

DIAKONIA

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In the Acts of the Apostles there is a passage that tells us of the three important concerns of the early church. It reads: "During this period, when the disciples were growing in number, there was disagreement between those of them who spoke Greek and those who spoke the language of the Jews. The former party complained that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. So the twelve called the whole body of the disciples together and said, 'It would be a grave mistake for us to neglect the word of God in order to wait at table. Therefore, friends, look out seven men of good reputation from your number, men full of the Spirit and of wisdom, and we will appoint them to deal with these matters, while we devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word'". (Acts 6: 1-4)

These words led up to the appointment of the first seven deacons. The three important concerns mentioned in the passage are prayer, the ministry of the word and service of the needy, diakonia. For a body of people whose supreme value was love, whose ideal was the Master "who went about doing good" (Acts 10: 38) diakonia was indispensable, but it had to go hand in hand with prayer and evangelisation. Different people might concentrate on different aspects of the community's concerns, might be charged with leadership and responsibility in various ways, but the different concerns affected the whole community and all its members.

Christian diakonia has expressed itself in a variety of ways down the ages - most manifestly in education and welfare. In the West, from the Dark Ages to the Age of Revolution and the emergence of the modern state, education and welfare were mainly the responsibility of the Church and its institutions. And even as in countries traditionally Christian the state began to take over these responsibilities, fresh manifestations of the Church's diakonia in education and welfare came into existence in so-called mission countries. These expressions of diakonia too are gradually passing to the state, as the countries concerned, now mainly politically independent, assume responsibility for them.

But the need for Church diakonia never diminishes. Specific disabilities may change, but the reality of human need in one form or another persists - "You have the poor among you always" (John 12: 8). God's plan for humanity provides that it grows from the less perfect to the more perfect and, as long as it is in its growing and imperfect state, it will suffer need: spiritual, physical, social, cultural, economic and political. As it is the duty of the Church, the community of believers, to meet spiritual need by prayer and preaching, so it is also its responsibility to help meet other human needs by Christian service. Meeting one another's needs is one of the greatest contributions to human growth.

Needs differ according to historical situations, localities and circumstances. As human needs are understood to-day we could classify them under three broad categories, though it would not be easy to draw hard-and-fast lines between the various categories, since they interlock and overlap to a considerable degree.

The three categories are:

- (i) Social welfare, which broadly speaking refers to the needs of some persons and families in an otherwise adequate and successful society.
- (ii) Development, which comprises the needs of a society not yet at the same level of development as neighbouring societies and consequently at a disadvantage in comparison with them; it is achieved mainly through education and training and the provision of equipment.
- (iii) Liberation, which implies the removal of political, economic, social and cultural obstacles to development.

Though each category emphasises a different aspect of human need, in practice, as has been said, the categories overlap, for community development is considered an essential element in social welfare and is also integral to liberation.

Because of the political involvements usually associated with liberation and the unhappy history of direct Church involvement in politics, it would appear advisable that the Church's interest in liberation remain indirect; that is, critical and educational but not activist.

Education emerges as an important fact in all discussions of human need. We have seen how for a thousand years and more the Church was almost the sole promoter of organised education in the West. In speaking of modern needs such as development and liberation, education stands out again as the key to achievement, and this is obviously true also of social welfare. It should be noted that in all these categories of human need there are two sides to the question, the side of the "haves" and the side of the "have-nots". There are those who have something to give and those who have something to receive or to achieve - in welfare, in development, in liberation. In regard to both sides the Church has an educational duty: the duty of educating the "haves" to their responsibility in terms of Christian sharing and the duty of educating the "have-nots" in what they should aspire to in terms of achievement and participation.

As we survey the world scene in regard to welfare, development and liberation, we realise that our consciousness of human need has expanded enormously since the first deacons were appointed to "serve at table". The needs themselves have grown. Most needs to-day are social problems, problems

about which individuals working in isolation can do very little, problems that require corporate endeavour and an organised, specialised approach. A great many "deacons" with ability, training and time at their disposal are required in the Church to-day 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. Is service to human need, the great social needs of people, the key to the future of the Church? This would appear to be so, as long as we do not forget that in the Christian community the "serving at table" is inseparable from prayer and the ministry of the word.

Coming down to practicalities, how can we give expression to this broad view of diakonia in the circumstances of our place and time? Before answering this question it would be relevant to deal with one of the circumstances, the circumstances of a divided Christianity. 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.

It is, therefore, proposed that a project be undertaken to give effect to Christian concern on the basis of a two-dimensional universality: universal in its involvement of the Churches, universal in its approach to human needs, whether the need be in the field of welfare or development or liberation, understood in the sense described above.

It is also proposed that the project be named DIAKONIA.

One very practical consideration is that of the geographical area in which DIAKONIA should operate. It would seem essential that the scheme be limited to a specific and fairly restricted area, and this for two reasons: firstly, because to give a single director of Diakonia too wide a field of operations would be to dissipate and frustrate his efforts; and secondly, because of the experimental nature of the project in its initial stages. By way of illustration let us consider Durban and District as the initial field of operation for Diakonia.

POSSIBLE UNDERTAKINGS

A very superficial consideration of human need in and around Durban reveals that there are many areas of concern for Diakonia:

1. Education of White Church Congregations and of the White Public Generally:

The education envisaged would aim at creating in this sector of society an awareness of the social and economic

problems of less fortunate groups, in regard, for example, to wages, health, housing, pass laws and influx control, family situations, hostel accommodation and its social and moral implications, (a matter of grave concern at Clermont, Umlazi Glebe and Kwa Mashu) educational facilities, bursaries, social amenities, channells of communication between community and administration, worker and management; the whole vexed and complex question of domestic workers and their specific needs in the matter of wages, hours of work, transport and recreational, educational and cultural amenities.

Education to awareness in all these matters could be achieved to some extent by the dissemination of information. This pre-supposes the collection of information from such sources as the people involved in the problems and also organisations like the South African Institute of Race Relations, university faculties and institutes, trade unions and so on. Diakonia would not be a research body but a collecting and communicating agency.

It could communicate in a number of ways, for example:

- (i) by publishing informative leaflets and pamphlets and by disseminating good literature published by other bodies;
- (ii) by providing material for sermons, lectures, prayer services and special days of Christian concern and intercession;
- (iii) by providing discussion outlines based on factual information;
- (iv) by organising educational and training events, possibly in collaboration with such bodies as CELT, the Christian Institute, Challenge Groups, Justice and Peace Commissions, the Institute of Race Relations and so on.

2. Promotion of Projects:

There is a very close association between the educational activity mentioned above and the promotion of projects, for action is essential to education both as an ingredient and as a consequence. Under the heading of projects it is envisaged that Diakonia would formulate certain clearly defined and limited projects that Church groups could tackle, such as:

- (i) Provision of creches for working mothers, e.g. at Clermont where many women work in factories.

Trade unions could be very helpful in providing information and guidance.

- (ii) Provision of libraries, not only lending libraries, but places where students living in crowded conditions could work.
- (iii) Provision of cultural, social and recreational facilities for domestic workers (literacy classes, cookery classes, evening entertainment) in church halls.

3. Influencing Commerce, Industry, Government and Administration:

This would involve bringing to the notice of people in positions of power the disabilities of people dependent on them in regard, for example, many of the factors mentioned above under Education and in regard to such practical matters as toilet facilities, staff-rooms, canteens, restaurants and so on.

4. Self-Help:

Though the education and intervention of the "haves" is necessary in the solution of our grave problems, in the long run the greater contribution will come from the people who suffer under them. They must be helped to define and formulate their problems and to set about solving them through education and co-operation. Side by side with the education of the "haves" to see the needs of the "have-nots", Diakonia should always consider as its supreme aim the promotion of self-help and self-reliance among the "have-nots".

Selection of Undertakings

Obviously this multiplicity of undertakings could not be tackled all at once. Priorities would have to be decided upon and a careful selection made of realisable undertakings. This would be the duty of the organisation set up to promote the work of Diakonia.

ORGANISATION

(i) Director:

Diakonia should be built around a paid director equipped with whatever is necessary in terms of secretarial help, literature, education aids, transport and other help that may become necessary as the project develops and, hopefully, finance becomes available. One of the first requirements could be assistants able to specialise in certain aspects of the work, such as social welfare, education and so on.

(ii) Board of Management:

The director should be responsible to a Board of Management consisting of representatives of the churches. In the choice of representatives every effort should be made to ensure that a broad representation is achieved, not one of denomination, but also of race groups, men and women, laity and clergy.

(iii) Communication:

For effective communication between Diakonia and the participating churches, each church should be invited to set up an organisation to which its representatives could report regularly and from which they could receive expressions of opinion. The representatives should not be bound by such expression of opinion, but should obviously be guided by them in Board discussions. In other words the Board should be autonomous but deeply conscious of its obligation to the churches.

(iv) Funds:

These should be provided by participating churches in proportion to numbers and by appeals to funding organisations. Diakonia could cost from R12 000 per annum from the beginning.

(v) Christian Fraternity and Service:

Diakonia, though recognising the need for principles and rules of government, should endeavour to reflect a spirit of Christian fraternity and service in the conduct of its affairs rather than a rigid legalistic outlook.

(vi) Universal Concern:

Diakonia should be prepared to do all in its power, through advice and financial aid, to help in the establishment of similar organisations in other centres, whether or not they adopt the same name. What is important is purpose and motivation. In the same way, Diakonia should strive to respond to appeals for help from other parts of the country and of the world, recommending them wherever possible and practicable to participating churches and other organisations.

(vii) A Christian Project:

Diakonia, for the time being at least, should limit itself to participation by Christian Churches, for two reasons:

- (i) in order to build up in the churches a greater awareness of the need for Christian service in the solution of social problems;
- (ii) in order to promote ecumenical collaboration between the churches.

While remaining a specifically Christian project, Diakonia should not cultivate an exclusive spirit, but should endeavour to work in close co-operation with other organisations, whether religious or secular.