seeks to identify the underlying causes of the current situation in Europe, its impact and possible solutions. It was a very clear example of a response to the challenges facing our society in Europe and how Diaconia can help shape our responses; taking the opportunity to show alternatives that are people-centred and nurture well-being.

### *Supporting the development of approaches and thinking on Diaconia in Europe today*

Every day diaconal practitioners serve thousands of people across Europe who require care for a particular social need. It is because of this daily, sustained commitment that the reality of poverty, exclusion and need in Europe is revealed. It reveals an increasing demand for services and the decreasing support from public authorities which is a short sighted and self-defeating approach that can and is resulting in a human cost in terms of lost potential and well-being. This is the crux of the challenge; without a long term perspective based on social investment, combined with a rights based approach actions taken to reverse the effects of the crisis are fundamentally flawed and people will keep falling into that river. Anything else is contrary to our Christian beliefs and both spiritually and morally unjust. This then calls us to have a prophetic voice. Our Christian identity and the traits of Diaconia are not just historical or some sort of trademark – they must be living, breathing and shaping the work of churches and their related organisations. Diaconia must be an integral part of the liturgy and worship of the church and the work of the church in our societies. Yet in Europe many of our members find that that relationship with the church corporate can be challenged by the increasing professionalization of services, the pressure to be like for profit organisations or even competition as to who ‘owns’ the prophetic voice. Therefore our work on diaconal identity has included the relationship with church and Diaconia and where Diaconia may sit in the koninia of the church. This may be

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<sup>3</sup> EURODIACONIA: *Protecting Europe’s Most Precious Resources At A Time Of Crisis* – Declaration of the 2012 Eurodiaconia Annual General Meeting Eurodiaconia 2012. Disponível em: <<http://www.eurodiaconia.org/2015/09/proactive-policy-making-eurodiaconia-launches-three-policy-positions-to-rebuild-social-europe/>>. Acesso em: 28 ago. 2015.

a specifically European problem. As already discussed, many diaconal organisations are not the church themselves but organisations established by the church, often because of the rules around social services in specific countries. This means that at times church and Diaconia have grown apart although this is not always the case. In 2007 we published a document called 'To be and To do' which looked at the place of Diaconia in the life of the church and the relationship between Diaconia and the church. Many of our members have undertaken similar reflections in a national context and all are available on our website. Some churches, such as the Church of Norway, have a national plan for Diaconia that ensures that diaconal work is integral to church life. In other countries, such as the UK, several 'para-church' and often ecumenical organisations operate on behalf of the churches to ensure a more effective and at times co-ordinated approach to Diaconia or, in the UK terms, Christian social action. The relationship between church and Diaconia is a constant area of reflection for us as we develop thinking around Diaconia. This is accompanied by the changing context in which Diaconia operates in Europe.

Europe is an increasingly multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi faith continent. Migration to Europe is at a very high level and this means that the demographics of the European continent have changed. Furthermore, alongside the development of the multi-faith continent we also have a more secular continent, especially for the Christian faith with less people attending churches on a regular basis and changes in the number of people declaring a personal Christian faith. What has this to do with Diaconia?

One of the questions that challenge our members is what makes an organisation diaconal? Is it the values that permeate the culture of the organisation or is it the Christian faith of the people who work (whether paid or voluntary) for the organisation? The easy answer could be that it is both but the reality in Europe is that this is not so easy to answer. Some of our members believe that their people need to have a clear, practising Christian faith in order to serve people with a sense of diaconal purpose, especially if part of that work involved prayer for users of services or leading corporate acts of worship. Others look for church membership as an indicator of a connection with the Christian identity of Diaconia. However, we also have members who do not see it as realistic or necessary, that people in their organisations have either a church connection or a confessing Christian practice. They believe, and have successfully experienced, that it is possible to have a diaconal identity through the values and practices of the organisation regardless of the faith or otherwise of those who are engaged in the organisation. Additionally, for many of our members in countries where their protestant Christian tradition may be a minority it is not practical to expect all staff or volunteers to share that Christian tradition. Therefore many of our members invest a lot of resources into defining the diaconal characteristics of their work and transmitting those through practice and training to their staff and volunteers. In 2010 Eurodiaconia worked with members to try and identify some of those core characteristics and published the document 'Faith In Social Care' as a resource to help members in this work yet it is potentially a never completed piece of work; as context

changes our members will be affected and will have to respond while still protecting and in some cases re-defining their diaconal identity.

Another area which requires both theological and practical thinking is the increasing competitiveness and market driven approach to social services provision in Europe. Although already mentioned as a practical and advocacy issue for Eurodiaconia and our members it is also one of identity. Our members are asking themselves if they can retain their diaconal identity while still being ‘in the market place’ of social services and being forced by market pressures to be more like business than charitable organisations.

But on our thinking on Diaconia in Europe has expanded over the past years from simply a focus on praxis to encouraging a wider theological review process as well as trying to bring practitioners, theologians and social academics together to encourage a wider reflection on diaconal identity, perspectives for the future of diaconal work in Europe. To facilitate this we have joined forces with others to establish the International Society for Research in Diaconia and Christian Social Practice ([www.diaconiaresearch.org](http://www.diaconiaresearch.org)) and have become partners in an academic journal “Diaconia, Journal for the Study of Christian Social Practice”.<sup>4</sup>

We are very aware of our European identity as Eurodiaconia – it is after all in our name – but we also recognise that we are part of a wider global communion of churches and church related organisations who believe in the Christ centred call to service of others. We have therefore looked to strengthen our relationships with global ecumenical bodies such as the World Council of Churches and have been given a number of opportunities to join global reflections with other churches and organisations on Diaconia. It was such meetings that gave us the inspiration for our latest project.

For some time Eurodiaconia had felt the need to look beyond Europe and learn from other parts of the world. As has been mentioned inequalities in Europe are increasing, local communities and people are feeling a huge impact of the global financial and economic crisis and there is interest in doing more work where people at risk of poverty and exclusion are empowered to act for themselves. We knew that in South America there had been some creative and cutting edge responses to similar issues, especially community building and empowerment activities and thanks to some already existing contacts we have been able to organise a study visit to Brazil. This visit will take place in November 2015 and thanks to a grant from the Otto Per Mille Fund from the Waldensian Church in Italy we will be able to bring a small group of leaders from European Diaconia to Porto Alegre to look at work being carried out and participate in debates around diaconal identity and context between Europe and Brazil. This is just the first stage in what we hope could be a longer project of learning and exchange between our continents and will surely enrich our work on diaconia in Europe today.

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<sup>4</sup> DIACONIA: Journal for the Study of Christian Social Practice. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht. Disponível em: <[http://www.v-r.de/en/diaconia\\_journal\\_for\\_the\\_study\\_of\\_christian\\_social\\_practice/m-0/500059/](http://www.v-r.de/en/diaconia_journal_for_the_study_of_christian_social_practice/m-0/500059/)>. Acesso em: 28 ago. 2015.



The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his Letters and Papers from Prison: “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself”.<sup>5</sup>

The big challenge or question for diaconia in Europe can be summed up as how are we both prophets and practitioners and retain our diaconal identity? How do we effectively develop our practical experience into political discourse and become advocates yet keep our focus on the Christian calling of service we have? Or, as the prophet Isaiah puts it how do we *proclaim freedom for the captives* at the same time as *binding up the broken-hearted*?<sup>6</sup> This is not just a spiritual or intellectual shift for diaconal social service providers, but also a practical one. There may have been a long experience in providing care, but being political advocates will often require different skill sets, different practical experiences and potentially a different network. We are sometimes afraid to be advocates, to get involved in politics but if we can show the injustice from our practical experience of providing care and services, if we can make strong moral and ethical arguments about the validity of certain economic, financial or even social approaches that are bound up in the inherent dignity of each and every person and their rights then we will be making a start.

If we wish to effectively address inequalities, increasing demands for services based on demographic changes, poverty and exclusion in Europe and provide quality care for all people then we need to be more than lifeguards... we need to travel upstream and see what is happening on the river bank. If we do not like what we see, and if the people we have helped out of the water show us what being pushed in felt like, and if we believe that no more people should be pushed into the river then we have to be more than lifeguards. We need to be working on the river bank every day just as we continue to pull people out of the water every day but in addition to providing services and cares we need to be providing political alternatives and be river bank based advocates for justice, solidarity, trust and equality.

For more information on Eurodiaconia please go to [www.eurodiaconia.org](http://www.eurodiaconia.org) or contact Heather Roy, Secretary General at [heather.roy@eurodiaconia.org](mailto:heather.roy@eurodiaconia.org)

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<sup>5</sup> BONHOEFFER, Dietrich. *Prisoner of God: letters and papers from prison*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 61 : 1-2 The Holy Bible, New International Standard Version, International Bible Society 1973.

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