Paper:

The New Diakonia And The Wesleyan Tradition
- A Critical Response To The New Diakonia
From An African Methodist Perspective

by:

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1. Introduction

This paper ventures to state what may be considered to be a possible response by Methodist Churches in Africa to the call for adopting the New Diakonia. Needless to say, the recommendations do not represent any official views - even though they may well be. To put the discussion in perspective, a brief outline of the history of the development of the concept of New Diakonia, as well as a short account of Wesley's movement or mission of good news to the poor will be given. We shall then consider the nature of Wesley's movement, and discuss the extent to which the New Diakonia is similar to, or different from, Wesley's movement. The social conditions of England which prompted the Wesleyan concern for improved social welfare will be compared with those of contemporary Africa. The relevance of the concept of the New Diakonia for Africa will be considered. On the basis of all this, we shall state what in our considered opinion can be a Methodist response to the call for a New Diakonia in today's Africa.

2. The Origins and Nature of Diakonia in the Church

The term diakonia and the programme of action that it describes have gained much currency in the last few years in both the ecumenical family and the evangelical fellowship. Both the term and programme, however, are not new. The word diakonia itself is an English transliteration of the Greek word diakonia derived from the verb diakoneo, which means "to serve". From it we have English words like "deacon", "archdeacon", "diaconal" etc. Literally, diakonia means "waiting at table", but in a wider sense, it means "service", "ministration." The term is now used as a technical theological term to refer to the Christian approach to humanitarianism, or simply to mean "practical Christian service to society." See my Paper "The strengths and Weaknesses of Present Forms of Diakonia in Africa " in Kudadjie & Molo 1989: 74-84.

The beginnings of institutionalized diakonia in the history of the Church may be traced to the appointment of the seven deacons recorded in Acts 6 in response to the need in the early Church to pool resources together and to share them fairly among all, so that no one in the group might be in need. The practice of diakonia can be seen even in the ministry of Jesus who preached the kingdom of God and went about doing good and commissioned his followers to preach the kingdom of God, heal the sick, and teach those who believe to live out what they believe. The Church has faithfully performed this service to the community throughout its history, according to the perceived needs of particular communities at particular times. For a long time the Church's diaconal service consisted mainly of "religious" services such as preaching, teaching, counselling and prayers of intercession for society, governments, nations, etc.; education for literacy; as well as technical, vocational and professional training; health and medical services; and some social relief services.
3. The Changing Scene

Up to the 1960s most of the Church's diaconal service was of the type variously described as "curative", or "corrective", or "ambulance" service. The current thinking in the ecumenical family is that diakonia should be preventive rather than curative. We give a brief sketch of the history of the development of the new thinking on Diakonia in the World Council of Churches in the last 25 years.

4. Brief History of the Development of the Concept of the New Diakonia

In July 1966, the World Council of Churches' Commission on Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service (CICARWS) organized a consultation in Swanick, UK on "Diakonia - Practical Christian Service to the World." This consultation added two components to the prevailing concept of Christian service conceived as social relief work and service. These were (1) the idea of Social advancement (or social action), and (2) social justice, stressing that without social justice true development is impossible.

New forms of social involvement that were worked out tended to encourage dependency. To address this, the WCC fifth Assembly in Nairobi (1975), reiterated the issue of justice and the struggle for human dignity. The Assembly called on the Church to be concerned with the transforming of conditions which generate injustice. This meant, among other things, that the Church should also tackle issues related to the distribution and use of power, and those related to unity and solidarity among the churches.

A Seminar held in Geneva in 1982 in preparation for the WCC Vancouver Assembly (1983), explored the "Contemporary Understanding of Diakonia." The Seminar drew out a number of major marks of Christian diakonia. Diakonia is humanitarian and is for both Christians and non-Christians. Since it is essentially self-giving - and not merely the giving of material things - all people are capable of giving and receiving diakonia. Diakonia, it was stressed, ought to be concerned with structural and political factors of want, enslavement and suffering. If the goal is to be achieved, then diakonia has to be preventive, and the local church should be the centre of action. Recipients of diakonia are to be respected and empowered.

The Vancouver Assembly (WCC Fifth Assembly) itself raised the issues of healing, caring, sharing and the drawing of those often marginalized, such as women, lay people, the handicapped and children. Arising therefrom, two themes were draw out for programme guidelines, namely: (i) healing and sharing, (ii) the struggle for justice and human dignity. In response to a call for models of diaconal service that would address these issues, the World Council of Churches' Commission on Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service (CICARWS) worked out models to deal with the two themes through (a) service that would cater for immediate needs, and (b) action that would deal with root causes of the problems. Thus, both the curative and preventive approaches were to be adopted.

The high point of the exploration for new ways of providing relevant and effective practical Christian service to the world was probably reached at the CICARWS Global Consultation on Diakonia - code-named "Diakonia 2000 - Called To Be Neighbours" - held in Larnaca, Cyprus, 1986. The consultation was to seek

- a clearer view of the world situation as a basis for further analysis and study;
- a theological understanding of diakonia which, though not committing every Church, serves as guidance for further action and relationships;
3.

- an exchange of actual approaches and needs which can serve as a basis and orientation for learning and sharing;

- concrete suggestions for the work of the churches at different levels, out of which will come the new directions and agenda for CICARWS for the next 20 years." (Poser 1987:1)

The Larnaca Consultation raised a wide range of issues in the context of the current world situation, and biblical and theological reflections on diakonia. It came out with a vision for a just and peaceful society - a society in which, as it were, not only would there be Good Samaritans to take care of the injured, but where there would be no robbers because the conditions that breed robbers would have been uprooted.

The Consultation recorded a litany of woes, noting the worsening world situation.

Among the numerous recommendations made for new and radical forms of diakonia, were calls on humanity to:

- address root causes of injustice
- renew models of sharing
- change lifestyles
- restore the environment.

The Church on its part was called upon to play reconciliatory roles to resolve conflicts that give rise to suffering and refugee situations; review its own power and be more democratic and simple; de-emphasize material resources and foster spiritual gifts; deepen the prophetic diakonia; focus on people, etc. (Poser 1987:92-104)

Responding to the Larnaca call for further discussion, in 1987, CICARWS held a world Consultation on Resource Sharing in El Escorial, Spain. The Consultation formulated an ecumenical discipline for sharing resources - material, spiritual, etc. It stressed equal partnership between donor and recipient; and called for equitable representation of women and youth on all decision-making bodies in the ecumenical family.

Regional Consultations were also held to review the Larnaca findings and work out their implications. The Africa Region held its Africa Diakonia Consultation in Nairobi in 1989. It reviewed the African situation, and noted the deteriorating conditions. It worked out a theological and cultural basis for Diakonia in Africa, and made numerous, detailed recommendations to tackle the African situation. These related, among other things to:

- the prophetic and advocacy roles of the Church
- holistic development
- recapuring and preserving the traditional African heritage of sharing
- North-South, Intra-Africa and South-South sharing
- ecological issues
- how to meet emergencies
- disseminating the concept of the New Diakonia

(Kudadjie and Molo 1989)
5. Emphases of the New Diakonia

We may give the following as the checklist of the New Diakonia for Africa (Diakonia 1990:63-64)

What is Now Called For

The new kind of Diakonia that is called for is one that will mean

1. Getting away from conceiving of Diakonia as being
   - entirely social relief work;
   - "curative" or "ambulance service";
   - for Church members only;
   - unbiblical or unspiritual;
   - not an important part of the Church's work, or an alternative to evangelism.

2. Instead, Diakonia should be seen in essence as:
   - a command of God/obedience to God/following God's own example;
   - calling for self-emptying and preparedness to suffer;
   - calling for commitment to solidarity with and support for the poor, oppressed, marginalized and disadvantaged;
   - meaning confrontation with the forces of evil;
   - demanding the Church to speak out clearly against the evils in the society and to defend the weak and the oppressed;
   - an invitation to transform, not only persons, but also structures, both within and outside the Church, to ensure justice, peace and integrity of the creation;
   - a challenge to present not only a "social gospel", but the whole Gospel - it is holistic, embracing both evangelism and social work;
   - identifying root causes of social, economic and political issues and ills, and resolutely working towards redressing them;
   - developing a new vision of what the service and the calling of the Church in Africa is about;
   - supporting people struggling for justice, human dignity and self-determination.

3. Finally, the new concept of Diakonia will mean
   - more use of prayer and spirituality as weapons in dealing with issues and difficult situations;
   - changing personal and institutional lifestyles for the well-being of those deprived and marginalized;
   - informed Christian analysis of social, economic and political situations;
   - empowering the weak and the powerless to realize their potentials;
   - more people-oriented projects; and long-term holistic development;
   - serious effort in tackling environmental issues;
   - compulsory relevant education for stewardship.
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   - serious effort in tackling environmental issues;
   - compulsory relevant education for stewardship, accountability, and strong leadership cadre for the African Church;
   - human resource development;
   - strengthening local churches and communities to transform their own environment; and
   - tapping more than hitherto African traditions and culture in diaconal efforts.
6. Wesley's Movement: Good News to the Poor

The Lord Jesus identified himself (Luke 4:18-21) with the anointed whose mission was described by the prophet Isaiah (61:1-2):

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people. (Today's English Version)

Although Jesus called all people to repent and enter the Kingdom of God, he seemed to be particularly interested in the poor and oppressed - not unlike all God's earlier spokesmen and not unlike God himself, as can be seen in the Law and the Prophets. And so were the Wesleys and their movement. Theirs was a mission to the poor. John Wesley the evangelist, the curer of souls, was also the social reformer (Greet: 75).

Who are the poor to whom the Wesleys ministered, and what was the nature of their ministry to them? Charles Wesley gives a clue as to who were the poor of their time, in the Wesleys' Conversion Hymn "Where shall my wondering soul begin?":

- Outcasts of men, to you I call,
- Harlots, and publicans, and thieves!
- He spreads His arms to embrace you all;
- Sinners alone His grace receives;
- No need of Him the righteous have;
- He came the lost to seek and save.

Studies on poverty as understood in the Old Testament have shown that the concept derives from six main Hebrew roots, classifiable in various ways. John Stott suggests three principal divisions:

First, and economically speaking, there are the indigent poor, who are deprived of the basic necessities of life. Secondly, and sociologically speaking, there are the oppressed poor (or powerless poor), who are powerless victims of human injustice. Thirdly, and spiritually speaking, there are the humble poor, who acknowledge their helplessness and look to God alone for salvation. (Stott 1990:234)

John Stott further suggests that we can reduce poverty to two kinds:

1. the material poverty of the destitute and powerless,
2. the spiritual poverty of the humble and meek.

These "poor" are those to whom the Kingdom comes as great good news, partly because it is a free and unmerited gift of salvation to sinners, and partly because it promises a new society characterized by freedom and justice. (Stott 1990:238)
Descriptions of conditions in 18th century pre-Wesleyan English society in which the Wesleys ministered show clearly that the people were truly poor. Two examples will suffice:

(1) There were able preachers, but the characteristic sermon was the colorless essay on moral virtue. Outreaching work for the unchurched was but scanty. The condition of the lower classes was one of spiritual destitution. Popular amusements were coarse, illiteracy widespread, law savage in its enforcement, jail sinks of disease and iniquity. Drunkenness was more widespread than at any other period in English history. (Walker 1959:454)

(2) It is said that the stench of London could be detected three miles out into the surrounding countryside. The figures relating to infantile mortality are appalling. In the years following Wesley's birth, three out of every four children born in London died before their fifth birthday. The lack of proper sanitation and tainted water supplies were the cause of epidemics which wiped out thousands of people. Medical services were totally inadequate. (Greet 1988:72)

The history of how the Wesleyan movement - as part of the great evangelical revival - confronted and addressed the issues of their time and what they did to transform and reform the society is too well-known to be recounted. It is acknowledged that Wesley's revival saved England from collapse. This he did through his active concern with both evangelism and social welfare - which has become a tradition in Methodism (Cross 1957:894)

Dr. Kenneth Greet, formerly Secretary of the Department of Christian Citizenship and one-time President of the British Methodist Conference has shown succinctly (in his lecture "John Wesley and the Three Dimensions of Christian Mission"), how John Wesley ministered to the body, mind and spirit of his converts. (Greet 1988:70-82). That three-fold concern shaped the mighty movement that raised people like William Wilberforce (1759-1833), Anthony Shaftesbury (1801-1885) etc. Through the untiring efforts of such men, and amidst great opposition, incredible social reforms were effected in England.

Laws were passed which abolished slavery; schools were set up to provide free education for the poor; the employment of women and children in underground mines was forbidden; improvements were made in the conditions of work.

The ordinary masses were thus helped to have education and employment which in turn gave them self-advancement and self-improvement. The movement also undertook ministry among children. Within Methodism itself, the members of the classes and bands found that not only were they allowed to express their opinions; their opinions were required. This was in contrast to the situation in the highly hierarchical wider society where "the emerging class of artisans looked in vain to the political authorities for any part in determining their own destiny. They found scarcely anything better in the Church of England."(English (English 1990:104)

Thus whether in the church or in the state, the Wesleyan mission to the poor was good news, indeed. It was holistic. As Dr. Donald English, one time President of the British Methodist Conference put it, for the Wesleys.

The social caring and the struggle for justice were not simply expressions of the gospel, they were part of it.
And again, there is no point in trying to deny Wesley's evangelistic zeal, nor that it stood at the centre of his concern. But to claim that this was all he was committed to is manifestly untrue. The schools, the hospitals, the orphanages, the lending societies are all witnesses against such a claim. So, too, in the endless stream of books, including five dictionaries, one of which modestly claims to be the best in the world! Then there was the large collection of small booklets; small enough to be carried in large numbers by the preachers, cheap enough to be affordable by the poor people, and short enough to be readable by the unlearned. Add to this the book on cures, the collecting for the poor, the plan to raise a troop of soldiers to defend the realm, the criticism of the treatment of French prisoners of war at Knowle, near Bristol, and you have a considerable testimony to social action and the struggle for justice. (English 1990:103)

For the Methodist Church it could not and cannot be otherwise, for John Wesley the Founder of the Methodist Movement himself, after the Aldersgate experience, professed as his object -

to promote as far as I am able vital practical religion and by the grace of God to beget, preserve, and increase the life of God in the souls of men. (Cross 1957:1446)

So John Wesley promoted and left a legacy of practical religion. As part of his practical religion, he left some important traditions and enduring values which, as noted by Greet, remain as reliable guides for the Methodist people as they shape their programmes and decide on their directions. Out of these, the International, Social and Economic Affairs Committee of the World Methodist Council has identified the following:
(i) the importance of Facts, (ii) the Value of the Human Being, (iii) The importance of the Christian Community as a Sign of the Kingdom, (iv) The Practice of Stewardship, and (v) The Priority of the Poor in God's Plan Salvation. (Greet: 80-81)

Wesley's Mission to the Poor and the New Diakonia

How does the Wesleyan mission to the poor relate to the New Diakonia? Were his social action programmes and teachings "ambulance service" or curative dealing only with symptoms? Or were they dealing with root causes and, therefore, preventive? How would Wesley have responded to the call to the New Diakonia?

A careful examination would indicate that Wesley would have no difficulty in going along with the concept of the New Diakonia. In the first place, both the Wesleyan movement and the New Diakonia are responses to the call in the Bible to preach the good news of the Kingdom of God, to heal and to teach; to care for the widows and orphans; to seek justice; to transform society as salt and light; to raise the fallen, etc. Secondly, they are both imitating God who creates, provides and cares for the universe; and Christ who gave himself as a sacrifice to redeem a fallen world. Thirdly, they are both relevant responses to the felt needs of their time. Fourthly, they are people-oriented and seeking to uphold the sanctity of life and dignity of the human person. In short, both Wesley's social action and the New Diakonia are responses to the call of the loving and righteous God for justice, peace and the integrity of the creation.
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That being the case, the New Diakonia is not only similar to but continuous with Wesley's good news to the poor - although it may be said to be calling for more radical and more complex services than Wesley's diaconal services. The Wesleyan movement dealt with immediate problems,
but also with the root causes. Thus the schools, the anti-slavery laws, the penal reform Acts and the workers' emancipation laws prevented the continuation and recurrence of the desperate and miserable conditions of the poor.

The African Situation and the New Diakonia

It is pertinent to keep in view the African context in which the Church in Africa - and for that matter the Methodist Church in Africa - is being called upon to render practical Christian service to the society. We quote the description of the African situation as given by the 1989 Africa Diakonia Consultation (CICARWS 1990; 48-49)

1. Negative Factors

(a) The direction of development in Africa was disrupted by the colonialists and has since continued to be in the control of foreign interests: the neocolonialists, the multinational corporations, and Northern donors and financiers.

(b) Traditional African concepts, values, and lifestyles are being eroded in the face of modernism and infiltration of foreign values.

(c) African nations are relatively new and lack adequate management skills and the necessary technology to handle the post-independence problems.

(d) In the bid to protect the newly-won political independence, many politicians and governments have adopted undemocratic and oppressive methods.

(e) Political instability is persistent, leading to increasing number of refugees and displaced persons.

(f) There is an increasing debt burden on African nations and worsening balance of trade situation.

(g) The quality and standards of living remain low, and, in many instances, are falling even further.

(h) There are conditions of extreme desperation and hopelessness in almost everything - politics, morals, economy, population growth, environment/ecology, health, food and nutrition, etc.

(i) There is an increasing inability of the continent to feed itself.

(j) The local churches tend to be mainly preoccupied with the struggle to survive and to maintain their structures.

2. Positive Factors

(a) There is still a rich heritage of values, traditions, and practices that can promote the new concept in Diakonia.

(b) There is a gigantic Christian presence in Africa. Christianity has introduced a new faith and a new hope.
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(c) There is in place an encouraging record of the Church's diaconal services to society through: prayer, counselling, education, health, social and relief services, etc. Some of the services are, however, essentially remedial and provisional

(d) There is an increasing co-operation among the countries of the region.
An African Methodist Response to the New Diakonia

Considering the character, the thrust and extent of the New Diakonia in the contexts of the Methodist tradition and the contemporary African situation, what could be the response of the Methodist Churches in Africa to the New Diakonia? Not having sought the views of the Methodist Churches in Africa on this issue, one could only make rational guesses which in no way represent official views - though they could well be.

(a) Reservations

It is conceivable that, at least, some of the Methodist churches will have reservations about the New Diakonia for a number of reasons. Firstly, it may be contended that the New Diakonia misses the priority of the task of the Church which, supposedly, is to evangelize. As has been pointed out already, however, it is difficult to separate evangelism from social action. The two are parts of the whole, as the Law and the Prophets as well as the life and teaching of Christ and the apostles make clear. Religious protestation and observance must be matched by righteous living in relation to the neighbour and the environment. Jesus preached and fed the poor and healed the sick all together.

A second ground for possible misgiving is the strong political undertones in the New Diakonia. Must the Church be that political? This is an old debate which we cannot engage in here. (See our own position in Kudadjie and Aboagye-Mensah 1991). Suffice it to say that there are degrees of legitimate political involvement by Christians as individual citizens in the state, and for the Church as an institution. Within proper limits and with the right circumspection, a Methodist Church can take useful political action without unduly interfering in politics.

An issue related to the foregoing is the possibility Governments viewing any role by the Church that raises the people's awareness to their rights or potentials in self-determination, as inciting the people to have disaffection against the ruling authorities. Real as this is in the African situation, it need not constitute a disclaimer against the responsibility of the Church to be involved, albeit within proper limits. Recent events in Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Zaire, Zambia, Zimbabwe, etc. demonstrate what positive power the church can exert in the interests of the people in their political life.

There may be other issues on which a Methodist Church may have reservations. We shall mention only one more which is likely to be questioned: That is the call on the Church to take action to protect the environment and to avert disaster and cope with emergencies like drought, famine and earthquake. The question is whether the Church can bear that burden if it is being saddled with, and whether that is not an ambitious undertaking which can be discharged only by Governments; and even so, in concert with other Governments and international agencies. Such misgiving, in our opinion, is legitimate. It is to be noted, however, that the Africa Diakonia Consultation Report gives detailed suggestions as to what is expected of the Church - such as giving education on stewardship, preserving the environment, encouraging tree planting and reforestation, monitoring the situation and passing on information and alarm to the Government, and so on. (See Kudadjie and Molo 1989:13-33)
Commendation

No matter what reservations one may have, looking at the New Diakonia from the perspective of Methodism one cannot fail to be impressed by a number of commendable and themes that can be isolated from it. These include the acknowledgement of the importance of the spiritual dimension of problems as well as spiritual resources necessary to combat the forces of evil; the emphasis on a blend of evangelism and social action; the concern for empowering the powerless and marginalized. Nor can one fail to notice the quest for social justice and dignity of the person; the promotion of self-determination and self-advancement of the poor. Nor human resource development; stewardship and accountability. And can one be so apathetic as not to be inspired by the persistent call on the Church to intensify its prophetic and advocacy roles? All these emphases of the New Diakonia were also noticeable features of the Wesleyan mission of good news to the poor, even if they were not always given nearly the same emphasis that they are being given in the New Diakonia. These must commend the New Diakonia to Wesley's successors.

The operative concept of preventive diakonia and the increasingly commonplace idea of dealing with the root causes of problems are also features of the new thinking that must endear it to African Methodists. This must be so because Africans have learnt over the years that much of the so-called aid that has been given to African nations and churches has created more dependency than before and failed to redress the adverse condition of the great majority of the people. Aid has often impoverished the people and stifled local initiative and creativity. It has taken the form of giving starving people some fish instead of teaching them to fish for themselves and thus empower them to solve their own problems. Therefore, the emphasis on dealing with root causes is justifiable and commendable.

Insofar as diakonia in Africa is concerned, there are a few other features that should make the new thinking particularly welcome. We are referring, in the first place, to the putting of Christian service on firm biblical and theological basis, and not see it merely as a humanitarian activity. In many fora where the new thinking has been discussed, there has always been the clarion call and reminder that the Church must be careful not to look like another UNDP or USAID or ODA. The Church must offer diakonia because of its self-image as the body of Christ, the representative of Christ; because God is "diaconal" and has called the Church into partnership with Himself; because Christ was broken for the world, and the Church must similarly provide service to God's people through brokenness. Hence the 1989 continent-wide African Consultation on Diakonia and the subsequent sub-regional consultations all stressed the theological basis of Diakonia.

Secondly, there is also a positive emphasis on taking the African cultural practices and values more and more into account in the effort to find new and relevant ways of serving society. African communalism and sense of sharing which guarantee that everyone gets something have been underscored.

So have the African respect for life, preservation of the environment and acceptable social conduct - which traditionally are ensured through the institution of taboos and sanctions. It is common knowledge that the erosion of such traditional values and institutions has led to much chaos and indignity in our time. If, therefore, the African New Diakonia calls the Church to be mindful of them - without necessarily seeking to protect the status quo as if culture were static or necessarily divine but rather judging and redeeming and transforming it through the merits of Christ - then this new thinking deserves the support of African Methodism - whose forebears, whether viewed as Africans or as Bible-believing Christians, were desirous to found societies and communities where people live in peace and harmony; where there is abundance and death and disease and want,
like the enemy, are subdued and eliminated; above all, where the Supreme Almighty God is pleased with the people and showers His blessings on them. In a nutshell, our African and Methodist forebears longed and worked for a society where the vision of the New Creation in Isaiah 65:17-25 will be realized. Our understanding is that the New Diakonia also seeks to realize this vision under God. Wesley also sought this for England and America and all over the world where his missionaries went.

Conclusion

We conclude, then, that the New Diakonia is biblical. It is evangelical. It is Wesleyan. It is relevant to our times. Let the Methodists in Africa - and, indeed, all Christians elsewhere - adopt it, and allow the Holy Spirit to guide them as they decide on each particular course of action under its umbrella.
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