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Can *diakonia* be mission without ulterior motives?

Christopher Meakin

Starting from some experiences in the Church of Sweden, this short paper offers reflections on the place of *diakonia* in the mission of the church. With the perhaps provocative question in the title, it points to the need to see *diakonia* as integral to the church as the body of Christ sent to continue the ministry of spreading the Gospel, continuing Christ's mission as a whole.

In the politically radical 1960s traditional missionary projects of the church were criticised in Sweden, as elsewhere, both within and outside the church, for amongst other things using the help that was given to people in 'mission countries', in the form of poverty relief, medical care and education, indirectly to influence them to become Christians. So diaconal work had ulterior missionary motives. This was not a new objection but acquired further political and sociological dimensions in modern discourse. Today, the church would generally deny that it intentionally uses caritative projects to influence people to become Christians. The Church of Sweden would affirm that such conversions are not a precondition for receiving its help. It is often pointed out that helping one's neighbour is an integral part of Christian faith, based on the teaching and example of Christ, easily grounded in various biblical texts (for example Lk 10:25–37, Mt 25:31–46). It has been part of the life and work of the church since the beginning. Wherever the church has taken root, it has served people with whom it comes into contact, and not just its own members. This is an expression of the holistic mission of the church. Mission is here understood in its broadest sense, as the task of being the community of believers in Christ in the world, with the many aspects that this entails, rather than in only its evangelising dimension, that is bringing people who do not yet believe in Christ to faith and the possibility of salvation through him.

Since the 1960s, the organisation and work of the international diaconal engagement of the Church of Sweden can be interpreted as in some ways a reaction to the idea that it could have ulterior evangelising motives. Developments and changes have naturally been the result of several factors, including sociological, economic, ideological, and theological. The details of this process are not the subject here, but a shift of focus to a strongly diaconal perspective in mission can be illustrated in the following

way. Originally, there were two separate bodies engaged in international work, *Church of Sweden Mission* (founded in 1874) and *Luther Aid* (started after the Second World War as a separate organisation but with clear links to the church, and then taken over by the Church of Sweden in 1984). The latter, as the name suggests, focused on aid and development work. The former sent missionaries to other countries, originally founding new churches, at times together with other missionary societies, and later gradually moving to more often send personnel to work in what had become partner churches. The two organisations often overlapped in the diaconal sphere. In 2008, the two were amalgamated to form what was called *Church of Sweden International Work*. The focus became less on sending people to work in evangelisation, even as part of a local church's own missionary endeavour, and more on aid and development projects, or emergency relief, in cooperation with local partners or international confessional and ecumenical organisations, such as the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches. These projects were often partly funded by back-donors such as SIDA, *The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency*, which is a state body. Since 2019 this work of the Church of Sweden has been part of ACT, *Action of Churches Together*.¹

These changes have not always been positive in the eyes of those ordinary church members who previously had been very involved in supporting the missions. Some have seen it as a loss of identity, as much of this work is no longer seen as having a specifically church or Christian focus. An underlying question about this development can be formulated as follows: if the church is doing the same work as many other agencies, what is the point of supporting it, if one wants to do so motivated by one's faith and involvement in the church? Why not just support the Red Cross, UNICEF, and the like instead? Turning this question round, we might equally ask: if the church's diaconal work is the same as or even part of the work of other organisations, whether secular or religious, and this is supposed to be part of its mission, can its mission be *diakonia* in the full sense, service in the footsteps of Jesus, and that without further motives?

In the Church of Sweden's special circumstances as a former state church which now sees itself as a 'folk church' with a 'mission' to all who

¹ This process is studied by former archbishop of Uppsala, Anders Wejryd, in his doctoral dissertation *Lutherhjälpen som försvann* [= Luther Aid that disappeared], (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Uppsala 2022).

live in Sweden, it has been interesting to see the results of surveys done in recent decades about membership trends.² One of the recurring reasons given for being, becoming, or staying a member – when there is otherwise a decreasing trend in membership –, is the diaconal work of the church both abroad and at home, and for some at home in particular. People want the church to be there for them and for others when there is a crisis. Even if this is not evangelisation in a direct sense, and even if it may be doubtful whether this affects them in any deeper spiritual sense, this positive effect of the church's *diakonia* at least creates some sort of relationship to the community of faith and perhaps has some significance in revealing an inchoate longing for God. Putting it in a crass way: *diakonia* keeps these people in the church. Is this possibly pre-evangelisation? In the Church of Sweden it would probably be said that it is in any case part of the church's 'mission' as a folk church.

The church does in fact meet a lot of people in various forms of need in its parish diaconal ministry. The Church of Sweden has witnessed a development from Mother House Deaconesses of the German kind in the 19th century to permanent deacons, now fully integrated into the ordained ministry since the introduction of the Church Order when the church was disestablished in 2000. Through these ministries the Church of Sweden has given a clear expression to *diakonia* as part of the mission of the local church and created specific forms for diaconal ministry. In this work it is generally said that *diakonia* should be needs-orientated, and not have evangelising motives. At the same time, deacons often witness to the fact that encounters with the church's *diakonia* can be an important factor in bringing persons to faith and active Christian fellowship. Of course, this is an age-old experience of the church. An example from a city in which I have ministered can illustrate this. The parish runs a diaconal centre for people with varying needs, such as loneliness, financial problems, mental health issues, or addiction of different kinds. Many of these people who previously had no relation to the church now attend services, either the

² Jonas Bromander, *Medlem i Svenska kyrkan. En studie kring samtid och framtid* [= Member of the Church of Sweden. A study of the present and the future], (Stockholm: Verbum, 2005); idem, *Svenska kyrkans medlemmar* [= The Church of Sweden's Members], (Stockholm: Verbum, 2011); idem et al., *Medlemmar i rörelse. En studie av förändringar i Svenska kyrkans medlemskår* [= Members on the Move. A study of changes in membership of the Church of Sweden], (Uppsala: Svenska kyrkan, 2018).

Friday evening mass, which has become ‘their’ mass, or the ordinary Sunday masses.

These examples from Swedish experience imply theological perspectives. In exploring them, one approach could be to start from a theology of creation: the church is called to take part in God’s ongoing creative activity, and Christians are called to be agents in God’s struggle against destructive forces. In a Lutheran context this can at times be formulated in the perspective of the two kingdoms, the spiritual and the secular, where the church communicates grace and spreads faith in the spiritual realm, and believers work in the secular realm for a world in accordance with the will of God. In this scheme, *diakonia* would generally be held to belong to the secular realm. Christians can work with others because everyone, regardless of whether they believe or not, contributes to God’s ongoing creative purposes if they work for what God wants, even if they are not aware that they are doing so. Gustav Wingren (1910–2000), an influential theologian in Sweden in the 20th century,³ developed against the background of this tradition ideas about the role of the folk church.⁴ For him, ecclesiology should be worked out in relation to a theology of creation, so that the church’s mission is not to turn the world more and more into the church, but to make it more and more human. Wingren sees this as a consequence of the incarnation, and the way in which Christ, true God and true human, encountered people: they came to him out of the masses with their various needs, were seen and addressed, healed and helped, and then returned to the mass of humanity without necessarily becoming members of a special, clearly identifiable faith community.⁵ The conclusion is that if Christ is the one who exists for others, the folk church can only be truly church if it is a church for others than itself.⁶

Another approach could be developed using ideas from the document on mission produced by the World Council of Churches, *Together towards*

³ Gustav Wingren was professor of Systematic Theology at Lund University 1951–1977.

⁴ Bengt Kristensson Uggla, ‘Öppenhet och egenart. Gustav Wingren, folkkyrka och nätverkssamhälle’ [= Openness and Special Identity. Gustav Wingren, folk church and networking society], in Urban Claesson (ed), *Folkkyrka nu? Samtal om utmaningar och möjligheter* (Folk Church Now? Conversations on challenges and possibilities), (Stockholm: Svenska kyrkan, 2012), 27–46.

⁵ Uggla, ‘Öppenhet och egenart’ (as note 4), 32.

⁶ Uggla, ‘Öppenhet och egenart’ (as note 4), 40.

Life.⁷ Whilst specifically a document about *Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, as its subtitle states, *diakonia* is clearly an integral part of its understanding of the mission of the church. *Together towards Life* builds on the idea of *missio Dei*: mission is not the church's mission but God's mission, understood in trinitarian and pneumatological terms – the Father sending Son and Spirit into the world for the life of the world – with clear diaconal dimensions. God's mission is here understood as being about bringing life, especially where this is threatened:

The affirmation of God's mission (*Missio dei*) points to the belief in God as One who acts in history and in creation, in concrete realities of time and contexts, who seeks the fullness of life for the whole earth through justice, peace, and reconciliation. Participation in God's ongoing work of liberation and reconciliation by the Holy Spirit, therefore, includes discerning and unmasking the demons that exploit and enslave.⁸

Concrete actions to alleviate suffering and to enhance the life of people are seen as integral to mission:

Actions towards healing and wholeness of life for persons and communities are an important expression of mission. Healing was not only a central feature of Jesus' ministry but also a feature of his call to his followers to continue his work (Matt 10:1).⁹

Aspects from these approaches can be fruitfully related through sacramental theology for understanding *diakonia* in the mission of the church. While some Swedish theologians can be hesitant about talking about the sacramentality of the church (although this approach was dealt with positively in the agreement between the Church of Sweden and the Union of Utrecht¹⁰), the dimension of sacramentality offers a potentially fruitful approach to the question of *diakonia* in the mission of the church. The church can then be understood as the presence of Christ in a way analogous to the incarnation, in particular when the fellowship of believers encounters and responds to people in the same way that Christ did when

⁷ Jooseop Keum (ed.), *Together towards Life. Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013).

⁸ Keum, *Together towards Life* (as note 7), § 43.

⁹ Keum, *Together towards Life* (as note 7), § 50.

¹⁰ *Utrecht and Uppsala on the Way to Communion. Report from the official dialogue between the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht and the Church of Sweden* (2013), § 5.3. This was reissued with a German translation and essays in *Beiheft zu IKZ 108* (2018), ed. by Angela Berlis.

confronted with the concrete needs of the people whom he met. People can come with their various problems, be seen, addressed, helped, and then continue their lives in the world that is God's. The body of Christ is in this respect a sacrament of salvation, in the sense of being a sign and an agent of the ongoing work of making the world the place we believe God wants it to be: a place where there is life and life to the full. *Diakonia* can be seen in this way as a sort of sacrament: a sign and effective channel of God's creative and healing love for the world through the community of believers when they follow in the steps of the one who came not to be served but to serve (Matt 20:28, Mark 10:45). The experience of that love and actual care in the diaconal dimensions of the church's mission can bring people to open themselves to the message of salvation and to become members of the communion created by the sacraments of faith in baptism and the Eucharist. Even if people to whom the church's *diakonia* offers support and help do not come to faith, the diaconal work of the church is an essential and in its specific 'mission' a sufficient part of mission of the church, even though it does not constitute the totality of that mission. As *Together towards Life* observes:

The church in every geo-political and socio-economic context is called to service (*diakonia*) – to live out the faith and hope of the community of God's people, witnessing to what God has done in Jesus Christ. Through service the church participates in God's mission, following the way of its Servant Lord. The church is called to be a diaconal community manifesting the power of service over the power of domination, enabling and nurturing possibilities for life, and witnessing to God's transforming grace through acts of service that hold forth the promise of God's reign.¹¹

Through its diaconal engagement, the church is the presence and agent of God for the life of the world, a part of the *missio Dei*.

To return to the question in the title of this paper: *diakonia* can be mission without ulterior motives because God in Christ was in the world as a servant (Lk 22:27). With no other motivation than love of humanity, we serve our neighbours whose predicament determines what we do for them. We cannot conceive of God, or Christ, having ulterior motives, and therefore the church also cannot have ulterior motives, using one aspect of its mission for the purposes of another rather than in its own right. Each aspect has its own justification in its specific role within the whole, God's integral mission.

¹¹ Keum, *Together towards Life* (as note 7), § 78.

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Zusammenfassung

Die Hilfe und Unterstützung, welche die Kirche in ihrer Missionsarbeit Menschen angedeihen liess, wurde bisweilen verdächtigt, dass ihr missionarisches Engagement mit dem Hintergedanken geschehe, Menschen zum Christentum bekehren und zum Beitritt bewegen zu wollen. Der Beitrag setzt bei Erfahrungen und Auswirkungen dieser Kritik auf das missionarische Engagement der Kirche von Schweden an und stellt Überlegungen dazu an, in welcher Weise Diakonia integraler Bestandteil der Mission der Kirche ist, einen ganz eigenen Wert hat und nicht lediglich unter dem Aspekt der Evangelisierung bewertet werden darf. Der Verfasser bezieht sich auf verschiedene theologische Quellen und betrachtet Diakonia als einen Aspekt der Sakramentalität der Kirche.

Keywords – Schlüsselwörter

Mission – *diakonia* – folk church – *missio Dei* – analogous sacramentality