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Speech by the Rev Prof Dr Jerry Pillay,
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to the ReDi conference, Oslo, 1 June 2023

Called to Transformation – Reflections about the Future of Diakonia and Diakonia Research

It is a pleasure to be in Oslo for this conference organised by “ReDi” – the International Society for the Research and Study of Diakonia and Christian Society Practice. I thank the organisers and VID Specialised University, which is an internationally respected centre for diaconal teaching and research. Thank you for inviting me to give this address; I bring greetings from the World Council of Churches.

I am very pleased that the World Council of Churches is a corporate member of ReDi. This partnership is important in advancing academic research into ecumenical diakonia. Saint Anselm’s famous definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding” remains relevant; for all of us here advancing our theological understanding of diakonia is central to our mission of better caring for people in Christ’s name. As new challenges emerge, whether the impact of technological advancement, the existential crisis of climate change or the consequences of conflict in places as diverse as Sudan or Ukraine, we Christians cannot sit idly by and claim to be unaffected. Just as in Acts chapter 6 we read of the call of the first Deacons, we too are called to love and serve in Christ’s name. To be effective, such service requires commitment, expertise and proper knowledge of the context.

The theme of this year’s ReDi conference is “*contested spaces of diakonia: seeking justice, safety and well-being.*” Last year, the World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance jointly published the study document “*Called to Transformation – Ecumenical Diakonia*”. Justice, safety and well-being are key themes found throughout the book. It aims to outline theological and practical service for diakonia. It is not intended to be in any way prescriptive: it is offered as a resource to facilitate learning and encourage good practices. It highlights the prophetic diakonia that addresses peace building, climate justice, gender justice, racial justice, health and healing. It also aims to address the diverse practices of diakonia and the theological background of diakonia, as well as addressing misleading theologies.

“*Called to Transformation – Ecumenical Diakonia*” has its origins in a conference held in Malawi in 2014, working on clarification of the relationship between churches and

specialised ministries. Since then, there have been further developments – not least the launch of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 and the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020. Both require churches and their diaconal agencies to respond and engage. To be effective, such engagement requires co-ordination, co-operation and mutual aid – delivered in a spirit of prayer and Christian loving kindness – hence the emphasis on a truly ecumenical diakonia which should be the leading trend for future diakonia.

The document describes some key challenges for our times. It covers a multiplicity of topics ranging from the ecological dimension of diakonia to the consequences of malpractice in diaconal institutions. It shows that there is much common ground between the church-related development agencies (in the family of ACT Alliance) and the churches (in the family of the World Council of Churches). In fact, we do not and should not have time for disagreement and division. We must work together, in partnership, to try to achieve the transformation that is essential in striving to achieve justice, safety and well-being for all. The document addresses the question of how we address the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which, despite their shortcomings, still represent one of the most clearly expressed ways of improving quality of life for the one billion poorest people in the World. Right now, the targets of the SDGs are far from being accomplished: the world needs to redouble its efforts not just write off the SDGs as a failure.

“Called to Transformation – Ecumenical Diakonia” has been translated into German, French, Spanish and Norwegian – thanks to the Christian Council of Norway and the Norwegian Church Aid. Please do read, study it and engage with it. It is available to download through the WCC website.

With this document in mind, I want to focus on the conference’s theme of contested spaces of diakonia: seeking justice, safety and well-being and reflect on the future of diakonia and diakonial research.

There are multiple numbers of organisations addressing the variety of challenges in the world and rightly so because the issues are enormous and require many players as possible to make the world a better place for all creation. We need to understand that we ought to be in collaboration and not competition as we seek to make a difference, share a common goal and contend with limited resources. Our strength is found in cooperating and acting together for transformation and change. This requires interdisciplinary work and collaboration on a number of fronts, in the work we do, the research we engage, and the impact we long for.

However, while churches are called to cooperate and work with other organisations in transforming the world, it must not lose its own point of entry and focus. While, like other organisations, we are interested in addressing the evils and wicked problems in the world our starting point is our faith in Jesus Christ that leads us into faith praxis (James 2: 14-26). Thus, we need to understand that we are not just another NGO but part of faith communities responding to faith imperatives that drive our vision and energy to

transform the world so that all may have fullness of life. Diakonial ministries are rooted in the history, theology and polity of the Christian Church.¹

The diakonial imperative has been with the church ever since its inception. This is normally evidenced in its care and concern for the poor and needy. However, over the ages this understanding of diakonia has come to the realisation that the root causes and effects of poverty, inequality and injustice must also be addressed in changing the material conditions of the poor and needy. Thus, over the years, the concept of diakonia has broadened to include involvement in the life of humankind, in making of nationhood, building of culture, structuring of society with its functions and institutions and in shaping the form and quality of political systems to work towards justice.

The early church was driven by the example and ministry of Jesus to care for the poor, lame, sick and needy. Bruce Winter² in his careful and well-documented discussion of public life in the first century shows how early Christians took part in public life in the Greco-Roman communities in which they lived. He argues that "the early church in fact taught a civic consciousness among its members". Christians were not to abandon life in public sphere (*politeia*) but to address their obligations as citizens from the perspective of the Christian ethic. Every Christian had an obligation to promote the welfare of the city and help the poor, even without the rewards that were traditionally accorded the benefactor.

David Bosch³ points out that transformation (humanisation) has been a part of the Christian mission and influence in society right from the beginning. In a society described as "macabre, lost in despair, perversion, and superstition," Christian communities emerged as something entirely new in the populous and far-flung Roman Empire. The early church was on the periphery of society. It found many of its earliest adherents among slaves, women, and foreigners – people who had no special influence on the shape of society. Yet it was to have an impact on society, especially over the next two millennia.

Christianity began by preaching and practicing the "*gospel of love and charity*" which included almsgiving and care for widows, orphans, slaves, travellers, the sick, the imprisoned, and the poor⁴. Driven by the love of Jesus believers went out and expressed their love for the neighbour. The early disciples showed true mercy and compassion. Their input into changing society was essentially to provide charity and

¹ See, Jerry Pillay, The significance of social justice and diakonia in the Reformed, tradition, *HTS Theological Studies*, Vol.78 n.4, Pretoria, 2022, pp. 1-14.

² Bruce Winter, *Seeking the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens. First-Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994, pp. 200f.

³ BOSCH, D.J. 1999. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Missions*, New York: Orbis Books.

⁴ VON HARNACK, A. 1967. *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, New York: Harper.

love as expressed in the Scriptures. Yet they were to have a profound effect in helping the poor and neglected.

During the middle ages, the church advocated a moral code sometimes called the Christian corporate ethic, reflecting the fact that all of society was considered a single entity or corporation.⁵ This led to a strong paternalistic obligation toward the common people, the poor, and the general welfare of society. The monastic movement, though the unlikely agents because of their withdrawal from society, were able to transform society.

The Benedictine monastery, for example, became a "school for the Lord's service", and was to have a profound influence in the centuries to follow. The monastic movement, from its inception, has been concerned not only with the spiritual side of life, but also with its social and economic components. During the Middle Ages, the Church was deeply concerned about economic matters, not only on the theological level, but also on the operational one. Hospices, orphanages and philanthropic work were supported by income generated through economic activities. However, most of these were done through the monasteries. Julio De Santa Ana⁶ points out that it was the monasteries that chose to radically eradicate poverty. The monks saw as their gospel responsibility the need to be involved in changing society. However, their work was more centred on 'poor relief' rather than transforming society fully.

The 16th century Protestant Reformation was an attempt to reform and transform both church and society. The Reformation embraced a number of quite distinct, yet overlapping, areas of human activity: the reform of both the morals and structures of church and society, new approaches to political issues, shifts in economics thinking, the renewal of Christian spirituality, and the reform of Christian doctrine.⁷

The Reformers, according to Stivers⁸, not only influenced their society but they were also influenced by the ideology (economic) of their time. While they were guilty of this, most Reformers generally advocated an involvement in society, unlike the early church or Middle Ages, they went a step further in the attempt to transform society. Their theology in many ways encouraged the transformation and development of community. And this they engaged as they influenced social and economic policies of the government of the day.⁹

It can be deduced from this that Christian mission and diakonia started to broaden its terrain and impact in transforming people, communities and society. It is thus not surprising that some 'secular interpretations' tend to discount the importance of the

⁵ HUNT, E. K. & SHERMAN, H.J. 1981. *Economics: An Introduction to Traditional and Radical Views*, New York: Harper & Row, p.6.

⁶ DE SANTA ANA, J. 1979. *Good News to the Poor: The Challenge of the Poor in the History of the Church*, Geneva: WCC, p.62.

⁷ McGRATH, A. E. 2012. *Reformation Thought An Introduction*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

⁸ STIVERS, R. L. 1993. *Reformed Faith and Economics, USA: University Press of America*, pp.33-48.

⁹ STIVERS, *Ibid.*

religious element in the Reformation. They simply state that Luther, Calvin, Knox, Zwingli and others are products of their socio-economic and political backgrounds and circumstances.¹⁰ There can be no doubt that other factors played a role but the religious one cannot be ignored. The Reformation movement did not only renew and change the church leaving the world uninvolved. This movement intervened dramatically in the lives of all and brought about radical changes in the social, political and economic aspects of a new developing world. It gave rise to a new epoch in the history of humankind. And all through this time there were small groups of Christians who kept to the task of transforming the lives of the poor. It is thus not surprising that one of the theological miracles of the late 20th century is the rediscovery of the biblical witness to God's particular concern for the poor and oppressed. This became the major focus of the ecumenical church, in particular.

The ecumenical movement argued for God's "preferential option for the poor" and it placed emphasis on the poor as the agents of change. It is no longer the case of the rich developing the poor but of the poor developing themselves. Hence, it was learnt that economic growth as the paradigm for transformation of society is clearly insufficient. The needs of human beings and their communities, present and future generations, and creation as a whole, must be the starting point for a transformed world.

The ecumenical movement also gained a better understanding of the multifaceted meaning of the complexed problems in the world and called for a comprehensive approach. As a result, all community projects and programmes, education and training should place an emphasis on social justice, people's participation, and the role of people's movements and the need of networking between them. This also provided a growing awareness that diakonia must go beyond mere service, charity and relief, it must engage radical transformation.

According to Pillay (2002), this broader definition of diakonia does not only embrace the notion of development but it also expands into global solidarity, engagement and transformation. The ecumenical church has impressed upon us the need to shift from an ecclesiocentric to an oikocentric perspective of diakonia that leads to a more modest claim about our task in the world.¹¹ The mission and diakonial praxis of the church is to be a sign and action addressing the groaning universe. The biblical understanding of the kingdom or reign of God gives credibility to the interconnectedness and interdependence of a single world society.

According to Albrow,¹² globalisation refers to "all those processes by which the people of the world are incorporated into a single world society". Similarly, McGrew¹³ stated:

¹⁰ VAN DER WALT, BJ. 1991. *Anatomy of Reformation*, Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University for CHE, p. 211.

¹¹ HAHHAD, B. 2014. Service or Subsistence? Diakonia in Our Globalized, Gendered World, *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 66, Issue 3, p. 2.

¹² ALBROW, M., & KING, E. (Eds.). 1990. *Globalization, knowledge and society: Readings from international sociology*, Sage.

¹³ MCGREW, A. 1992. *Aglobal society? Modernity and its Future*, Aldershot and Brookfield: Ashgate

“globalisation constitutes a multiplicity of linkages and interconnections that transcend the nation states (and societies) which make up the modern world system. It defines a process through which events, decisions and activities in one part of the world can come to have a significant consequence for individuals and communities in quite distant parts of the globe.”

Globalisation is a multifaceted phenomenon which includes economic, political, cultural and social dimensions. However, scholars tend to emphasise economic globalisation. Although the latter is an important factor but one must not ignore other important factors like political, cultural and social factors.¹⁴

Returning to the Christian understanding of diaconia and globalisation we can draw from John Calvin’s view where he wrote, no member has “power for itself nor applies it to its own private use, but each pours it out to the fellow members”; what chiefly matters is “the common advantage of the whole body” (Inst., III, vii, 5.). Occasionally, Calvin identified this community with the whole human race: “All people are bound together as a sacred chain [which] should be embraced in one feeling of love” (Commentary Acts 13: 36; Inst., II, viii, 55).

Having shown that diakonia is grounded in the history of the church, I shall now proceed to show how it is rooted in the theology of the Christian church. For the focus of this paper, I will not delve into deep theological details but look at some of the theology undergirding diakonia by reflecting on the theme of this conference on justice, safety and wellbeing.

Justice

Firstly, let’s consider the theme of justice. The word justice appears no less than 173 times in the Bible. So justice matters to God. The God portrayed in Scripture is the “lover of justice”: “The King is mighty, he loves justice - you have established equity; in Jacob you have done what is just and right” (Ps. 99:4; cf. Ps.33:5; 37:28; II :7; !sa. 30:18; 61:8; Jer. 9:24). We see in his dealings with Israel how God seeks justice for his people. In sympathetic response to the groaning of Hebrew slaves (Ex. 2:23-24), the God “who executes justice for the oppressed” and “gives food to the hungry” (Ps. 146:7, NRSV) pushed Moses to become the liberator, smashed the shackles of Pharaoh, and led the people to a new homeland. God's deliverance became the paradigm of justice for Israel and continues to be so for us today.

Injustice was a violation of the covenant and an act of faithlessness. In the light of the covenant, to know God is to show justice (Jer. 22:13-16; Micah 6 8). Indeed, justice in the prophetic tradition is a spiritual discipline, an act of worship, without which the value of

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¹⁴ HEBRON, L., & STACK Jr, J. F. 2013. Globalization: Debunking the myths, Dorling Kindersley India Pvt. Ltd.

other spiritual disciplines - prayer, fasting, sacrifice - are negated (Isa.58:1-10; Amos 5:21-24; Hos. 6:6).

Faithfulness to covenant relationships demands a justice that recognises special obligations, "a preferential option" to widows, orphans, the poor, and aliens - in other words, the economically vulnerable and politically oppressed (Ex. 23: 6-9; Deut. 15: 2-11; 24:14-22; Jer. 22:16; Amos 2:6-7; 5: 10-12). This tradition of concern for the weak and poor was embodied in the idea of the Jubilee Year (Lev. 25). The Jubilee Year prevented unjust concentrations of power and poverty by requiring the return of property every fifty years. Similarly, the Year of Release (Dent. 15:1-18) provided amnesty for debtors and liberation of indentured servants every seven years.

There are classical definitions of justice – whether in legal or philosophical contexts, including in the works of Plato and Aristotle. Perhaps though it is easier to identify and characterise injustice. Striving for justice and against injustice was key to the struggle against Apartheid in my home country South Africa. The legacy of the injustices of Apartheid left a deeply scarred and divided society in need of reconciliation and hope, especially for those affected by generations of exclusion from economic advancement. Justice is not a one off event; it is a mind-set and a process. With justice should come a proportionate response, mercy and compassion. In this regards justice is a related function of diakonia as we work against injustices in the world.

Diakonia, then, is an agent of justice. In the Old Testament, in Proverbs chapter 21 verse 3 we read, "To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice." In an ancient culture where sacrifice was a central part of worship, this may have seemed a radical and indeed countercultural statement, but it goes to the core of what should be the human response to God's grace. In Matthew 23 verse 23, Jesus says "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practised without neglecting the others." We see God's priorities here – it's not about tithing herbs or other such diversions or trivialities, it's the core message of justice that matters. In seeing the indivisibility between justice and diakonia, perhaps there is no finer text than Matthew chapter 25 from verse 34:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Applying this in the contemporary context requires commitment and principles. Many churches do great work at local levels in providing food to the hungry and other basic services that make a real difference for individuals, and this is commended; often with little resources. In fact, some churches like Reformed churches and others have diakonia centred in the polity of the church. These are often seen in the system of deacons who are responsible for `temporal` or service ministry to the poor and needy.

Our current situations have shown us that mere service ministries, good as they are, are not enough. We also have to address structural sin and injustice in society: tax policies where the hyper rich can end up paying less tax than the middle income earner; where bank loans for the poor have higher interest rates than for the wealthy; where pollution and climate change disproportionately affects the poor and where exploitation and greed is still highly profitable.

Further, it must be noted that justice goes beyond what you do for others. The aim has to be the creation of a society based on justice. In his book "Liberating Diakonia", the Rev Professor Kjell Nordstokke writes:

Within diakonia there has been a growing awareness of the need to move away from paternalistic patterns of action for people in need towards practices with people, in a way that allows marginalised people to be subjects in the effort of changing their conditions of life. 15

This is vitally important for the future of a diakonia based on justice. The entire agenda of ecumenical diakonia, by its very definition, must be inclusive and collaborative rather than exclusive and paternalistic. Christian churches have not always taken these considerations seriously in its diakonial endeavours. There are many factors that prevent the process happening. Sometimes projects finish benefitting the rich because of failure to analyse the power factors in the community. Sometimes they become dominated by the functional purpose, and lose the perspective of transformation that the particular function is meant to serve. Sometimes they support or supplement government plans and projects, instead of organising the people for power to bargain with Government. Sometimes they instil competitive profit-seeking that obstructs the building of any new community. People must be full participants in planning and implementing according to their needs, so that they are always aware that the struggle is theirs.

Harvey states that if the perspectives of evaluation are transformational and sensitive to the humanising process, the basic questions will be:¹⁶

How does the project release people, build sharing community, and enhance the solidarity of the people?

¹⁵ NORDSTOKKE, K, *Liberating Diakonia*, p 60, Tapir Akademisk Forlag, Trondheim, 2011

¹⁶ See HARVEY PERKINS, *Roots for Vision*, p.90.

Does the project give power to the people to share their own future as a community, and uncover their potentialities and strengths within cultural realities?

Does the project enhance their understanding of their situation and the power factors operating in it, and their will to do something to change it?

How does the project benefit the poor? (my addition to the above questions)

It is clear that from a biblical and theological perspective justice ought to be an important aspect of diakonia. The need to work against injustices and structural sins is also an imperative in which will need to be taken very seriously in future diakonial work. It is pleasing to note that though churches are not engaging this in a full-scale way yet they are increasing becoming aware that justice ministries ought to be part of diakonial work. Thus, many changes are closing the gap between Elders as spiritual leaders and Deacons as service ministry and now combining these ministries in the polity and structure of the church. The dichotomy between Word and Deeds is slowly joining forces in the ministries of churches. This will probably be the future trend of diakonia in the church.

Safety

Let's now move to the second of these themes – safety.

After considering the importance of justice, safety may sound a little bland and cautious. But the 49 references to safety in the Bible show the importance of safety in the quality of human existence. The Psalmist writes “I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.” (Psalm 4.8). Numerous prophetic warnings echo the need for peace and security (Jer. 6:14; Ezek. 13: 10; Mic 3:5; 1Thess. 5:3). Safety and protection are found in the Lord (Ps. 46, Ps. 91: 1-2, 2 Sam, 22: 3-4). Safety, security, peace and protection are important themes in the bible. It often reflects on the time in biblical history that is no less different for us today.

Far too many people do not enjoy a safe existence. The news from Sudan and Ukraine remains ominous. Wars, conflicts, factions, ethnic, racial and gender-based violence and religiously inspired violence are the norm of daily experiences across the globe. Every news report of bloodshed comes with grief and loss for a family. The 22nd July 2011 was a terrible day in the history of Norway, with 77 people killed by a far right terrorist here in Oslo and on the island of Utøya. These innocent victims were denied the safety that they deserved. Again thinking of John chapter 10 verse 10, the words of Jesus “I have come that they may have life ... life in all its fullness” counters the nihilism of the men of violence.

Last month I was in Sri Lanka. A country so rich with natural beauty, yet scarred by an ethnically-motivated civil war, terrorism and the aftermath. The country has descended into economic chaos and bankruptcy. Sri Lanka is not alone in needing help, but it is an example of the precariousness of the global economic model where fiscal vulnerability can have terrible consequences for the population. The mess was not created by individual Sri Lankans but they are the ones bearing the brunt of the chaos. In all of this, we must consider the safety of the people against the whirlwinds of economic injustice.

Human beings need safety, warmth and shelter. The diakonal response must be to address human need where it arises, and to address the structures in society, at governmental and macroeconomic levels that cause far too many to go without safety. In a world struggling with violence and insecurity, diakonial programmes and work ought to address issues of safety and security. The World Council of Churches is very involved in peacemaking and peacebuilding programmes in the Middle East, Africa, and other parts of the world.

Addressing issues of safety and security must include a number of players and activists from a variety of different fields: religious, social, economic and political. Thus, the WCC partners with other NGO's to engage collaborative efforts in addressing these challenges. At the University of Pretoria, where I once served as dean of the Faculty of Theology and Religion, we established a Centre for Religion, Public Life and Security in collaboration with the Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life, with the main purpose of addressing the issues, especially in Africa, that threatens safety, security and peace.

A number of universities have constituted departments addressing issues of security and safety. It is important for religious organisations to partner with such institutions and organisations to transform broken and violent communities into places of safety and peaceful living. From a research point of view, this will involve breaking down academic silos and boundaries and engaging interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary research to address the complex problems of society. While maintaining their point of departure in transforming society – as called by Christ - churches and religious organisations must draw from the expertise and insights of other professions, even from secular institutions if we are to dialogue, research and act in any significant way of transforming society and not merely putting band aids on deep wounds. The future of diakonial work will require formidable partnerships, research collaboration and joint action for transformation with a variety of contributors and research disciplines.

Well-being

The third of the three themes is that of well-being. Justice and safety are essential in facilitating well-being. The sacrifice of well-being is described extensively in the Old Testament, notably in Leviticus:

Aaron lifted his hands towards the people and blessed them; and he came down after sacrificing the sin-offering, the burnt-offering, and the offering of well-being. Moses and Aaron entered the tent of meeting, and then came out and blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Leviticus 9:22-23.

Health and wellness in some verses in the bible are related to serving God: If we serve the Lord in all aspects of life, He will bless us and heal us whether it is spiritually, physically, or emotionally (Exodus 23:25, 1 Cor. 10:31, Matt. 6:9-13). Yet in many places where health and wellbeing of people are at risk is because of systemic and social injustices and sin.

The New Testament does away with concepts such as animal sacrifice as an atonement for sin or thanksgiving for well-being. In Matthew chapter 9, following the call of Matthew the tax collector to be one of Jesus' disciples, we read:

“When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?’ But when he heard this, Jesus said, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’

There are many different models of delivery of diakonal service throughout the world. Here in northern Europe, the level of professionalism creates services of a very high standard. Such work is unattainable in terms of financial, personnel and physical resources in many countries, especially in the Global South. Yet in many of those nations there is a closer integration between the worship life of the Church and diakonal service – and the Church is growing and a sense of well-being is fostered. Perhaps in the Global North it is time to look again at what can be learned from diakonal practice in the Global South, where so much is achieved with so little. It is encouraging to note that many local churches in the Global South address issues of health and wellness. For example, churches have organised groups for walking, sermons and talks on wellbeing, clinics, hospitals, mental wellness programmes and counselling services. Much of these were established especially during the COVID -19 pandemic when faith communities were forced to provide additional services to congregants and community to help people struggling with a variety of challenges impinging on wellness and health. COVID-19 has taught us that religion, ethics, science, medicine and other fields have to all come together to address a global crisis. Similarly, the global crises of poverty, hunger, food insecurity, violence, climate emergency – all require collaboration and cooperation to create a better world and life for all creation.

The World Council of Churches has recently revived its work in Health and Healing, a Commission is to be established in June this year. While it is composed of member churches, it draws on the services of a number of professionals and experts in the field of health and social issues. The intent is to take a holistic approach to health and wellness. From a research point of view, it means drawing from the sources of a number of academic disciplines to create knowledge, understand the issues more fully and find lasting and transformative solutions to enhance the quality of life and living. Diakonial work and ministries require a more integrated approach to dealing with the challenges that threaten health and wellbeing. However, it must be noted that the focus and interest must not only be on humans but on all creation.

Conclusion

Justice, safety and well-being should not be contested spaces for diakonia. They are integral to what we should do. We promote these three because they are humane, they are life affirming, and they are Godly. “Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diakonia” addresses these values and more, including the recognition that a faith-based and a right-

based diakonal agenda can and must coexist. Likewise, diakonia must be inclusive – not merely doing acts of kindness to others from a position of wealth or privilege, but the recognition that human beings are equal in God's sight and diaconal service must involve the user rather than treating him or her as passive recipient of whom gratitude is anticipated.

The world's population has doubled from 4 billion people to the current 8 billion. Special attention must be paid to the needs of the world's poorest one billion people. The Church has a duty and calling to advocacy and service. At a global level, the World Council of Churches has a responsibility to address global economic trends and pressures, including through the work of the Commission of the Churches for International Affairs. In the words of Martin Luther King, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." We must strive for to make a safer place for all – advocates for peace and reconciliation, countering hatred and working for human flourishing. All humans need a sense of well-being, not extremes of luxury or wealth, but the essentials for a decent life. In order to meet the challenges of our times we need to embrace the holistic understanding of diakonia which calls, not for lone rangers, but collaborative and integrated work on all levels in the ministries of the church, society and academic institutions and research to transform a broken and suffering world.

For all of you who work in diakonal research, I will pray for you and for your work. Your God-given skills give you the chance to work collaboratively with God's people and all partners, thereby improving the quality of life for us all.

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