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## DIAKONIA IN THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF ICELAND<sup>1</sup>

*Diaconia na Igreja Evangélica Luterana da Islândia*

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**Abstract:** This article gives a broad overview of diaconia in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland, ELCI. The issues addressed cover historical background and present practice of diaconia. The subjects included are general introduction of the country, the structure and governance of ELCI, the history of diaconia in ELCI and on to the present state of affairs. Diaconia in ELCI as a separate ministry only did start to develop in the latter half of the 20th century and is still in its early stages. Humanitarian effort was carried out by the general public, both organized and on an individual level. Nevertheless, these were often inspired by the Christian message. The first diaconal effort of ELCI were special ministries of pastors assigned to select task. Diaconia in ELCI is still growing and developing its identity, due to domestic needs and inspiration from international ecclesiastic relations. The credibility of the Church is conditioned by the practice of diaconia because diaconia is at the core of the Church's nature as community and its mission in the world.

**Keywords:** Diaconia. Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland (ELCI). Iceland.

**Resumo:** Este artigo oferece um panorama amplo da diaconia na Igreja Evangélica Luterana de Islândia, ELCI. As questões tratadas lidam com o pano de fundo histórico e a prática atual da diaconia. Os assuntos incluídos são: introdução geral ao país, a estrutura e governança da ELCI, a história de diaconia na ELCI e a atual conjuntura. Diaconia na ELCI como um ministério separado só começou a se desenvolver na última metade do século 20 e ainda está nas fases iniciais. Esforços humanitários eram praticados pelo público em geral, tanto organizado como individualmente. Mesmo assim, esses eram muitas vezes inspirados pela mensagem cristã. O primeiro esforço diaconal da ELCI eram ministérios especiais de pastores/as designados/as para tarefas específicas. Diaconia na ELCI ainda está crescendo e está desenvolvendo sua identidade devido

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■ a necessidades domésticas e à inspiração de relações eclesiais internacionais. A credibilidade da igreja é condicionada pela prática da diaconia, porque diaconia está no centro da natureza da igreja como comunidade e da sua missão no mundo.

■ **Palavras-chave:** Diaconia. Igreja Evangélica Luterana de Islândia (ELCI). Islândia



## **Introduction**

This article gives a broad overview of diaconia in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland, ELCI. The issues addressed cover historical background and present practice of diaconia. The subjects included are general introduction of the country, the structure and governance of ELCI, the history of diaconia in ELCI and on to the present state of affairs. Diaconia in ELCI as a separate ministry only did start to develop in the latter half of the 20th century and is still in its early stages. This is based on the fact that typical diaconal ecclesiastic institutions of 19th century Northern Europe were never established in Iceland. Instead their tasks were carried out by civil humanitarian effort, both organized and on an individual level. Nevertheless, these were often inspired by the Christian message. Diaconia in ELCI is still growing and developing its identity, due to domestic needs and inspiration from international ecclesiastic relations. The credibility of the Church is conditioned by the practice of diaconia because diaconia is at the core of the Church's nature as community and its mission in the world.

## **About Iceland: the country and the nation**

Iceland is a 103,000 km<sup>2</sup> island in Europe, located in the North Atlantic Ocean with a population of 330.000. The climate is cool temperate maritime with four seasons. Precipitation is high and winters are mild. Yet nature is often unyielding with rough weather and active volcanoes. This big island is scarcely populated along the coastline with most dense habitation in the capital area of Reykjavik.

Icelanders have their own language, Icelandic, and their own distinct culture and history. In sociodemographic, Iceland is part of the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden), and strongly related to them in origin and history. Iceland was a relatively poor, agricultural society until World War II. After the war, changes have been rapid, turning it into a modern, urban society. Iceland did not have an active role in WWII but as its geographical location was strategically important it was occupied early on by British Army and later US army. After the war a NATO base was established, run by US Armed Forces until 2006 when it was dissolved.

Compulsory, free education is 10 years from age 6 to 15. Most go on to higher education. Literacy is general. The model for the country's welfare system is similar to other Nordic countries. There is a subsidized state health care system. Iceland has a unique parental leave system with 3 months maternal leave, 3 months paternal leave and 3 months that the parents can divide between themselves. Average life expectancy is 81 years for males and 84 for females.

Electricity for households and industry is relatively cheap and comes from hydro and geothermal power stations. 95% of all houses in Iceland have geothermal heating, available all year round at a very low cost. Fossil fuel is only used for transportation. Therefore, more than 85% of the energy consumption in Iceland comes from renewable sources. It might be of interest that the aluminum industry, all in foreign ownership, consumes at least 70% of the energy produced in Iceland.

Iceland is not a member of the European Union. In general, unemployment rate is low, registered 3,2% in July 2015.<sup>4</sup> The country was badly hit by an economic crisis in 2008 and still suffering the consequences. During the crisis unemployment increased to 11%. Inflation has often been very high but has decreased in the past years. In July 2015 it was 1, 9%.<sup>5</sup> Main export industries are fish and fish products, aluminum and tourism. The economy is built on service and tourism, industry and energy, technology, fishing and agriculture.<sup>6</sup>

## The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland (ELCI)

### *History of ELCI*

Iceland was settled in late 9<sup>th</sup> century by mostly Nordic and Celtic people. Christianity was established formally by legislation around year 1000. The Catholic Church played a major role in shaping the Icelandic culture. In the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Lutheran Reformation was established with hardly any resistance and most of the pastors converted. Monasteries dissolved as consequence which greatly affected diaconal services. Instead local, municipal authorities became responsible for social help and health care which was very primitive and scarce. This arrangement did not change much until urbanization began in early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Bible was translated into Icelandic 1584. This was very important for church life and literacy in Icelandic. For a long time it was one of the duties of the pastor to test children's reading abilities.

Iceland was under Danish rule until the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the church was governed by Danish authorities. In 1874 Iceland gained its own constitution in relation to Denmark, with distinct laws for the church which changed it from a state church to a national church. In 1998 legislation was changed which made the church more autonomous in its internal matters although the connection to the state is still very close.

The 1874 constitution established freedom of religion, yet membership to the ELCI remained almost 100% for a long time to come. Membership of ELCI today is about 75% of the population. The numbers have declined rapidly from 90% in the past two decades. When all Christian denominations are included, a total of 86% of

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<sup>4</sup> "Unemployment 3.2% in July." *Statistics Iceland*, <http://www.statice.is/Pages/444?NewsID=11346> Accessed: August 30, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> "Consumer prices up by 0.16% between months." *Statistics Iceland*. <http://www.statice.is/Pages/444?NewsID=11318> Accessed: August 30, 2015

<sup>6</sup> *Iceland in Figures 2015*, Reykjavik: Hagstofan, June 2015.

the population is registered as a member of a church. The Catholic Church has been growing. It was 1,5 % in 2000 but is now 3.5%. One of the reasons is catholic immigrants, mostly from Poland.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the high membership in ELCI, members actively involved in parish work are few. Church attendance for Sunday services is lower than 5%, often regarded as a habit of the confessional member. However, church traditions have a very strong cultural bond so that most members have their children baptized and confirmed. Most weddings and funerals take place in a church, officiated by a pastor. Many people like to go to church during Advent and on Christmas Eve. Attendance at Easter is much lower. Although the Christian heritage still shapes the society in many ways, it is developing towards secularization and multiculturalism. As for liturgy, ECLI has kept much of its Catholic heritage through liturgical renewal, alongside the strong Lutheran confession.

### *Structure of ELCI*

Iceland is one diocese under the bishop of Iceland. There are two suffragan bishops. The Church Assembly is the highest legislative authority of the church. It consists of 29 elected representatives, of which 14 are clergy and 15 are lay-people. A lay-person is president. The Church Council is the highest executive authority with two clergy and two lay-persons elected by the Assembly and presided by the bishop of Iceland. The bishop summons all the pastors and deacons to annual Synod. The Synod has a say in all matters of theology and liturgy to be decided by the bishop and Church Assembly.

There are about 280 Lutheran congregations within ELCI. A congregation is a geographically defined parish. The country is divided into nine deaneries. Operating now is a total of 128 pastors and 21 deacons. Gender equality is accepted as a general rule in ECLI. Women have been ordained as pastors since 1974 and now there are 47 women in ministry. The first woman bishop was ordained in 2012. However, there is only one male deacon in ministry at the moment. Until 1980's the Church has trouble recruiting qualified candidates for ordained ministry but now there are more people graduating and fulfilling the qualifications than are needed for vacant posts.

Many parish tasks are carried out by non-ordained theologians and deacon candidates, some as paid staff and others as volunteers together with lay staff and lay volunteers. Most congregations have various children's programs, youth work and some ministry to the elderly. Pastoral care and counseling is exclusively provided by pastors and deacons. Catechism is mostly limited to confirmands. Some churches provide teaching on matters of faith for the general member. Some parishes have active diaconal services but often limited to the elderly, some recruiting volunteers for the tasks at hand. Music life is often very active in the parishes. Most congregations have choir and an organist is usually on staff.

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<sup>7</sup> "Mannfjöldi – Talnaefni – PX." *Statistics Iceland*, <http://goo.gl/918jyD> Accessed: August 20, 2015.

Each parish is self-governing with an elected parish council. Each parish is a financially, independent unit. The council is responsible for the church buildings and church services in their area such as educational and diaconal activities, children and youth work. The pastors are responsible for the liturgy and the sacraments. The size of each parish is very diverse in this remote country. The biggest are in Reykjavík and Akureyri, with members in each of up to 14.000. In rural areas some parishes are as small as ten members or less.

The state collects the membership fee for every religious organizations and returns it to the congregations or organizations. The salary of pastors is provided by the Icelandic state by a special agreement with ELCI which in turn assigned assets to the state as source of income for the salary payments.

## Diaconia in ELCI

Diaconia is defined thus in ELCI policy paper for 2004-2010: “Diaconia is the role of the church to care for the neighbor and help him” with reference to Matthew 25.35: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in”.<sup>8</sup> This policy is still in effect.

The policy states that the ministry of the church is revealed in the Christian faith and love by doing. The church should seek out those in need for care and support, cooperate with other humanitarian organizations and participate in interdisciplinary efforts for pastoral care, crisis counseling and caring for the sick. Special attention should be given to people in difficult life situations such as lonely and isolated people, single parent families, addicts, the long term ill and their loved ones as well as people that have suffered some kind of trauma. For this purpose the church encourages congregations to be active in home visitations to the elderly, the lonely and the sick, to train volunteers for involvement and to support pastoral care within hospitals and nursing homes. In areas of pastoral care and counseling, special attention should be given to the bereaved, young families and couples counseling. Congregations should support Christian relief work and mission by providing funds and work effort, domestic and abroad, and contribute to financial support of the poor in cooperation with other relief organizations.

The policy seems to focus mainly on pastoral care as presence through counseling people in various difficult life situations. The policy mentions physical needs once and only in the very last paragraph, the poor. In this context it is noteworthy that taking the Offering at Sunday service is not customary and many parishioners find it embarrassing to give money during a service.

It is of interest to compare this policy to the role of the welfare state, which defines Icelandic society and its governance. It is the legal duty of the Icelandic state

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<sup>8</sup> “Stefna og starfsáherslur Þjóðkirkjunnar 2004-2010.” Þjóðkirkjan, p. 11, [http://kirkjan.is/kerfi/skraarsofn/kirkjan-frettir/2011/12/stefna\\_og\\_starfsaherslur\\_thjodkirkjunnar\\_2004\\_2010.pdf](http://kirkjan.is/kerfi/skraarsofn/kirkjan-frettir/2011/12/stefna_og_starfsaherslur_thjodkirkjunnar_2004_2010.pdf) Accessed: July 30, 2015

to ensure that people have food, clothing and housing. However, welfare services often come short and funds are limited. Regulations cause people in need of more to go lacking in critical needs, such as housing costs, sufficient food and health care. Various non-profit charities are operated for such overflow, The Church Aid being one of them. Diaconia can be viewed as complimentary to official support and it goes without saying that people need pastoral care as well.

From a theological viewpoint it can be argued that the narrow development of diaconia in practice is a consequence of Lutheran theology which emphasizes justification by faith alone, causing ELCI to be rather liturgically oriented on worship as profession of faith as opposed to good deeds. The policy leaves the practical implementation up to each parish as it is able and does not outline what the basic tasks and services of the congregations should be in terms of diaconia. It mainly defines preferred recipients of service. Parish funds are greatly financially burdened by housing costs, liturgical music and outsourced, paid services. Consequently, there is often little left for practical outreach to the needy. This raises questions about priorities in each congregation, if diaconia is inevitably opted out or if it is low on the agenda.

It is clear from the Church Assembly declarations<sup>9</sup> that every baptized person has a duty to practice diaconia. It is also important to have a professional approach in the congregations and deaneries, in special services and institutions of the church. Even though the pastors and deacons serve as leaders in this field, every job in churches should be grounded in a diaconal purpose, i.e. to share the Christian faith in deeds with a caring presence.

The term “diaconia” is vague for the general public since foreign words are seldom used in the Icelandic language but translated instead, new words made or old ones recycled in meaning. The Icelandic term for diaconia, “kærleikspjónusta”, means “service of love” which is also vague and broad. This gives space to call almost everything a congregation does “a service of love” with the risk leaving out the tough task of actually addressing people’s dire needs on a professional level. The reality is that much consolation is found in practical help. This raises the question if diaconal ministries in Iceland should put more effort in advocacy for social justice since public welfare is secured by law but tend to fall short of provision by official institutional practice, mostly because of lacking funds.

For more than the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the church had no theological emphasis on diaconia even though the public welfare system was still in its early stages. After 1959 the church leadership was more positive towards diaconal work. This direction has gradually grown stronger. The change began after a pastor was first assigned to a hospital in 1963. As more pastors were assigned to special posts, the term Special Ministries was coined for their fields of service. In 1998 the Bishop of Iceland created the motto of ELCI: Praying, Proclaiming, Serving.<sup>10</sup> By this, diaconia

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<sup>9</sup> “Gerðir kirkjuþings 2006 númer 15.” Kirkjuþing. <http://www2.kirkjuthing.is/mal/2006/15> Accessed: July 30, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Sigurbjörnsson, Karl. *Í birtu náðarinnar: hirðisbréfi til íslensku kirkjunnar*. Reykjavík: Skálholtsútgáfan, 2001.

was declared an integral part of the ELCI. This is in harmony with the established theology of the three dimensions of being a church as described by The Lutheran World Federation: The communion (koinonia) is made visible through the expression of proclamation (kerygma), celebration (leiturgia) and service (diaconia).<sup>11</sup> Thus, community/communion is built on diaconia, not alone, but not without it either, both in policy and in practice.

International relations have strengthened diaconal work in ELCI. Diaconia is often on the agenda at international meeting. This facilitates discussion and empowers the status of diaconal work. Examples of such impact are the World Council of Churches Lima text of Faith and Order from 1982<sup>12</sup> and the Porvoo Statement from 1992<sup>13</sup>. Various publications from LWF, WCC, Eurodiaconia and the Nordic churches have been translated into Icelandic and have proved useful for development of diaconia.

## Church institutions and special ministry

ELCI has several pastors and deacons designated to special ministries, each focusing on a particular group of people. ELCI has two diaconal institutions: the Icelandic Church Aid and the Family Service. In addition ELCI is also represented in a nationwide Crisis Response Program.

### *Pastors and Deacons in special ministry*

As parishes grow bigger the need for more specialized services increase. Large institutions within parishes need more service than the parishes can provide and/or afford. Special Ministries were founded by ELCI for such situations and pastors assigned to serve prisoners, people with disabilities, deaf people, for immigrants/refugees/asylum seekers and as hospital chaplains. Pastors of Special Ministries provide support for their clients, their families and other professionals who attend to them. They cooperate with other professional to advocate for their clients. Liturgy is also part of their services. A total of 12 pastors serve in special ministries today, of which 8 are hospital chaplains. Most hospital chaplains are hired by the hospitals and only one is assigned by ELCI. Before the economic crisis in 2008, there were also special ministries for alcoholics and drug addicts as well youth at risk in the centrum of Reykjavik. From time to time pastors have provided special ministry in the Nordic countries and in England, initially related to hospital situations.

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<sup>11</sup> Nordstokke, Kjell, ed. *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment*. Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2009, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry." World Council of Churches, 1982. <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text> Accessed: July 30, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> "The Porvoo Statement." The Porvoo Communion, 1992. [http://www.porvoocommunion.org/porvoo\\_communion/statement/the-statement-in-english/](http://www.porvoocommunion.org/porvoo_communion/statement/the-statement-in-english/) Accessed: July 30, 2015.

Deacons have been hired by various institutions. They serve under the guidance of the bishop like the chaplains hired by hospitals. Deacons provide pastoral care in schools, hospitals retirement and nursing homes and in assisted living facilities for disabled people.

### *The Icelandic Church Aid*

The Icelandic Church Aid (ICA) was founded in by ELCI in 1969 after a nationwide fund-raising initiative for relief work in Biafra in Africa. ICA is an independent foundation within the National Church of Iceland with the aim to initiate and coordinate relief work and assist people in need, domestic and abroad, regardless of its cause and regardless of nationality, race and religion or political ideas. ICA is mostly financed by public contributions through fundraising campaigns but it also has regular supporters. ICA's staff are lay professionals, a total of 6 persons.

The domestic aid of ICA concerns people in financial need. People apply for aid and must provide documentation of income and expenditure for assessment of need. Assistance available are gift card in food stores, second hand clothing and direct payment of medication and medical cost. There is also an aid fund for young people to finish vocational education or secondary education until they can apply for state study loans. ICA also offers counseling free of charge, such as financial counseling, family and individual counseling and life coaching.<sup>14</sup>

ELCI is a member of two European organizations, Eurodiaconia and EAPN (European Anti-Poverty Network). They work against poverty and social exclusion in Europe and focus on advocacy which has strengthened such work within ICA. The ICA Domestic Aid was awarded by Eurodiaconia in 2011 for its voluntary work after the economic crisis in 2008.

Many volunteers work for ICA. They manage the second hand clothing collection and perform first contact data collection when people apply for aid. There is also a youth organization operating within ICA, Changemaker, and is a member of Changemaker International. Their agenda is "to attack fundamental causes of the unequal distribution of resources between rich and poor countries."<sup>15</sup>

### *Family Counseling and clinical supervision center (FC)*

Every pastor meets people with marital and family issues. Divorcees are a large clientele. ELCI established the FC to provide counseling by licensed professionals. The service has a low profile but a high quality standard. The fees for professional services are low and can also be free of charge. The staff is 3 lay professionals.

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<sup>14</sup> "Icelandic Church Aid – A Short Overview." Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar. <http://help.is/id/9> Accessed: August 15, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> "Changemaker Iceland." Changemaker International. <http://www.changemakerint.org/index.php/iceland> Accessed: August 15, 2015.

The counseling center also provides clinical supervision for church staff, especially the pastors and deacons. The goals are to help church staff to improve their practices for better ministerial work and to prevent burnout.

### *The Church of Iceland Crisis Response Program*

The Church of Iceland's Crisis Response Program coordinates the church's response to national/regional crisis (natural disasters, mass casualty incidents) and provides a plan for the church to cooperate with its partners, such as the Red Cross, health-services, police and social services in such situations. The response program provides a professional approach to crisis management with a pre-planned, coordinated response and training of pastors, deacons and other personnel in the whole country. The program has a section for each profession, with a checklist and direction for what is expected and how to respond. The main goal is to ensure the best support to all affected by the crisis and to make the best use of resources.

## **The ordained ministry of deacons**

The structure of diaconal work has developed rather differently than in Scandinavia and Germany as typical diaconal institution which were common there around 1900 were never established in Iceland. In 1915 a nursing school was founded in Iceland but the church opposed to making it a diaconal church institution. The diaconal profession was established in steps from the 1960's. When interest arose in establishing the order of deacons around 1990, the church had to find a way for education and training. Traditional diaconal institutions of earlier times abroad were in transition and even shut down due to changing times so these were not suitable models.

In 1981 a new Service Book was authorized in ELCI which included an ordination rite for deacons. However, a reference to diaconia was not included in the ordination text. No deacons were ordained until 1995. A decision by the Church Assembly in 1990 made it clear that the church was willing to look at the ministry as three fold; bishop, pastor and deacon.<sup>16</sup>

In 1993, formal education for deacons was established at the University of Iceland by request of the bishop. Diaconia became an established profession. As such it is still defining its identity. There are common misconceptions about of the profession. Deacons are still asked if they are sub-pastors or if they have not yet finished their theological studies and are helping the pastor. When ordained deacons first started to work, some pastors seemed to fear that deacons would take their jobs. Female pastors, in particular were concerned that deacons would be recruited instead of them. That was not the aim of the deacon profession and did not turn out to be the case. Deacons considered their work as different from the pastoral office, with new tasks in the church. From the diaconate position, the church is not complete without diaconia.

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<sup>16</sup> *Gerðir kirkjuþings 1990*. Kirkjuþing: Reykjavík 1990. p. 150-163.

Education of deacons is provided by the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Iceland. There are two options for diaconal studies. One is a BA degree, 180 ECTS, a combination of theology and selected courses with the Faculty of Sociology. The other is a 60 ECTS diploma. Prerequisites for the diploma is a university degree as teacher, nurse or social worker. There is a gender imbalance in the group of diaconal students and among ordained deacons as well. Teachers, nurses and social worker in Iceland are mostly female. The curriculum for diaconal students is more or less the same as for theological students on the pastoral track. The course on diaconal history and diaconia is only 2 ECTS. Mandatory occupational training is provided by the church. To become a deacon, one must be ordained by the bishop or the suffragan bishops in a cathedral. By July 2015 the bishop had ordained a total of 50 deacons to congregations, NGO's and institutions like hospitals, retirement and nursing homes and schools. Of those, 46 are female and 6 are male. Only 21 deacon are at work today.

A hunting question arises, why this many deacons are ordained but relatively few remain in position. Naturally, some retire with age. Many have been assigned to temporary projects which have not led to permanently established ministries. It is not mandatory for congregations to have a deacon. Some congregations hire people for a diaconal ministry without a deacon education. In some cases there seems to be a trend to hire a pastoral candidate to execute tasks previously assigned to a deacon and with time, the deacon post is gone.

## **Final considerations**

ELCI did not attend formally to diaconia in the first half of the 20th century. Diaconia began to develop as a ministry in the second half, first with special ministries of pastors, then by diaconal institutions (ICA and FC) and later with deacons. Diaconia is mostly practiced by offering counseling to people in difficult situations with the exception of ICA which is directly involved in practical diaconia.

ELCI lacks the self-identity of being a field worker among people in practical need. Instead its identity is more formed by the tradition of ministering the Word through preaching and counseling. Counseling and a caring presence make low demand on resources. Even with the entry of deacons as an ordained ministry, teaching still remains the main task of their ministry instead of practical diaconia. Teaching is one more expression of the ministry of the Word.

The distance between the policy makers and the executive powers is great. ELCI has an established policy of diaconia but the practice grows very slowly in the congregations. The ideal future would be for congregations to develop ways for their parishioners to engage actively in diverse ways of practical application of diaconia. The work must be governed by professional knowledge and practice. But it is equally important that all who are baptized grow in the calling to care for their neighbor.

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