



ARCHBISHOP HURLEY'S RATIONALE FOR CHOOSING THE NAME DIAKONIA

From 1962 – 1965, Archbishop Hurley attended the various sessions of the Second Vatican Council in Rome, along with 2,500 other Catholic bishops from the whole world. This event gave a great boost to his awareness of the need for social justice. He felt greatly encouraged that the Church had officially given support for the difficult struggle he had been involved in since becoming a bishop in 1947 – he felt more committed than ever to do whatever he could to help the Church play its role in ending apartheid.

His thinking had also been given a boost in another way, that was to understand the importance of ecumenism, that no Church should do on its own what could be done with others. Moreover he knew that no church on its own could tackle the massive problem of apartheid. He also realised acutely that the Church was not in a strong position to talk about apartheid – a problem of division among people – when it was itself so divided.

Strongly influenced by the Second Vatican Council and by the immense frustration of black people in South Africa, by the early 1970s he was convinced that the Church should undertake a massive programme to bring about social change both among blacks and whites. Otherwise there would be an explosion of anger and frustration on the part of black people, met by intransigence of hardened white attitudes. And this explosion would have tragic consequences.

In a paper he gave on 30 January 1974, entitled simply “DIAKONIA” he made reference to Acts 6: 1 – 4, a passage that he said “tells us of the three important concerns of the early church”. I’d like to read that passage in full because for Hurley this was clearly a foundational text for the organisation, Diakonia, that he was by this time actively seeking to establish.

“About this time, when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenists made a complaint against the Hebrew: in the daily distribution their own widows were being overlooked. So the Twelve called a full meeting of the disciples and addressed them, ‘It would not be right for us to neglect the word of God so as to give out food; you, brothers must select from among yourselves seven men of good reputation, filled with the Spirit and with wisdom, to whom we can hand over this duty. We ourselves will continue to devote ourselves to prayer and to the service of the word.’

Hurley said that these words had led to the appointment of the first deacons. The three concerns of the early Church mentioned in that passage from Acts are 1. prayer, 2. the ministry of the word and 3. service to the needy, otherwise known as *diakonia*. This sort of service was indispensable for the church whose ideal was Jesus “who went about doing good” (Acts 10:38). Hurley emphasized over and over again that that service to the needy had to go hand in hand with prayer and evangelisation. The three were inseparable, though different people might concentrate on different aspects.

In this paper from 1974, Hurley spoke about how Christian *diakonia* had expressed itself in various ways down through the ages – especially in education and welfare. In the West from the Dark Ages to the Age of Revolution education and welfare were mainly the responsibility of the Church and its institutions. Gradually the state had been taking over these responsibilities.

But, said the archbishop, the need for “Church *diakonia*” never diminishes. Specific disabilities may change, but human need in one form or another persists “You have the poor with you always.” John 12:8. These human needs are: spiritual, physical, social, cultural, economic and political. The Church meets spiritual needs by prayer and preaching. But it must also meet the other needs by Christian service.

Hurley saw three broad categories of need:

1. Social welfare
2. Development
3. Liberation – which he defined as the removal of political, economic, social and cultural obstacles to development.

His view of *diakonia* was that it should be a continuum, starting with welfare, progressing through development, and moving on to liberation, though some of the Church leaders of that time urged him not to say the word “liberation” too loudly because they thought it would put the whole effort in jeopardy before it got off the ground! Such was the fearful climate of those times.

Hurley said that if we look at the world scene in relation to welfare, development and liberation, it is clear that our understanding of human needs has expanded enormously since the first deacons were appointed simply to “serve at table”, to help in the distribution of food. But clearly the fundamental need to ensure justice continued – there must be justice and equality in the distribution. The needs have grown, most needs today being social problems about which individuals working in isolation are able to do very little. What is needed now is “corporate endeavour and an organised, specialised approach.”

Hurley really begins to warm to his subject at this point of his paper and I quote: “A great many ‘deacons’ with ability, training and time at their disposal are required in the Church today to give effect to what our Christian concern should be. It is probably correct to say

that the relevance and significance of the Church in the modern world depends on how this concern is manifested. Jesus gave us love as the mark of the Christian. Where there is need, love shows itself in service, in *diakonia*. And then he asks this very significant question: Is service to human need, to the great social needs of people, the key to the future of the Church? I'm sure the answer in his own mind would have been "Yes definitely".

Then he asks another question, how will we express this broad view of *diakonia* in the circumstances of this place and this time. One of these circumstances is the division of the Christian churches. Hurley suggests an important principle: "because the healing of division is so important in our time, whatever we do in terms of *diakonia* should be ecumenical. Christian service offers the best opportunity to the churches to engage in ecumenical collaboration. Where the ministries of word and worship have their problems in the field of ecumenism, practical Christian service can offer opportunities for united action without reservation or hesitation." In that one simple paragraph he lays down a sort of charter for Diakonia – the organisation he was about to found, with the support of other church leaders. It must be ecumenical, so that it could set an example to a divided people.

And then he makes the proposal that led to the 35 years of united Christian service here in Durban, that we are celebrating this week. "It is therefore proposed that a project be undertaken to give effect to Christian concern on the basis of a two-dimensional universality: universality in its involvement of the churches, universality in its approach to human needs, whether they be in the field of welfare or development or liberation."

And he adds, "It is also proposed that the project be named DIAKONIA."

He then turns his attention to the geographical area in which this new organisation should operate. Because he sees it as something of a pioneering effort, and because of what he calls "the experimental nature of the project in its initial stages" and because he didn't want "to dissipate and frustrate the efforts" of this new organisation, he suggests that it concentrate its efforts on Durban and District as its initial field of operation.

What did he think this new organisation should do? No surprise – he sees there would be many areas of concern for Diakonia.

1. Education of white church congregations and of the white public generally about all the injustices and inequalities of South Africa:
through leaflets and pamphlets, through material for sermons, lectures, prayer services and special days, through discussion outlines and by organising educational and training events possibly in collaboration with other organisations.
2. Promotion of projects "clearly defined and limited" and he suggests three: crèches for working mothers, libraries (not only lending libraries, but also places where students could study, and providing cultural, social and recreational facilities for domestic workers.

3. Influencing commerce, industry, government and administration.
4. Promotion of self-help in poorer communities. "Diakonia should always consider as its supreme aim the promotion of self-help and self-reliance."

Then he gives some important advice: don't try to tackle all of these at once! Not sure we have always paid attention to that advice!!

He then goes on to set out a number of practical considerations about staff, the board, funding. A few things leapt out at me reading this paper 37 years after it was written:

1. To promote good communication between Diakonia and its member churches, each member church should have an organisation which could work closely with Diakonia, something like a social responsibility group or a justice and peace group.
2. Diakonia should endeavour to reflect a spirit of Christian fraternity and service rather than a rigid legalistic outlook. A very Hurley principle. – remember his motto "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."
3. Diakonia should help in establishing similar organisations in other centres, whether or not they are called Diakonia. It should respond to appeals from other parts of SA and of the world, recommending them wherever possible and practicable to participating churches and other organisations.
4. Diakonia should be a Christian (not an inter-faith organisation) "for the time being at least" for two reasons:
 - To build up in the churches a greater awareness of the need for Christian service, and to promote ecumenical collaboration among the churches. It should, nevertheless, not cultivate an exclusive spirit but "endeavour to work in close co-operation with other organisations, whether religious or secular."

Perhaps the most important principle Hurley set down for the new organisation was that it should not work on behalf of its member churches, but conscientize them so that they themselves would get involved. He sounded a strong warning note that "a vigorous and effective Diakonia that would scarcely touch the lives of congregations and their members would be a failure." He wanted Diakonia to guard against spinning off from the churches, leaving them untouched by its concerns and activities. How did he see the organisation guarding against this danger? By "constant review, regular self-examination of its success or otherwise in activating the social conscience of its member churches."

In 1985, delivering the first Denis Hurley Lecture, he proposed the idea of an annual social justice season when for about a month or so, the churches would concentrate their attention on one social issue, through the hymns, readings and prayers of the liturgy, through sermons, bible studies, exposure programmes, the church would really galvanise the energies of the churches in practical social action.

In another address at one of Diakonia's Commissioning Services, at St Faith's Church in Carlisle Street, on 2 June 1991, he suggested that perhaps the most powerful way of establishing a strong tradition of diakonia in the member churches, all should be encouraged to have small groups that would work on these issues.

"It seems to me that the pursuit of justice, so difficult and so demanding, will begin to grow only when it is pursued in or through groups or small communities dedicated to the Bible, prayer, reflection on social experience and on the action flowing from it. Can we imagine a situation in which all our churches agree to pursue such a policy, a situation in which our churches and congregations are communities of communities, churches made up of little churches – alive, biblically inspired, prayerful, concerned and active? Can we imagine the networking taking place between these communities? Can we imagine the ecumenical impact on society, the growth of Christian public opinion transforming the very soul of our society?"

*Presented by Dr Paddy Kearney
Pioneer Director of Diakonia Council of Churches
18 October 2011*