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THE DIACONATE AND THE DIACONAL WORK IN CHURCH OF SWEDEN AFTER THE YEAR 2000: DEVELOPMENT OR BACKLASH? TO BE ORDAINED – A SCENE¹

*O diaconato e o trabalho diaconal na Igreja da Suécia
depois dos anos 2000: desenvolvimento ou retrocesso?
Para ser ordenado: um cenário*

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Abstract: Diakonia has a long and strong tradition in the Church of Sweden. In ecumenical contexts our Church has often been considered a pioneer when it comes to diaconia. Since 1987, and even more outspoken in the Bishops letter of 1990, the diaconate in Church of Sweden, belongs to and is part of the one and threefold Ministry of the Church. The intention of the letter seems to have been a firm link between the Eucharist and diaconia. In the rites of ordination there is an emphasis on the connection between the deacons and Jesus Christ. Today, the starting-point for a definition of the diaconate is ecclesiology. We could define the task of a deacon as that of transcending borders – as a bridge between diaconal work among the most vulnerable and downtrodden, and the liturgy and worship. The deacon should link the periphery with the center. However, the diaconate has experienced a certain resistance. There were, and might still be, some lay-persons as well as some pastors, who (even if they highly estimate diaconal activities) still do not regard the diaconate as an essential part of the very being of the church. Apart from this, the most obvious current challenge is the growing gap between wealthy and poor in our society. The so called EU-migrants, seen begging in the streets all over our country, very poor persons, mostly from Romania and Bulgaria. The increasing flood of refugees, mainly from Syria, in need of everything. This work requires cooperation with the local society as well as with NGO's and other churches. This kind of networking and cooperation has rapidly developed the last few years. The call of the deacon is also to recruit and inspire others, voluntary workers, to engage and act responsible. There is an increasing focus on the rightsbased perspective. The question – development or

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backlash? – will need a twoheaded answer. A great development of diaconal work, which has ongoingly adopted to new challenges, as well as a disappointment – so much still remains to be implemented, theology expressed in documents to be turned into practice. It is part of the vocation of a deacon to be a prophetic and critical voice, to challenge our own comfort, in the society as well as pointing towards a (sometimes) too self-occupied Church. Could this be one of the reasons why the diaconate, in practice, is not just smoothly accepted in the Church-structure?

Keywords: Diakonia. Church of Sweden. Diaconate.

Resumo: A diaconia tem uma tradição longa e forte na Igreja da Suécia. Nos contextos ecumênicos, nossa igreja tem sido considerada pioneira em relação à diaconia. Desde 1987, e ainda mais contundentemente na carta dos bispos de 1990, o diaconado da Igreja da Suécia pertence e é parte do ministério uno e tridimensional da igreja. A intenção da carta parece ter sido firmar um forte vínculo entre a eucaristia e a diaconia. Nos ritos de ordenação há uma ênfase na conexão entre pessoas diaconais e Jesus Cristo. Hoje, o ponto de partida do diaconado é a eclesiologia. Poderíamos definir a tarefa da pessoa diaconal como a de transcender fronteiras – como uma ponte entre o trabalho diaconal entre as pessoas mais vulneráveis e oprimidas e a liturgia e o culto. A pessoa diaconal deveria conectar a periferia com o centro. Porém o diaconado tem experimentado uma certa resistência. Existiram e talvez ainda existam pessoas leigas como também pastores e pastoras que (mesmo que estimem muito as atividades diaconais) ainda não consideram o diaconado como uma parte essencial do ser da igreja. Ao lado disso, o desafio atual mais óbvio é a crescente brecha entre as pessoas ricas e pobres da nossa sociedade. As pessoas migrantes da UE estão sendo vistas mendigando nas ruas em todo o nosso país, pessoas muito pobres, principalmente da Romênia e da Bulgária. O fluxo crescente de pessoas refugiadas, principalmente da Síria, necessitando de tudo. Esse trabalho requer cooperação com a sociedade local assim como com ONGs e outras igrejas. Esse tipo de criação de redes e cooperação tem se desenvolvido rapidamente nos últimos anos. Existe um foco crescente na perspectiva baseada em direitos. A pergunta – desenvolvimento ou regressão – necessitará de uma resposta bifocal. Um grande desenvolvimento do trabalho diaconal que tem continuamente se adaptado aos novos desafios, assim como um desapontamento – tanto ainda falta para ser implementado, a teologia expressa em documentos precisa ser colocada em prática. Faz parte da vocação da pessoa diaconal ser uma voz profética e crítica, para desafiar nosso próprio conforto na sociedade, assim como para apontar para uma igreja que (às vezes) está muito preocupada consigo mesma. Pode ser essa uma das razões porque o diaconado, na prática, não é facilmente aceito na estrutura da igreja?

Palavras-chave: Diaconia. Igreja da Suécia. Diaconado.

Introduction

A Sunday morning in June 2015, the diocesan Cathedral of Uppsala filled with expectant people.

The procession is entering the Dome, walking up the long aisle, the Crucifer and the Cathedral Choir followed by the Candidates, the women and men who are to be ordained Deacons or Priests in this Ordination Service. They are followed by as-

sisting Pastors and Deacons, members of the Diocesan Chapter, the Dean and finally the Bishop.

In Church of Sweden today, more often than not, Deacons and Priests are ordained in a shared Ordination Service. They belong to the one threefold ministry of the Church. The difference in their offices will show in vows and vestments.

The Promises of the Deacon, some lines:

– A Deacon shall seek out, help and support those who are in bodily or spiritual need, provide Christian nurture and teaching in the faith in the church and in society; be a sign of mercy and in all things serve Christ in his/her neighbor. The deacon shall defend the rights of the individual and stand at the side of the oppressed and encourage and liberate God's people to that which is good, so that the love of God may be visible in the world. The ministry of a deacon will now be committed to you. Consider those whom you meet with care and reverence. Seek the will of God together with them and strive to let your faith, your life and your teaching become one whole.

Two of the questions connected to the vows:

The Bishop: Will you in your ministry, follow and protect the order of our church and follow your calling after Christ's example?

Candidates: Yes

The Bishop: Will you live among people as a witness to the love of God and of the mystery of reconciliation?

Candidates: Yes

After the affirmation of the promises follows the ordination with the laying-on of hands.

The deacons vested in their green shirts and albs, are now given the stoles as a sign of their commission in the one and threefold ministry of the Church.

Ordination is an act that reminds the Church that it receives its mission from Christ himself.

The stole, followed by the emblem of the deacon is handed out to the newly ordained at the altar rail.



The message of the emblem is referring to the Holy Trinity.

The circle – God, the Creator; the deacon is to cooperate with the Creator in protecting the creation and encourage and liberate God’s people to that which is good.

The cross – Jesus Christ; it is for the deacon to follow Christ’s example, and to serve Him in his/her neighbor. To be a sign of mercy and a witness to the mystery of reconciliation.

The dove – the Holy Spirit; reminds of the Holy Spirit evoked upon the candidates during ordination. The dove is carrying a fresh branch of leaves, conveying the message of life, that is, the Gospel.

The emblem of the deacon reminds us of that Christians confess faith in the Triune God. It is this faith that constitutes the identity of the Church and therefore the identity of diakonia. (Diakonia in Context, LWF 2009)

The ordination prayer gives an Christological foundation to the Deacons ministry.

– There is a strong emphasis in the rites on the link between the deacons and Jesus Christ. The deacon and the whole people of God remain in fellowship with Jesus, and through Him, also with each other. The deacon continues the mission of

Christ by bringing the needs of the people to the Church. (Tiit Pädam, Ordination of Deacons in the Churches of the Porvoo Communion, 2011)

The Ordination Service will be continued with the Holy Communion.

The newly ordained, deacons and pastors alike, will take part in the distribution of the Eucharist.

In the ordinal service, in the vows and in the sending out in service and Ministry one can see the expectations in the diaconal admission on every level of the Church of Sweden.

The process of Admission and Recruitment

Ordination to the diaconate is preceded by a process of admission. The process aims at discernment of vocation and potential ability of the candidate. Since the year 2000 this process of admission has been strengthened. There might be some differences however, between the 13 dioceses in Church of Sweden.

The candidates are called to a Conference of Admission, likewise as candidates with a vocation to priesthood, sometimes at the same occasion, in the same conference.

This presupposes that the candidates meet certain requirements which qualify them for the ministry. These embrace a suitable academic education (completed or on-going), periods of internship in parish other than your own, spiritual formation and theological knowledge.

Bishop, recruiting officer, experienced pastors and deacons, together with members of the Diocesan Chapter meet the candidates during two days for extensive interviews.

The conference, (admission-board) will thereafter give a recommendation concerning the candidate. This recommendation, the bishop will bear in mind, when he or she finally takes the decision to give the candidate a positive or a negative answer.

Some background – what did the Swedish bishops express concerning the diaconate?

In 1990 the Bishops' Conference produced a document called Bishop, Priest and Deacon in the Church of Sweden.

Concerning the commission of the deacon it reads – *it is essential to evangelical doctrine that there is an inner connection between service of worship as the focal point of the congregation and the function of the Christian service of love among people. The life of the congregation originates in and finds its strength and inspiration from worship.*

Consequently, the diaconate has its place in the liturgy. The connection between the congregational fellowship (koinonia), the serving (diakonia) and the service of worship (leitourgia) has existed since early Christian time. The deacon is given the commission in the ordination to be “a sign of merciful kindness”. This must find room

for expression in worship. Two suitable occasions for this would be when the sacrament of the altar is distributed and in the general intercession of the Church.

The intention and aim, twenty-five years ago, seems to have been a distinctive permanent diaconate within the one ministry of the Church, with a firm link between the Eucharist and diaconia.

What happened?

Almost ten years later, Prof Sven-Erik Brodd states as a fact, – Today the starting point for a definition of the diaconate is ecclesiology (the teaching on the nature of the Church, the meaning of the people of God, God's household) not a definition of what Diakonia is. This is obvious in, for example, the Church ordinance of the Church of Sweden, adopted by the General Synod in 1999.

The two factors, ecumenical outlook and new ecclesiological insight, seem to be the main factors which have paved the way for the permanent diaconate, episcopally ordained and an integral part of the threefold ministry of bishops, deacons and priests.

It should also be mentioned that the breakthrough for the discussion about the diaconate within the ministry was the so-called Lima document of the Faith and Order Commission, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM), published in 1982.

This document describes that the Church appears as the body of Christ in the structures Martyria (witness), Leitourgia (worship) and Diakonia (service). These structures need to be incarnated through

- Witness and oversight, the Bishop
- Worship and liturgy, the Pastor
- Diaconal responsibility, the Deacon.

This is the basic essence of the Church and the theological basis for the threefold ministry bishop-pastor-deacon.

At that time the Mother House-Diakonia, inherited from Germany, was still the prevalent concept in our church.

Some background – glimpse from our Church history that hopefully make our development more clearly concerning the diaconal work and the diaconate

The Church of Sweden has about 6.3 million members, 13 dioceses and approximately 1 400 parishes. Among the employed staff (app. 25 000 people) there are about 3 000 pastors and 1 200 deacons (app. 1000 working in parishes). There is app. 20 000 volunteers conducting an important work inside the parishes. Outside the parishes, as own institutions, there is 5 diakonia institutions and app. 6 larger city missions in Sweden. These institutions are also an important contribution to Swedish diaconia but outside the official Church of Sweden. I will come back to this.

1851 Ersta Diakoni was founded as the first diakonia institut.

1868 The Church of Sweden had its first Synod and at that time also the diaconate was discussed. There was a suggestion about a ministry for deaconesses and deacons but it was rejected.

1920 in the Synod of the Church of Sweden there was a decision taken concerning a liturgical ritual to install deaconesses in their call. It was then conducted at the so called Motherhouses.

1941 the decision was taken in the Synod that the ritual for deaconesses and deacons ordination were placed in the Service Book of 1942.

1987 a new Service Book was published and after a discussion the ordination ritual for deaconesses and deacons was still there and was developed to be more like the ordination to priesthood. Until this year there was a vow in the priest's ordination rite, to take diaconal responsibility. At this occasion, the remaining theological differences between male and female deacons were finally abolished. Until this year there was a vow in the priest's ordination rite, to take diaconal responsibility. This was deleted in 1987, because of the importance given to the diaconate – it was now acknowledged as an integral part of the threefold ministry.

1995 a working group was given the mandate from the Synod of the Church to work out a final report concerning the whole question about the diaconate. The ordination for deaconesses and deacons has since long been part of the Service Book but without a clear connection within Church Law.

And then finally we can read from the Church Ordinance (2000):

The call is to bring out the gospel given to the whole people of God. Everyone inside the Church is connected in the one and only body. Baptism is the main ordination to service inside the Church and gives participation in the common admission of the Church. The ordained Ministry is a service inside and for the congregation. The ordained Ministry is a sign inside the congregation and in the society.

The deacon is through the service, a sign of mercy inside the congregation, as well as in the society. The deacon holds a responsibility to deliver a service of love, especially towards exposed people. The service depends upon the local social needs, the structures of the congregation and priorities connected with the diaconal work and situation. The service has a caritative (social outreach) approach that can also be visible in the duty of education inside the congregation. Where ever there is human suffering, it is the call of the deacon to interfere and to inspire others to act responsibly.

And from the ordination ritual to become a deacon we can read: *The deacon shall defend the human rights, stand beside the marginalized and oppressed, and encourage and deliver the people of God to what is good, so that the love of God is visible in the world.*

In the 1860th the Church of Sweden had to gradually hand over all the social responsibilities that up to now had been a natural part of the work and responsibility of the church.

During the same period almost all of our Institutes of Diaconia started (City missions included) and while they are constructed as foundations or likewise outside

the formal Church body they more or less took over all the social responsibilities that the Church use to have.

Within the congregations, the Church of Sweden retains a diaconal responsibility that by all means had a holistic perspective of every human being but with no mandate to be professionally involved in the society as it used to be. Most of the deaconesses at this time were trained nurses and this fact also characterized the work of the congregation.

Of course it also characterized the expectation from both the pastors and the congregation upon the work done by the deaconesses and the responsibility of diaconal work.

Though one can state that the education of the deacons during the last 20 years gradually includes an engagement towards the society and its development within. The view upon the role of the deacon and diaconal work has gradually been focused on outreach work and cooperation with other actors inside the society (also including authorities).

The education to become a deacon has also throughout the years become more directed towards not only care but also human rights perspective and a role for the deacon as a voice when people end up in vulnerable situations in life.

The Institutes of Diaconia (City missions included) has always been a free in relationship to the Church of Sweden with their own organizations as own foundations and with own boards. But there has always been some kind of relationship to the Church of Sweden through ones value and representation inside the board. But lately there has been attempt to find a stronger relationship (on the initiative of the institutions) so far with little result.

This is how we would like to define the task of the diaconate today

The deacon as a bridge between diaconal work and liturgy.

The deacon should link the periphery with the center, or even bring the center to the periphery. The starting point is at the altar. The movement is the one of being sent from the altar, sent to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, the downtrodden and marginalized. And then again moving back to the altar, the Eucharist, enclosing in intercessions, those suffering with burdens and brokenness of all kinds.

We cannot copy the early Church, the Koinonia, but we can draw inspiration from it. The first Christian Church can be described as an elliptically structured fellowship with two poles; the Eucharist and Diaconia. These are mutually conditional one on the another. (S-E Brodd, *The Theology of Diaconia* 1999)

In 1987 Konrad Raiser (later General Secretary in the WCC) lectures about the rediscovery of the indissoluble link between the Eucharist and Diaconia, between “the sacrament of the altar and the sacrament of the brother and sister”.

There is no doubt whatsoever that all over our country, lots of important and good diaconal work is carried out by deacons and voluntary workers, in the congregations and in society. Why is it then that too many deacons feel isolated and worn

out? Why is it that some pastors and members of parish-councils still define Diaconia merely as the social work of the church?

Could one of the answers be, – the link between Diaconia and the Eucharist is not there or has been broken? In our work at Vårsta (Institute of Diaconia in the north of Sweden) within the center of crisis and catastrophe we talk about people with PTSD (Posttraumatic stress syndrome) being “framebroken” perhaps that is what we sometimes can see happens with deacons.

Nowhere, neither in the letter from the Bishops 1990, nor in our Church Ordinance (1999) has any liturgical task for deacons, different from tasks of lay-people, been named. To our understanding this is a problem.

There are often marked differences between the theology, expressed in documents, and the practice of the church. Documents are one thing and praxis another.

We wish a distinct task in the service of worship, in intercession and during Eucharist, to be assigned to the deacon by the Bishops. (As it was in fact once mentioned in the Letter of the Bishops in 1990.) For several reasons, deacons today (and pastors alike) are running the risk of being influenced rather by management theories than by theology of the ministry. Meaning that the utilitarian view (usefulness) and measuring of results is predominant.

The Holy Communion holds a contrary meaning. The Eucharist offers a messianic fellowship; reconciliation is its core meaning and content.

During Ordination service the deacon promises to be a witness to the love of God and the mystery of reconciliation. A diaconate, not firmly anchored in worship and Eucharist might well result in a deficiency of the ordained ministry of the church. And Diakonia runs the risk of being becoming merely social work. Furthermore, serving at the altar will bear meaning to the spirituality of the deacon. At the very moment of installing the Holy Communion, Jesus tells his disciples “But I am among you as one who serves”. Luke 22:27. Handling the gifts of bread and wine, for example in laying the table and in distribution deepens the reflection on serving and nurtures the spirituality of the diaconate. In orthodox tradition diakonia is often called the liturgy after the liturgy, the serving, resource-sharing and reconciling task given to the Church. The link between the sacrament of the altar and the sacrament of the brother and sister is indissoluble.

In our Church of Sweden, the deacon serving at the altar is praxis in some parishes, but to our understanding far too seldom. And still being a question if this is part of the “job” or rather based on ones own act as a voluntary, as any Christian.

However, all this work with integrating diaconate inside the Ministry or the connection between outreach work and the liturgy has not been without a certain resistance. There were and might still be, lay-persons as well as pastors that even if they highly regard diaconal activities still do not regard the diaconate as an essential part of the very being of the church. The deacon is given the task of transcending borders, and to build bridges, a “go-between” connecting the center of the church (worship) and the surrounding society. The call of the deacon is to edify and inspire the congregation to take diaconal responsibility, to respond to the vocation of the “common diaconate”, to be a church in the world (contextual) but not of the world. The mandate of the deacon,

to be a leader in the congregation was made obvious and visible in the Church Ordinance, 2000, where the three-fold ministry was explained as the one ministerial office of our church. In order to be trustworthy and retain the identity of diakonia, in social work and efforts directed outside the congregation, a strong connection to the service of worship is essential. At occasions this was interpreted as trespassing into the sphere of the pastor, probably due to at least two factors:

Preceding the Church Assembly 1999, and when the decision was taken (Church Ordinance 2000) there was no clear information from the national level of the church concerning the ambition of the threefold ministry. There was an ongoing debate, but to a certain extent it was understood as a sole question of the diaconate itself, and not really a concern of the whole church with bearings to the identity of the church. Secondly, during the last part of the pastors training (the Pastoral Institute) neither Diakonia, nor the diaconate within the threefold ministry was to be found in the curriculum. Pastors to be, have throughout the years, been instructed that there is one leader within the congregation – the pastor.

In the Church Ordinance, Diakonia is clearly defined as one of the four fundamental bearers of the Church of Sweden. (Worship, Education, Diakonia and Mission) As a result, this suggests more than one kind of leadership within the congregation, this leader should be reporting to, accountable to the head of the parish, (normally the vicar). The leadership in a congregation entails several different professionals building up and equipping the congregants through education (children, youths, grown-ups) as well as in the call to mission work (the common priesthood). The leadership should, accordingly, define itself as one team with a shared mission, shared objective, subordinate to the head of the parish.

How do we look upon our service, diaconal work?

In diaconal work/service, three different levels or foci, could be discerned. If the Holy Trinity is our point of departure, we find that these levels correspond to the interrelation work of the Triune God.

1) To help. Reactive diaconal work.

Acute action of emergency. To support, e.g. with food, housing, money or clothing.

Jesus Christ is the role model. Acts of reconciliation, the deacon as a servant.

2) To give voice. Prophetic diaconal work.

The task of advocacy and change. Rights-based work, e.g. to accompany a person to the Welfare-office to defend her/his legal rights. To speak out in protest, when structures, instead of meeting their intention, tend to become inhuman. Dignifying work. The Holy Spirit gives inspiration to acts of empowerment, the deacon as an agent of change.

3) *To restore. Proactive diaconal work.* To be engaged in restoring the brokenness of creation. To liberate and care for the whole creation, humans as well as animals and environment, demands a way of long-plan thinking. The deacon as a steward and co-worker of God the Creator. Acts of transformation. The deacon as a go-between.

The task of Reconciliation, Empowerment and Transformation is given to the whole Church and the deacon has a special call to inspire and to lead this work, (as expressed in *Diakonia in Context*.)

Diakonal work can be directed towards and carried out on the three levels of

Individuals – people must always find a refuge in the Church, be seen and respected there and be offered well-considered help as the need arises.

Groups – by bringing people together, community may be created and the exchange of experience encouraged. People may then consider their own situation in a wider perspective and creativity, which can lead to the finding of solutions to problems being nourished.

Society – there are many ways to contribute to good social developments. The fundamental task is to participate in and to support the democratic assemblies and processes that already exist. Could it be that extra-parliamentary methods, lobbying or even civil disobedience might be necessary in order to challenge those in power who neglect their responsibilities? Many parishes have for example engaged in unusual practices in order to support refugees.

The picture of diaconal work undertaken by parishes across the country may roughly be sketched like this: Care, Pastoral care, Treatment or Support.

Some reflections concerning our development

Diakonia in the Church of Sweden has often been considered to be a pioneer in ecumenical circles. One reason can be a clear connection of the diaconate in the Ministry and the diaconal work strongly connected to a local congregation with a social outreach.

During the years 1995-1999 many of us were engaged in the work of integrating the diaconate inside the Ministry in connection with the Church Synod 1999 (where also the new relationship with the State was decided). We were then many that looked positive upon the future of the diaconate and the diaconal development inside the Church of Sweden. This integration of the diaconate inside the Ministry was a natural development that had been discussed since 1920-1930.

With this integration in the Ministry and connection with the liturgy together with its clear social profile the diaconal work in the Church of Sweden was a pioneer.

The Church of Sweden has in spite of its 15 years of being free from the State not succeeded in a clear way to develop the responsibility of the diaconal work of the Church. In spite there are a lot of investigations being done on a central level, research projects, local projects of development (often with resources from European Union) it takes far too long time to make it become part of praxis of the official Church. Although when it comes to the public opinion there is a great confidence when it comes

to the work of deacons and diaconal work. The diaconal praxis is what people in general consider to be trustworthy when it comes to the Church of Sweden. It might even be the reason sometimes that a person still is a member of the Church of Sweden.

But in spite of this fact the Church of Sweden chooses to focus more and more on its own structures and has difficulties to name diakonia/diaconal work with its real name. Often in official text/literatures, lectures, research projects it's written and spoken more about the social engagement in the Church or the engagement and responsibility in the society. We ask ourselves if this is an act of deliberate or not? Is the responsibility for the Church when it comes to the society and peoples vulnerable situations in life something different then the diaconal responsibility for every congregation of the church of Sweden according the Church Ordinance?

Today the Church of Sweden is a clear part of the voluntary sector.

During the period of construction of the welfare system, from the 1950s onwards, society was expected to provide most of the work of healthcare, education and care, as a matter of public concern. Today Sweden like most of the rest of Europe sees an ever-creasing number of actors within the areas of care and education. It is becoming increasingly frequent to find parishes or ecclesiastical institutions providing care either on the basis of grants for special project, or by delegation from the public sector.

These diaconal projects are example of efforts undertaken by ideologically based non-profit making organizations. These efforts and institutions belong within a sector that is neither public nor private, but which is sometimes called "the voluntary sector". In the EU-context, the terms the third sector, the social economy or the civil society are used.

The sector is frequently asked for and is expected to grow. By implication, this means that new choices and initiatives face parishes and diaconal institutions. It may be a request to act as a gathering force behind or together with various local actors. It may also be a request for the parish to sponsor various projects, such as institutions for care, rehabilitation, or cafés and maybe particularly in sparsely populated rural areas a post-office or a computer center.

The social debate about care and education in the future often includes an invitation to the voluntary sector, precisely because it is not driven by any profit-making interest.

Traditionally, diaconal work has often been directed towards elderly, whether or not they have been previously known or active in the parish. Gradually, as an increasing number of parishes engage in analyses of the needs and in co-operation with other local agencies, the discussions about priorities become ever more prominent and new target-groups are identified. Temporary efforts often in the form of specific projects, also become increasingly common forms of working. A growing number parishes co-ordinate their work with neighboring parishes, particularly with regard to give financial assistance.

When it comes to the Institutes of Diaconia (City missions included) they are already involved and a active part of the Swedish welfare system of today. Sometimes with a clear assignment from the municipality or other authority (connected with money). Sometimes as an organization in the role of a lobbyist working with groups

or individuals (often so called exposed/marginalized people) and not being paid for (using money from gifts and solidarity sponsoring). Trying in this work to be a voice together with exposed groups and individuals. Somehow the Institutes of Diaconia still feels that they are conducting a lot of diaconal service and social work not really acknowledge by the Church.

Integrated in the local congregation

Through the Church Ordinance of year 2000 the diaconate was integrated in the ordained ministry and was given a specific role in the life of the church, a distinct connection between Church of Sweden and the diaconate was established, and diakonia became (well) integrated in the life of the parishes.

In the year 1998 the council for parish ministry sponsored an attempt to define the concept of diaconal ministry: *Diaconal ministry is the task, given to the Church and founded on the love of Christ, of meeting one another in vulnerable situations of life, by participation, respect and mutual solidarity.*

Currently expectations are often high as the work on the Parish instruction documents gets underway (Every parish shall have a so called Parish instruction. The vicar and the parochial church council in co-operation with the diocesan chapter shall work out the instruction. It contains five point and number two reads: *A pastoral program for the basic task of the parish: to provide worship, and engage in teaching, diaconal work and mission*). To meet and discuss how specific goals and the work profile of the parish may be formulated, provide new opportunities. Such discussions may reveal the choice of the way ahead and may contribute to new forms for diaconal ministry and work being found.

Challenges in the society of today

The Swedish society has developed enormously the past few years, not only for the better. Also in our country, we face a development where an increasing number of people fail to get support from the social welfare; the gap between wealthy and poor is growing wider. Children are brought up in a situation of poverty (according to Swedish definition). Immigration and the increasing number of refugees are highly demanding, especially to small rural local authorities with limited economy.

Unfortunately this has also lead to a significant increase of xenophobia and hostile attitudes towards vulnerable groups. Racist opinions and even a political party with a (hidden) racist agenda is part of the current political situation in Sweden.

The government, the state, has no longer a monopoly when it comes to welfare-service, (regulations of the European Union) entailing a growing market of private schools, hospitals and homes for care of old people. These private enterprises should mostly be purchased to the lowest price, meaning that the assignment or care itself is impoverished since private companies are making profit from what is actually run by means of common taxes.

Since the year 2000, when the strong link between the state and Church of Sweden was weakened, if not dissolved completely, our church is now part of the voluntary sector, “the third sector” and thus faces a new situation. This means that, after a long period of break, Church of Sweden again has the possibility to be an agent in the welfare-sector (as was the case until the year 1862, when the church was the most powerful agent, if not the only, concerning education, healthcare and care).

What deacons, working in our parishes today, unanimously notice, is a growing social maladjustment and an escalating exclusion of people from the labor market (especially of those with a limited work-capacity and/or immigrants).

The challenge to the deacons, how to meet the diaconal task today, is formulated in the Church Ordinance 2000: *Wherever there is human suffering, it is the call of the deacon to intervene and inspire others to act responsible.*

Representatives for parishes and institutions diaconal work have a mission to put the visible, local needs, the expressions for human suffering, in a larger perspective. Then it is not sufficient to open a soup-kitchen or a shelter, just as it's not sufficient to help simply on an individual level (although, not questioning the value of this work). At the end of the day it is about help which empowers a human being and liberates strength rather than paralyzing feelings of subordination.

It takes analysis of society and an internal discussion amongst the staff, within the parish or institution regarding how to prioritize. For example, concerning resource allocation within the budget, areas of responsibilities, who has the power to interpret the agenda, etc. Something which should end up in an active debate in the society.

The deacon, as the leader and source of inspiration of the diaconal responsibility of the congregation, has a vocation and a mandate (through the ordination) to be a critical voice, not only in society, but also towards a too self-occupied church.

There has been a development, from “traditional” diaconal work, such as, home-visits, counselling, office hours, to an increasing focus on the rights-based perspective of the work.

To represent those who are in an exposed and vulnerable position in life, means that you argue in favor of those without power, and you defend their human rights. Thereby, the deacon exercises part of the power of authority, which is at the disposal of the parish or the institution. A power pointing back at the example of Jesus. In this work of external empowerment, a complicating issue might be when there is a lack of balance to be found in the structure of power within the church itself.

An indistinctness between different ministries, between professions or between staff and elected representatives, will restrain and hold the diaconal work back. A political, prophetic diakonia is about pointing out injustices wherever they are exercised. This shows the importance of theological reflection closely linked to the perspective of praxis.

It is an obvious challenge to the church to attack and fight against, unrighteous situations of life and the reasons and origin of this injustice, on a local, as well as on a global level. Prophetic diakonia exercises faithfulness to the promise of the equal value of every human being and his/her dignity and sanctity. The prophetic vocation entails to reveal injustices and to fight for and defend justice, including human rights.

Diakonia has a call to build bridges, as well on the local as on the global level. Diaconal work should be a step ahead and maintain a holistic perspective – that is, to bring together, praise and grace with rights and justice and care.

Currently, quite a number of inquiries and reports on diakonia and development of diaconal work within Church of Sweden, are being produced. Concerning diaconal pastoral programs, models are being worked out, aiming at measuring results, quality and quantity, and ultimately to make diakonia more visible in efficient ways. In the parishes this kind of work is carried out in connection with the so called “Parish Instruction”, to produce this document is a duty of every parish in our church. In some cities there have been efforts to co-ordinate the diaconal work of the parishes in “Diaconal Centers”, in order to bring resources and knowledge together and to be able carry out the work in more efficient ways.

In research (especially in social science) there is likewise a growing amount of research-projects looking into the diaconal work of the parishes, as well as the rather new area of deacons in the function of heads within the parish.

In a few of our dioceses, there is ongoing work of development in the field called social economy.

These studies are investigating the diaconal work of Church of Sweden in relation to the visible need in society of agents within welfare-service.

Many parishes are currently working intensely with integration; far-reaching work is carried out locally in order to receive newly arrived refugees. This kind of work is, and needs to be increasingly prioritized.

On a national level, Church of Sweden is working out “Guide-lines/material” concerning the role of the church in welfare-work in a social political context.

Consequently, it can be stated that there has been progress in the development of diaconal work, and that it has adopted according to current challenges and needs.

Final considerations

Looking back to our initial question, we realize that the answer is two-headed. Both a great development for the deacons and diaconal work since the year 2000 and a disappointment close to backlash. So much still remains to be implemented.

Perhaps it will never be better than this as it lays in the nature of Diakonia itself.

There is a Swedish saying, “to have a stone in your shoe”, meaning to become aware of something that is disturbing and unpleasant. It is part of the deacon’s call to be a harsh eye-opener, a challenge to comfort, my own comfort and the comfort of the congregation and the Church.

To most of us it is probably easier to gather and sing a hymn, listen to a sermon and pray together, rather than thinking about what the hymn, sermon and prayer actually challenge us to do. One among the tasks of the deacon, is to make the congregation aware of this connection (*ora et labora*), and arouse the question, how can I contribute my share? This becomes strikingly obvious when the deacon stands up dur-

ing service pointing out local challenges, sometimes just outside the entrance of the church, – a temporarily living of beggars in the street, housing for asylum in a terrible condition, lacking almost everything that makes it a home, children at risk becoming homeless, poverty among elderly, scarcely having means for a proper meal a day.

How often isn't it that we become blind to what is obvious?

The challenge of the deacon is to inspire and lead the congregation to become a vibrant community, caring for each other in prayers as in praxis.

This service will always challenge our comfort and there is a risk that we choose to close our ears and eyes. That is why it is essential to look upon the Ministry as one body connecting theology, liturgy and diakonia. Likewise, the Church is one body, encompassing all the children of God, with their resources and needs.