

UUTTA TUTKIMUSTA / NEW RESEARCH

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Transformative Philanthropic- Diakonia of the African Orthodox Church of Kenya

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Introduction

The Orthodox Christian tradition is not a focus in the study of religious-based social development. A closer examination proves that this is due to a lack of scholarship rather than a lack of social ministry in the Orthodox churches. While various churches' philanthropic-diakonia initiatives, theology, and ecclesiology have been extensively studied, they remain relatively unexplored among the Orthodox Churches.¹ Although the World Council of Churches General Assembly in Busan in 2013 called on all member churches to map their tangible and intangible diaconal assets and contributions to their development and outline their diaconal theology, the Orthodox Church has yet to respond, further limiting contemporary studies on the subject and begging the question of why an ancient church that prides itself on its rich theology

¹ Molokotos-Liederman 2009.

has so sparsely documented its philanthropic-diaconal theology, especially in the context of global development. This can be explained by the fact that Islamic and Turkish occupation and communism in the traditional Orthodox lands have distracted them from many contemporary debates, including this one. Furthermore, while diaconal matters are not new, it is Western Christian theologians who seem to be the movers of this debate, with the Orthodox only responding to them in ecumenical fora, not among themselves. Orthodox theologians thus seem to avoid diaconal language as if it were a foreign concept in Orthodox theology. Diakonia is still not taught as an independent course in Orthodox institutions. Rather, it is a topic in history, patristic, or missional courses. All this begs the question of whether philanthropic-diakonia is an important part of Orthodox Christianity, praxis, and theology.

Since its formation in 1929 the African Orthodox Church of Kenya (AOCK) has been involved in considerable social transformational development but has received little recognition, documentation, or study in this area. The church is the largest Greek Orthodox Church in Africa, with four dioceses, 500 priests, and 201,263 Christians according to the Kenyan national census results of 2019. This study seeks to unveil how AOCK contributes to Orthodox theological and practical transformative philanthropic-diakonia and the challenges the church has faced in the process. To do this, the study evaluated and documented the theology and practice of the social transformative philanthropic-diakonia of AOCK from its formation until the present. The study used an interpretivist epistemology with a qualitative approach and a practical public theology method in a descriptive single case study design. Content analysis was used to analyse the study's 119 interviews from 80 respondents conducted between 2013 and 2023 and the literature used to collect its data. Four sub-studies were undertaken, with the objectives being to unveil the Orthodox contribution to Africa's social transformational development before and during Covid-19, evaluate the Orthodox Church's ecclesiological understanding of diakonia and social transformative development, examine the place of the church as a formidable and essential social transformative development agent, contribute to the little studied field of philanthropic-diakonia in the Eastern Orthodox Church in the African context, and note the AOCK diaconal challenges and offer proposals for them.

The term philanthropic-diakonia

Various Christian traditions have used different terminologies for their social development work. Although the terminologies appear different, the holistic development work and impact these Christians perform in society seem similar to outsiders. Nevertheless, the terms each Christian tradition uses show what this social ministry means to it and the extent to which each goes to fulfil its mission of serving others and society, spiritually and socially, politically, and economically. In their own ways these Christians share God's love and resources with those who need them to positively transform their lives. The term diakonia is used by most mainline Protestant Christian traditions² and in major ecumenical forums,³ the word being biblical and denoting service. The Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian traditions have popularised the use of the term transformative development, which tends to borrow heavily from the terms and principles of secular global development, although they add biblical aspects to their approach.⁴ The Roman Catholic tradition has preferred the term *caritas*.⁵

The Orthodox Church has mainly used the ancient Byzantine and Hellenist term *philanthropia* (philanthropy) to denote its social service work.⁶ Today, the Orthodox use this term to denote the love of God for humanity, an act shown fully by God offering His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to save humanity. Orthodox Christian social service therefore imitates and joins God in His service and love for humanity, making *philanthropia* a theocentric and anthropocentric term. Even with this deep theological understanding, the term *philanthropy* is seen in contemporary linguistics as material-based charity and donations offered to those in extreme need, more so during emergencies. Moreover, the term does not denote service to the rest of creation, but only to humans. To help alleviate this supposed weakness of the common Orthodox term, the biblical term *diakonia* is included in this study because it denotes the church's holistic service to the entire creation, with Christ being the main deacon. As the work of Christ is seen in scripture, He offers His service to all who need Him spiritually, physically, socially, economically, and even politi-

² Dietrich et al. (ed.) 2014.

³ Ampony et al. (ed.) 2021.

⁴ Myers 2011.

⁵ Ilo 2011.

⁶ Constantelos 1968, 3–16.

cally with a liberative and transformational model that not only rescues and aids the concerned individual, group, or society in extreme need but further extends beyond that episode and that individual, group, or society to become a truly transformative event and development. When this Christian service to others (diakonia) is merged with the philanthropic-love of God for humanity (philanthropia), we have a fully embodied term for the gospel in praxis that is acceptable both ecumenically and by the Orthodox. Thus, using the term philanthropic-diakonia in this study helps the Orthodox express their holistic social ministry more formally and meaningfully. This study further defines philanthropic-diakonia as the “Christian social ministry that expresses God’s love for humanity in mission and praxis”,⁷ a praxis-based social development that is rights-based, community-based, and faith-based and is hence broader than global development.

Church and development work in Africa

In development, churches, like other faiths, are often overlooked by critics due to their religious background and supposed cause of backwardness and underdevelopment.⁸ Critics of religion often see Christians and their institutions as uncivilised. Past and present realities, where religion is an instrument of colonialism, social dominance, Western dominance, gender injustice, religious extremism and radicalisation, and the endorsement of apartheid, racism, war, and conflict, have amplified this suspicion. Nevertheless, faith institutions cannot be ignored for their significant and positive social development contributions to individuals and communities.⁹ Since 11 September 2001 the world has further appreciated the role of religion in development, even though critics remain.¹⁰

Religion is fundamental in Africa, shaping worldviews, policy, and development.¹¹ Faith institutions remain the most trusted institutions, and their leaders are the most valued in Africa.¹² In sub-Saharan Africa, the church owns most schools, peacebuilding initiatives, medical centres, social welfare programmes, poverty reduction programmes, and humanitarian assistance

⁷ Thiani 2024, 27.

⁸ Haustein & Tomalin 2017, 76–85.

⁹ Marshall & Van Saanen 2007.

¹⁰ Karam 2014.

¹¹ Ferrett 2005.

¹² Howard 2020; Thiani 2019, 296–297.

programmes.¹³ Given that sub-Saharan Africa will be the home of most Christians by 2060, a review of the social development performed by such an important agent is essential.¹⁴

Christian institutions are advantaged in performing development in many ways.¹⁵ Philanthropic diakonia is a mandatory element of the church's *esse*, and where divine and spiritual motivations exist, the church must aim to achieve it. African churches operate in all areas, even where the government does not. In most cases church institutions already exist and understand grassroots community issues before any government institution does. African church bodies have been the voice of the voiceless and, with other parts of civil society, are worthwhile critics of bad governance. In some of these places the church acts long before such matters are reported through official channels. Churches have access to resources, funds, and volunteering personnel every day of the year, and what these do as development is owned locally by the community. It is also easier for the church to undertake some of the transformative development work, especially where justice, human rights, helping those in need, and caring for creation are concerned, because it already advocates for them, among other positive changes and community wellbeing within its structures, even without the involvement of a development project. In most African communities those in need go to church, especially when they need emergency and reconstruction aid and psychosocial assistance. All these social actions are easily undertaken because in highly religious communities like those in sub-Saharan Africa the church has an active weekly, if not daily, audience, history, and inherent social development mandate. This qualifies the church as an important development agent in Africa. Nevertheless, in all these matters the philanthropic-diakonia of Africa's Orthodox churches remains undocumented and understudied, especially in Egypt, with the largest Coptic Orthodox population; Ethiopia, with the largest Ethiopian Orthodox population; and Kenya, with the largest Greek Orthodox population.

13 McGuire 2008, 236–282.

14 Pew 2011; Jenkins 2011.

15 DFID 2012; Kim 2019; James 2011, 109–117; James 2016.

Study I: AOCK educational and health philanthropic-diakonia¹⁶

Health and education are the most prominent church development fronts in Africa – as much as 50 per cent in some nations. Since 1929 AOCK has had schools all over Kenya through the Local Native Council, foreign aid, the donation of local lands, and initiatives of local staff.¹⁷ This trend has continued in addition to other education-related developments. Its focus on schools meant AOCK was the first to have locally run pre-independence private schools that taught their students general academics, unlike the European-led mission churches' technical schools, which only prepared Kenyans to be casual labourers to serve their colonial masters. These AOCK schools were shut down during the Mau Mau liberation in 1951 and 1952 and were never returned to AOCK, even after independence. The first Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) Syllabus for diploma and certificate courses in Kenyan tertiary colleges was initiated by AOCK under the St Clement Orthodox Teachers College and was replicated throughout the nation. This syllabus introduced a more deliberate learner-focused education model to Kenya. AOCK continuously gave scholarships to less fortunate families for their children's primary, secondary, and college studies. These were given to both Orthodox and non-Orthodox living or studying in Kenya. Currently, AOCK runs more than 40 pre-schools, more than 40 primary schools, more than 15 secondary schools, and five tertiary institutions.

AOCK health projects started in the 1980s; today, it owns 20 health centres in Kenya, offering subsidised and free medical care to any Kenyan needing healthcare.¹⁸ European doctors and health experts visit Kenya annually between June and August to participate in free national AOCK specialised healthcare camps held in Orthodox parishes, mission areas, and health centres. This has helped less privileged Kenyans and their families acquire specialist healthcare they would otherwise have been unable to afford. Training of Kenyan health experts to add to the staff of Orthodox health centres and clinics in Kenya has been ongoing in Cyprus since 2010: between two and four students have been enrolled in this academic endeavour every year. This will help AOCK healthcare be self-sustaining and increase the number of in-

¹⁶ Thiani 2020.

¹⁷ Thiani 2020, 20–24.

¹⁸ Thiani 2020, 25–28.

ternationally competitive health experts. In return, Kenyans receiving health-care under AOCK are treated by world-class medical personnel for free or for subsidised fees. The HIV/AIDS campaign under CUAHA, which targets the Southern and Eastern Africa regions, has been a major step AOCK and its partners have taken in fighting this scourge in Africa.

Although self-sustainability and balanced partnerships have been an AOCK model since its inception in Kenya, the same does not always apply to all its development projects, as can be deduced from its health and education projects. This has led AOCK to lose some of its schools to the government because it cannot run them financially or eventually to rent its health centres to private individuals. AOCK's ideals are not always assured in partnerships with the government or private individuals. Moreover, when the government runs an AOCK school for a long time, it tends also to want to take over church properties, a tension that is not always helpful to the adjacent church community. When school and healthcare projects are built with foreign funding, the role and participation of the local community are neglected. The AOCK head office and clergy have been accused of handing over AOCK schools to the government without proper MOUs and initiating unplanned and unsustainable healthcare projects in parishes without involving the concerned community of lay Christians. Dependency, lack of participation, and ownership therefore seem to be the direst challenges AOCK health and educational philanthropic-diakonia projects face.

Study II: AOCK philanthropic-diakonia during Covid-19¹⁹

Throughout history Christians have helped societies manage their public pain and suffering, especially during plagues, pandemics, wars, natural calamities, fires, and other devastating occurrences, giving hope and assisting the afflicted materially and spiritually. Such philanthropic-diakonia is undertaken in three stages: relief; rehabilitation; and sustainability. The relief stage comes first in crisis management. Immediate aid alleviates suffering with food, shelter, healthcare, and clothing, evacuates the afflicted to safety, and cares for the dead as the community awaits lasting solutions. The rehabilitation stage follows, helping restore normality to the community by developing strategies for fixing what can be fixed to allow the community's restoration,

¹⁹ Thiani 2021.

including the reconciliation of warring parties, the rebuilding of destroyed homes, the return to evacuated areas, and the reuniting of families. The final stage is sustainable development, which seeks to offer sustainable change, growth, and stable livelihoods in the afflicted community while finding ways to live without returning to the situation that affected them. It has been noted that caring for those in need during difficult times is one way Christianity has gained adherents.

During the Mau Mau movement's war of liberation between 1944 and 1963, AOCK offered afflicted families food, shelter, education, and healthcare. This led to the closure and confiscation of AOCK institutions by the British colonial government, but it did not stop AOCK fulfilling its philanthropic-diakonia. During the 2002 pre-election ethnic clashes and the 2007/2008 post-election violence, which produced many Internally Displaced Persons, AOCK joined other Kenyans in helping affected families with food, shelter within their churches and schools, healthcare, and clothing.

After its official announcement in December 2019 in China, the Covid-19 pandemic was confirmed in Kenya in March 2020 in Nairobi and Mombasa. An immediate lockdown was announced in the two major cities, and many other areas in Kenya were soon affected. AOCK sought ways to offer relief and rehabilitation using its existing local systems and experience of offering relief in Kenya. Water was critical in handling Covid-19. Water drilling projects therefore became a priority for AOCK, starting with dry areas. AOCK clergy and parishes started collecting and distributing food subsidies to impoverished families and schoolchildren. Small-scale farming was initiated on AOCK church land, including the seminary, and was replicated in the homes of AOCK adherents to reduce the cost of food, which had risen due to restricted movement. AOCK microfinance projects, including Saccos, Clergy, Presbyteres, and Readers associations, were amplified to give salary advances and new business funds, rejuvenate old businesses, and offer farming funds and loan sustenance. The funds were easily accessed because they were passed on among AOCK adherents at the parish and community levels. Without these institutions many families would have suffered immensely. Owning and running such local financial institutions helped offer funds when global and national financial institutions were unreliable.

Study III: Orthodox ecclesiology of philanthropic-diakonia²⁰

Historically, Christians have always come together to assist those who suffer – whether they are Christian or not. Since the days of the early church housing and care for the sick, aged, orphans, widows, poor, immigrants, travellers, and homeless have been part of what the church is and does. Although it uses a religious model, this social contribution to society has become a reason for the church’s social recognition and a model for conversion. Inter-Christian cooperation is seen in the early church writings, but since the Second World War the church has cooperated with non-religious and religious institutions in diakonia and development. The World Council of Churches (WCC) 2023 ecumenical diakonia document initiated during the WCC General Assembly held in Busan, South Korea agreed the inter-Christian principles of philanthropic-diakonia. Understanding Christian diaconal language and relating it to the church’s nature and mission explains why the church has been involved in philanthropic-diakonia from its inception.

Although not professionalised, the Orthodox Church practises philanthropic-diakonia in all its daily endeavours from the parish to the diocesan levels, but it has not offered a theology for it. A review of the existing praxis and relating it to existing Orthodox theology shows that philanthropic-diakonia is inherent in the nature and mission of the church and is something on which even differing Christian traditions agree. The Protestant Reformation, having amplified professionalism, teaching, and the study of philanthropic-diakonia, has seemed to appropriate it as a Western Christian model of theology. Yet a historical review reveals that it is also an Eastern Christian model and understanding that the church cannot be the church without philanthropic-diakonia.

An attempt to develop an Orthodox theology of philanthropic-diakonia includes the following. Concerning liturgy and mission, philanthropic-diakonia is the praxis done outside what is taught and prayed for in the worship of the church. In this regard philanthropic-diakonia is the liturgy after the divine liturgy, with the divine liturgy confined to internal members and philanthropic-diakonia intended for all, whether Orthodox Christians, believers, or not. In relation to Orthodox ecclesiology philanthropic-diakonia is inherently seen in the life of Orthodox parishes, dioceses, and local churches, even with their differing magnitude and uncoordinated activities. Why? Because the church

²⁰ Dietrich & Thiani 2021.

cannot be the church without them. In Orthodox soteriology no one can be saved by faith alone without action. Orthodox soteriology and anthropology, borrowing from Matthew 25:31–46 and James 2:17–23, reminds all Orthodox Christians that they will inherit the kingdom of God by showing and performing acts of love to the other. In discipleship and martyrria Orthodox Christians, following the footsteps of the incarnate Christ and the ultimate suffering servant, are reminded of the need to serve others.

A comparison of the Evangelical Lutheran theology of diakonia with Orthodox philanthropic-diakonia reveals many similarities and differences. The Orthodox tend to act on their diaconal ecclesiology instead of theologising on it like Evangelical Lutherans. Evangelical Lutherans have professionalised diakonia and strongly teach it; the Orthodox do not. While philanthropic-diakonia is a path to salvation for the Orthodox, it is done purely out of goodwill by Evangelical Lutherans. Evangelical Lutherans map out and document their diakonia; the Orthodox regard it as another daily church activity and ministry. The two churches are not in communion liturgically and have differing theologies. However, they both have a diaconal ecclesiology that insists the church cannot exist without philanthropic-diakonia, which is inherently embedded in its nature and theology. The Orthodox Church may be an older and different Christian tradition from the Evangelical Lutherans, but in the ecumenical spirit it can learn how to map and document diaconal activities, their scientific study, and professionalise philanthropic-diakonia. Meanwhile, Evangelical Lutherans can learn something about Orthodox theologies that would benefit their understanding of philanthropic-diakonia.

Study IV: Problems and solutions of philanthropic-diakonia in AOCK²¹

AOCK has had philanthropic-diakonia since 1929, but it has not been studied until now. Philanthropic-diakonia experts and publications have often excluded the Orthodox Church, including young and vibrant churches like AOCK. In conducting philanthropic-diakonia, AOCK has faced many problems, conflicts, limitations, and tensions. Some have been resolved; others have not found solutions. Some of the issues identified in this study have affected recipients of philanthropic-diakonia, the project itself, the project managers and financiers, and the church. Legalistic giving and the prosperity gospel

²¹ Thiani n.d.

threaten future AOCK philanthropic-diakonia activities, creating misleading theological concepts around diaconal work. Foreign aid dependency, especially on major projects, has limited locals in taking responsibility, owning and making decisions, and wanting to handle major AOCK projects; several major projects remain unfinished. AOCK has used philanthropic-diakonia as a means of proselytism, something which is considered ecumenically unethical. This may also explain why AOCK is affected by the “Rice Christians” syndrome, in which some locals only join AOCK because of what they receive, including monetary, material, and position gains. AOCK Saccos and table banking loans have been accused of losing church members, limiting church attendance, and creating conflicts and hostilities when loans are unpaid and guarantors lose money. “Paper orphanages” have been discovered in AOCK, whereby an “orphanage” is formed on AOCK premises, and it collects funds it is presumed will help orphans who do not exist. Although these paper orphanages assist some less fortunate families, much money is lost unethically. The lack of properly professionalised philanthropic-diakonia has led AOCK institutions to misdirect some financial resources intended for diaconal work to pay salaries and other non-diaconal matters.

The solutions to some of the problems AOCK’s philanthropic-diakonia work faces include the following. There should be one coordinating and guiding office, with professionally trained officers running AOCK philanthropic-diakonia at the national and diocesan levels. There needs to be one strategic and management plan for all AOCK’s diaconal programmes. The capacity of all AOCK clergy and parish diaconal officers in philanthropic-diakonia and its dos and don’ts needs to be built. Philanthropic-diakonia short courses and degrees need to be taught at the Orthodox Seminary in Nairobi to enable all current and future clerics to be properly formed concerning this part of what the church is and does, further growing its research in the Orthodox tradition and Africa. Financially sustainable models and authentic partnerships of all AOCK major diaconal projects need to be sought to avoid dependency. AOCK should also seek, broaden, and replicate philanthropic-diakonia success stories. Nationally, AOCK should have official regulations and guidelines to help manage its philanthropic-diakonia projects properly and eliminate existing and future problems that could be a danger to the church and the public in general. To avoid the misuse of diaconal funds, separate accounts from other church budgets should be opened. Finally, the already started projects should be finalised before similar ones are started to avoid similar projects remaining incomplete.

Conclusions

This study highlighted the social transformative diakonia of the African Orthodox Church of Kenya (AOCK). Since 1929 AOCK has been involved in considerable social transformational development in Kenya but has yet to receive the recognition it deserves or to be adequately studied. This study is the first to evaluate and document the theology and practice of AOCK's philanthropic-diakonia from its formation to the present. The AOCK philanthropic-diakonia activities that concerned this study included AOCK's contribution to education, health, water, poverty reduction, social justice, feeding and microfinance programmes, social protection projects, and civil society activities like national governance, politics, anticorruption, and Covid-19 management in Kenya. The study proved that AOCK is an active, all-inclusive social development and social protection agent that has contributed to many philanthropic-diakonia activities in Kenya for almost 100 years, transforming many individuals and communities.

Successes and weaknesses have been noted in AOCK's diaconal ministry. The professionalisation and centralisation of philanthropic-diakonia projects and leadership are therefore called for, alongside constant monitoring and evaluation, sustainable financial management of diaconal work, and a more localised and ethically guided philanthropic-diakonia. This will help eliminate the existing ethical, managerial, operational, programmatic, and organisational problems. AOCK needs more authentic and financially sustainable partnerships and collaborations (SDG17) and more localised asset-based development to avoid paternalism and dependency. Moreover, they must go beyond relief, emergency, and charity models to prophetic, sustainable, and transformational development. The Orthodox Church globally, and especially AOCK, can learn from this study about the weaknesses, limitations, and tensions in how philanthropic-diakonia has been undertaken in the past and make improvements by following the study's suggestions.

Theology is always contextual. It is therefore always intended for a specific place, time, and culture, as is philanthropic-diakonia. Theology is not static because of contextual changes and its incarnational character, even though it demands the maintenance of *phronema* (the church's mindset). Global development, ecumenical diakonia, and existing Orthodox theology have shaped Orthodox philanthropic-diakonia praxis and theology. To understand Orthodox diakonia contextually, this study formulated the term philanthropic-

diakonia to help bridge the gap between Orthodox and ecumenical diaconal theologies and broaden their definition. The study has proved that diakonia is not a Western Christian model borrowed by Orthodox theology but a fundamental part of traditional Orthodox theology and ecclesiology that needs to be addressed. According to this study philanthropic-diakonia is not a matter of choice but a mandatory component of being a church and is thus an activity in which all Orthodox churches must be involved. Moreover, the study has laid to rest the binary terms of philanthropy (used by the Orthodox) and diakonia (used ecumenically) by merging the two to form philanthropic-diakonia, a more robust and acceptable term ecumenically and in Orthodox theology. The study further extends the Orthodox theology of philanthropic-diakonia from the recognised liturgy after the liturgy, missiological, and patristic concepts and elucidates it in the light of the Orthodox theology of anthropology, spirituality, salvation, and ecclesiology. The history and theology of a young church like AOCK have therefore proved valuable to the Orthodox Church and its theology globally. This situates AOCK philanthropic-diakonia in Orthodox theology without the exercise being labelled a Latin or Babylonian captivity. Its contribution to social development in Kenya for almost 100 years has been revealed at the same time.

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