

What makes diaconia<sup>1</sup> diaconia? How is it understood and lived in the practices of churches in different Christian traditions and social contexts, and during times of societal change? These questions lie at the heart of the study of diaconia. This special issue of *Diakonian tutkimus* brings together three articles and one commentary that all address these matters. Together, they provide the latest research on contemporary discussions and practices of diaconia in different churches and societal contexts in Europe and North America.

First, in the article *Ecumenical discussion about deacons*, Tomi Karttunen assesses the present-day ecumenical situation concerning the discussion of the place of deacons in the ordained ministry. Drawing from documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Lima Document, and the Porvoo Declaration, the article highlights the importance of understanding the place of the diaconal ministry within Trinitarian communion ecclesiology.

Second, the article *The church as diaconia. One view of the Reformed understanding of diaconia*, by Mariano Avila and Esko Ryökäs, provides a general description of deacons and their tasks in the contemporary Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). The authors use this as an example of the modern reformed theology of deaconship. Based on an analysis of documents and synodical decisions by the CRCNA, the article presents an idea of 'the church as diaconia', while also highlighting certain dogmatic tensions within this understanding.

In the third article, *The changing role of the church – Diaconia of the Orthodox Church in Greece during the years of the economic crisis 2010–2018*, Vasiliki Mitropoulou, Niki Papageorgiou, and Esko Ryökäs present the many activities by which the Orthodox Church of Greece attempted to help people during the years of the economic crisis. Based on the description of these activities in selected dioceses, the article presents a hypothesis of how the role

of the Orthodox Church might be changing in Greek society. This hypothesis suggests that the traditional role of the church as a backbone of national identity is giving way to a church that actively responds to the needs of people living in weak social and economic positions.

Finally, Dan Sandu's commentary, *Principles and practices of diaconia in the Romanian Orthodox Church*, presents some insights into the theology and practices of the Romanian Orthodox Church's diaconal work. Sandu's text describes how diaconia can be understood in a Romanian context. It positions this description in the historical and present-day context of the changing landscape of Romanian society and discusses it vis-à-vis public social services.

Together, these pieces raise many pivotal issues that also merit further attention in our scholarly field. First, they highlight the significance of *social context and social change* and their consequences for the practices of diaconal work and understanding the nature of diaconia. This is illustrated, for example, in the way that the economic and refugee crisis challenged the Orthodox Church in Greece, how the communist history and the more recent European integration frame the Orthodox Church's diaconal theology in Romania, how the Second Vatican Council has stimulated ecumenical discussion about the role of deacons in the church, and how the reformed tradition is interpreted in the contemporary North American context. The local, contextual, and historically bound trajectories steer the course of diaconal work and frame the understanding of what diaconia is in each case.

Second, these studies highlight issues of *similarity and difference* in understanding diaconia across denominations. Despite the differences in the social and historical contexts, the way diaconia manifests in practice appears very similar across different churches, raising the question of whether churches actually depart from each other as much as the doctrinal debates sometimes suggest. The question remains open as to where the similarities and differences ultimately lie. More comparative research is called for in this regard.

Further, the texts address the question of *the place and role* of diaconal work. The position and duties of deacons within churches can be understood in varying ways and contested from various fronts. The studies at hand underline the essentialness of diaconia in the overall understanding of what the church is and what it does. They inspire considerations of whether the question of diaconal ministry and practice can ever be discussed outside the question of what constitutes the church, who the agents are who 'do' diaconia, and

how such agents are positioned both in the organisational structure and the theological self-understanding of the church.

Lastly, the studies presented in this issue bring out questions concerning *the possibilities and challenges of studying diaconia*. The official documents of the churches and ecumenical bodies provide one obvious point of departure. The articles by Karttunen and Avila and Ryökäs illustrate that such materials reveal how diaconia is envisioned both within churches and in ecumenical settings. However, in addition to official documents, the lived practices of diaconal work merit attention. The example of the Orthodox Church in Greece shows that while there are some publicly available data on these matters, much remains below the surface. This is not only due to a lack of research; there is a theological rationale behind it, too. Both Sandu's commentary and the article by Mitropoulou and colleagues point out that churches willingly cherish the biblical ideal of giving secretly, where one should 'not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing' (Matthew 6: 3). Researchers studying diaconia have the sensibility to interpret the theological significance of this principle. Nevertheless, the study of diaconia ought not to be constrained by this ideal. Instead, further research is needed that explores in-depth the local manifestations and practices of diaconia and asks how these practices relate to, and possibly challenge, our theological imaginaries of *what* and *where* diaconia is and *how* it manifests in today's world.

## Footnotes

1 The reader should note the difference this publication makes between the two ways of spelling the word. We use *diakonia* in particular cases when referring to the Greek spelling of the word or to a direct quotation from an original source or other particular use of the term. The spelling *diaconia*, in turn, is used as a more general term that refers to the Christian love of one's neighbour that manifests in the contemporary world. We are aware that the

spelling varies between different source materials. However, this distinction is significant in order to understand the latest discussions around diaconia and to see the theological nuances of the term. This problem is described, e.g. in Ryökäs, 1999, 8, and Brodd, 2000. According to Brodd, the use of 'diaconia' in English is influenced by the German-speaking tradition. See also Latvus, 2017, 11–22.

## References

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## Authors

Anna Sofia Salonen  
Dr., Postdoctoral researcher  
Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Finland  
[anna.salonen@tuni.fi](mailto:anna.salonen@tuni.fi)

Esko Ryökäs  
Dr., University lecturer  
School of Theology, University of Eastern Finland  
[esko.ryokas@uef.fi](mailto:esko.ryokas@uef.fi)