



A sermon for DIACONAL SUNDAY

February 25, 2018 - Second Sunday in Lent



This sermon was prepared by Robert Granke, Executive Director of Canadian Lutheran World Relief (CLWR) who is retiring as of March 31, 2018. Robert has served in this role since March 1, 2006 and began his amazing career with CLWR in March of 1977.

When using this sermon, you may wish to provide a link to the CLWR website in your bulletin:
www.clwr.org.

READINGS: Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16 / Psalm 22:23–31 / Romans 4:13–25 / Mark 8:31–38

In the 1970s, when I began my journey with Canadian Lutheran World Relief, I had never heard the word *diakonia* before. I was simply thinking that I was about to embark on a career that would provide the opportunity to travel and see the world, while at the same time “do something good and help people in need.” I had no idea how things might evolve and that I would one day frame my life experience around the concept of diakonia.

In that era, the Churches’ understanding of Christian service was not as developed as it is today, after all, agencies like CLWR only really started in the 1940s, most after World War 2. Responding to human need and the circumstances of those migrating and becoming refugees naturally evolved to become vital parts of the mission of the Church, as it is today.

Since then, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) has defined diaconal ministry and enshrined it into the constitution of the Church. The Lutheran World Federation has established policies on diakonia and published papers on the subject. (Kjell Nordstokke, 2009, *Diakonia in Context*) I have been privileged to participate in two international consultations related to diakonia, one in 2002 (South Africa) and another held in Ethiopia in 2008, both sponsored by the LWF. I supported the development of diaconal ministry within the ELCIC, in my role as National Secretary of the ELCIC during the 1990s.

So, what is it about diakonia that is so important and why do I attach significance to the word and concept today? What relevance is this to ELCIC members?

The texts for this Sunday reveal a great deal about the significance that God attaches to service. The story of Abraham is a wonderful example of what it means to love and fear God, and how he was transformed, even later in life. Can you imagine being 99 years of age and being called by God? I expect that most that age today would be happy to be alive and not thinking about what new opportunities await. Without knowing what history will show, Abraham remained



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faithful and trusted God. He had no idea what lasting impact his love and dedication would have on humanity. Abraham experienced that ours is a God of surprises and that service happens in many ways, at any age. He placed his trust in God and made his desires known. God did not disappoint in the face of the immovable faith of Abraham.

Psalm 22 is a reminder that God does not neglect the cries of the afflicted. “For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has listened to his cry for help” As the needs of the people are met, for example by feeding the hungry in Uganda, those in need of water in Ethiopia and those seeking safe shelter from violence in South Sudan, the righteousness and faithfulness, indeed the love of God is proclaimed.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus speaks very clearly about the importance of service, to follow Christ is to take on a life of service where it is most needed...here at home and in many other places in our world.

So, what does this mean to me, for you and for the ELCIC?

Our collective acts of service, the diakonia we participate in through the work of CLWR is evident in a variety of places around the world. In Palestine, for example, oncology care and kidney dialysis is saving the lives of cancer patients each and every day at the Augusta Victoria Hospital (AVH). Palestinian children receive dialysis treatments that enable them to remain active and engaged in normal activities.

AVH is virtually the only medical treatment center where Palestinians are able to receive cancer care. Each day, buses bring patients to the hospital from one end of the West Bank and Gaza (one third of AVH patients are from Gaza today) to the other, in order that they can receive life-saving procedures. Without this transportation, it would not be possible to have access to the very fine AVH team and exceptional medical personnel.

Over the 15+ years of my service on the AVH Board, I have witnessed the impact of our care to Palestinians. From the very young with cancer, to the elderly in need of palliative care, support from CLWR and the international community has been received as a gift from God. My experience on the AVH Board has transformed my thinking about diakonia. We are much more effective as we work in concert with others around the world in service. Each person or country is able to bring something different and unique and we can overcome many obstacles that as individuals would be either impossible or much more of a challenge.



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The work of CLWR is integral to the mission of our Church. CLWR serves as a primary partner of the ELCIC, challenging the causes and responding to the consequences of global poverty and human suffering. All of the good work of CLWR, working with partners internationally, is on behalf of the Church and in the name of Christ, in faithful service to God's call, as Abraham experienced.

When I joined the LWF in 2002, I arrived at a time when there was a major conflict between relief and development agencies and the LWF about the relationship of humanitarian and development work and the LWF as an institution. Many agency leaders were supporting the idea that it would be best for service work to be separate from the LWF. They saw this as more efficient and easier administratively, away from the "bureaucracy" of the institution. The LWF General Secretary at the time, my former colleague, the Reverend Dr. Ishmael Noko, helped me to understand that this would send the wrong signal to global Church members of the LWF. We agreed to ensure that others better understood the central role of diaconia in the life of the Church and we engaged in many difficult conversations aimed at ensuring that world service remained a vital part of the mission of the LWF. I can tell you that this was not easy. While this dynamic is still at play today, the service work of the LWF that CLWR supports remains a key part of the mission of the LWF. As noted in the LWF 2009 *Diakonia in Context* paper, the mission of the Church is threefold, proclamation, communion and service. This is that way the ELCIC defines its mission as well. All are important and are interrelated. I certainly learned to appreciate that diaconia is a fundamental and essential part of being a Christian and it is how Churches define mission.

The mission of CLWR necessarily requires engaging the world in addressing poverty. There are many agencies with similar mandates, but few with the same motivations. Many Canadians see us as a "faith-based" agency. We support humanitarian efforts in partnership with many faith-based organizations. Our global Lutheran network supports and amplifies almost every every project that CLWR takes on. New partnerships are being forged, such as the recent membership of CLWR in the Humanitarian Coalition. It is in this consortium that we link up with secular agencies as well as with other faith-based agencies, like Islamic Relief Canada. We collectively seek and receive funding from Global Affairs Canada as we respond to international emergencies. New alliances for a changing time. But through it all, our identity remains, an expression of diakonia as a part of the overall mission of the Church.

More than 40 years ago, when I was hired by CLWR, I did not comprehend well what I was about to enter into and where it would lead me. I did not see myself as being engaged in diaconal ministry. It has been through some amazing experiences and opportunities for reflection, that I realize that I have served and contributed to the mission of the Church, in Canada and globally.



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Today we celebrate and lift up the importance of diaconal ministry. At the heart of this ministry is service and leading and equipping all the baptized for diakonia, by helping people to discern gifts for service, by encouraging awareness of the world's' brokenness. May we all be empowered by God's call and encouraged to see all that we do in service as contributions that many around the world take note of. We should not underestimate the significance of what each of us does, day by day. Acts of kindness, compassion and service to others is important and makes a difference. Being supportive of sponsoring refugees in Canada, volunteering in local food banks and community outreach programs are a few examples of making a difference in the lives of the afflicted.

I am well shy of Abraham's 99 years, and my story is not finished yet. I look forward to the new opportunities to serve and be surprised by God's calling, in ways that I cannot predict.

Additional Diaconal Sunday Resources available at:

www.elcic.ca/Leadership/For-Ministers/DiaconalSunday.cfm

The 2009 Lutheran World Federation paper *Diakonia in Context*, edited by Kjell Nordstokke, is available at:

www.elcic.ca/Documents/documents/DiakonaiinContextDMD_Diakonia.pdf