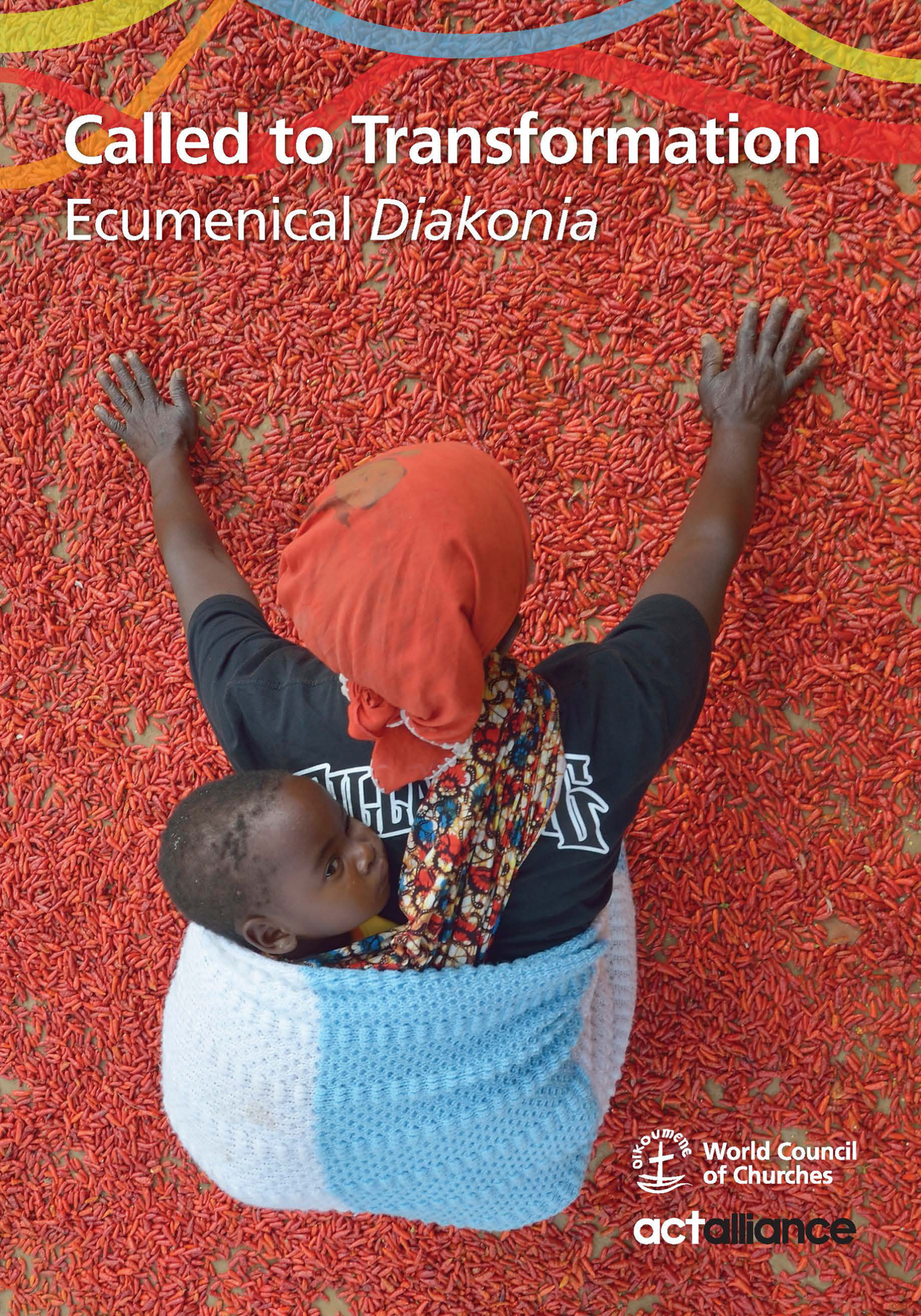
Called to Transformation

Ecumenical *Diakonia*



World Council of Churches

actalliance

Called to Transformation

Ecumenical Diakonia

World Council of Churches

actalliance

Called to Transformation – Ecumenical *Diakonia*

Copyright © 2022 WCC Publications. All rights reserved. This publication may be reproduced in English with full acknowledgment of the source. No part of the publication may be translated without prior written permission from the publisher. Contact: publications@wcc-coe.org.

WCC Publications is the book publishing programme of the World Council of Churches. The WCC is a worldwide fellowship of 352 member churches which represents more than half a billion Christians around the world. The WCC calls its member churches to seek unity, a common public witness and service to others in a world where hope and solidarity are the seeds for justice and peace. The WCC works with people of all faiths seeking reconciliation with the goal of justice, peace, and a more equitable world.

Opinions expressed in WCC Publications are those of the authors.

Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, © copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

Production: Lyn van Rooyen, coordinator
WCC Publications
Cover design: Beth Oberholtzer
Book design and typesetting: Beth Oberholtzer
Photo credits: See page 139
ISBN (PDF)w: 978-2-8254-1806-2
ISBN (Print): 978-2-8254-1814-7

World Council of Churches
150 route de Ferney, P.O. Box 2100
1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland
www.oikoumene.org

Contents

Preface 7
Acting General Secretary of the World Council of Churches

Preface 8
General Secretary of the ACT Alliance

Executive summary 9

Chapter 1
Introduction 13

1.1. Background 14
1.2. How to read this document 14
1.3. What do we understand by ecumenical *diakonia*? 15
1.4. The context of this document 17
1.5. Existing texts on ecumenical *diakonia* 19
1.6. Outline of the document 21

Chapter 2
The History of Ecumenical *Diakonia* 22

2.1. Introduction 23
2.2. The Early Church 23
2.3. The missionary era 25
2.4. Interchurch aid 27
2.5. Ecumenical *diakonia* and development aid 28
2.6. A new paradigm emerging 31
2.7. The formation of the ACT Alliance 33
2.8. Summary 35

Chapter 3
***Diakonia* in today's polycentric ecumenical movement** 36

3.1. Introduction 37
3.2. *Diakonia* from the margins 38
3.3. Busan 2013 40
3.4. *Diakonia* and the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace 40
3.5. Summary 41

Chapter 4
Theological Reflection on *Diakonia* 42

4.1. Introduction 43
4.2. Biblical reference: the diak- words 43
4.3. Trinitarian perspectives on *diakonia* 45
4.4. *Diakonia* as an integral part of the church's being and mission 47
4.5. *Diakonia* as discipleship 48
4.6. *Diakonia* and proclamation 50
4.7. Summary 51

Chapter 5
The Changing Landscape of Diaconal Action 53

5.1. Introduction 54
5.2. New faces of poverty in today's world 54
5.3. The Sustainable Development Goals as socio-political environment for diakonia 55
5.4. Migration and refugees 58
5.5. Economic justice 59
5.6. Climate justice 60
5.7. Gender justice 62
5.8. Health justice 64
5.9. Summary 66

Chapter 6
The Distinctiveness of Diaconal Practice 67
6.1. Introduction 68
6.2. The aim of diaconal action 68
6.3. The connection between what churches are and what churches do 70
6.4. *Diakonia* as faith-based and rights-based action 70
6.5. The distinctiveness of faith-based organizations 71
6.6. Diaconal assets 73
6.7. Diaconal language 75
6.8. Diaconal professionalism 75
6.9. Summary 76

Chapter 7
Contemporary Challenges 78
7.1. Introduction 79
7.2. Limited resources – resource sharing 79
7.3. Bilateral or multilateral diaconal work? 80
7.4. Cooperation and partnership in ecumenical *diakonia* 82
7.5. Working with secular organizations 83
7.6. Diapraxis – working with people of other faiths 84
7.7. Advocacy – prophetic *diakonia* 85
7.8 Abuse within diaconal institutions 86
7.9. Summary 86

Chapter 8
Ecumenical *Diakonia* in a confessional context 87
8.1. Introduction 88
8.2. An Orthodox understanding of Ecumenical *Diakonia* 88
8.3. A Lutheran understanding of Ecumenical *Diakonia* 89
8.4. A Reformed understanding of Ecumenical *Diakonia* 90
8.5. An Anglican understanding of Ecumenical *Diakonia* 90
8.6. A Methodist understanding of Ecumenical *Diakonia* 91
8.7. A Pentecostal understanding of Ecumenical *Diakonia* 92
8.8. A Baptist understanding of Ecumenical *Diakonia* 93
8.9. A Roman Catholic understanding of Ecumenical *Diakonia* 94
8.10. African instituted churches' understanding of Ecumenical *Diakonia* 95
8.11. Peace churches' understanding of Ecumenical *Diakonia* 96

Chapter 9
Ecumenical *Diakonia* in a regional context 97

9.1. Introduction 98
9.2. Ecumenical *Diakonia* in a Latin American context 98
9.3. Ecumenical *Diakonia* in a Caribbean context 99
9.4. Ecumenical *Diakonia* in a European context 100
9.5. Ecumenical *Diakonia* in an African context 101
9.6. Ecumenical *Diakonia* in an Asian context 103
9.7. Ecumenical *Diakonia* in a Middle Eastern context 105
9.8. Ecumenical *Diakonia* in a Pacific context 106
9.9. Ecumenical *Diakonia* in a North American context 106

Chapter 10
The Way Forward 109

10.1. Introduction 110
10.2. Recognizing the *kairos* moment 110
10.3. Affirming *diakonia* as a shared vision and mandate 110
10.4. Affirming the diversity of gifts 111
10.5. Affirming justice as a priority 111
10.6. Strengthening structures of shared action 112
10.7. Strengthening networks of cooperation 112
10.8. Strengthening communication 112
10.9. Strengthening diaconal capacity 113
10.10. Diaconal practice and code of conduct 113
10.11. The Environmental Crisis and Ecodiakonia 114
10.12. Summary 115

Addendum
The Diaconal Work of the Churches in the Context of COVID-19 116

Rationale 117
Section 1: Overview 117
Section 2: Examples 131

Contributors 137

Photo Descriptions and Credits 139

Preface

Acts 6 describes the calling of the first deacons – Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolaus. Almost two thousand years later, this call to care in Christ's name is just as relevant, essential and urgent. Discerning how best to do so in changing times is what led to the writing of this document.

"Called to Transformation – Ecumenical Diakonia" has its origins in a conference held in Malawi in 2014, working on clarification on the relationship between churches and specialized 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 ecumenical *diakonia*.

This document aims to outline theological and practical service for *diakonia*. 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 aim to address the diverse practices of *diakonia* and the theological background of *diakonia* as well as addressing misleading theologies.

The main document was prepared prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than change the document, the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches felt that an addendum on the diaconal response to COVID-19 should be commissioned. Both the main document and the addendum can be read here together. I would like to thank everyone involved in the preparation of both.

Witness and service are crucial for the Church: mission, *diakonia* and ecumenism belong together and to the heart of what it means to be Church. The World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance have worked together to produce this resource, which we offer for the churches and their diaconal ministries throughout the World. We hope that it will lead to the sharing of ideas across confessions and borders to serve people in need.

Rev. Professor Dr Ioan Sauca
Acting General Secretary
World Council of Churches

Preface

It is with appreciation and joy that we present the document "Called to Transformation – Ecumenical *Diakonia*", which is the result of a joint effort of the ACT Alliance and the World Council of Churches (WCC) to clarify our joint understanding of ecumenical *diakonia* and articulate who we are and what we do. It outlines theological components and builds on the practice of churches and ecumenical organizations through the years. It demonstrates the convergence between churches and specialized ministries to guide our actions, practices and policy development. It is also intended to strengthen the institutional capacity of our respective constituencies.

Understanding ecumenical *diakonia* in diverse confessional contexts (chapter 8) and in diverse geographical contexts (chapter 9) is critical in times of pandemic, conflict, exclusion and climate crisis. Our joint commitment to *diakonia* bodes well for strengthened cooperation between WCC member churches and ACT members, whilst still preserving the shared understanding that binds our different constituencies together across contexts.

This document provides a new 'base-line' for joint reflection and practice of *diakonia* – one that articulates our centuries old church tradition in the contemporary framework of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (chapter 5.3) and the commitment to 'localisation', promotion of local leadership and community led responses.

The document equips us for the necessary engagement with 'networks of cooperation' (chapter 10.7) – and helps us to develop a language to sensitize an international development and humanitarian system that has long been faith-illiterate but that is fortunately now changing with the discussion on 'religion and development'.

Diakonia is 'an integral part of the church's being and mission' (4.4). There is no church without *diakonia*, and no *diakonia* without 'the distinctiveness of its faith-based action'. In this context, there is no contradiction between a faith-based and a rights-based approach in *diakonia*, as they are mutually reinforcing: "faith-based and rights-based actions affirm each other".

Ecumenical *diakonia* affirms the fundamental importance of gender justice, recognizing that it is indispensable for development and poverty reduction. "Every human being holds the right to live in dignity and in freedom, and to be subjects in their own lives."

The understanding of our 'calling to transformation' comes with the insight that this call (vocatio) includes the need for us to engage with the poor, marginalized and excluded in advocacy (ad-vocatio) and if necessary, provocation (pro-vocatio): "*diakonia* will provoke resistance and contradiction, however always convinced that it will be transformative, calling into new ways of seeing, acting and judging".

The ACT Alliance thanks all involved in preparing the document and appreciates the collaboration with the WCC in articulating and sharing this document for continuous improvement of effective cooperation in service of people in need and in pursuit of justice.

Rudelmar Bueno de Faria
General Secretary
ACT Alliance

Executive summary



Photo: Paul Jeffrey/Life on Earth

The idea of developing this text on ecumenical *diakonia* surfaced in September 2014 during the International Consultation organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and ACT Alliance on the Relationship between Churches and Specialized Ministries, held in Malawi. The purpose of the document is to clarify the understanding of ecumenical *diakonia* and provide a common platform for acting and reflecting together. It outlines the theological components of *diakonia* and offers practical content for those engaged in such service. It is intended to be used for formation and training in ecumenical *diakonia*, to strengthen the institutional capacity of churches' respective constituencies, and to foster dialogue and cooperation between churches, ecumenical partners and the WCC.

The process of developing the document was accompanied by a working group with membership from the WCC and ACT Alliance, and initially accompanied by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). As affirmed by the WCC Executive Committee at its meeting in Trondheim, Norway (June 2016), the document:

- Considers the longstanding experiences of diaconal practice and reflection within the ecumenical movement, in particular by the WCC and the LWF;
- Considers the specific contribution of professional diaconal agencies in their role as members of the ACT Alliance;
- Responds to relevant social and political issues in today's world that challenge churches and related agencies in their diaconal action;
- Provides theological insight that underscores the trinitarian and ecclesiological founding of *diakonia* and that can orient churches and related agencies in their diaconal practices;
- Proposes concrete steps to be taken in order to strengthen the diaconal capacity of the churches in cooperation with their ecumenical partners.

The document conceptualizes ecumenical *diakonia* from two perspectives. The first links to a theological understanding of *diakonia* as a dimension integral to the nature and mission of the church. This perspective shows that *diakonia* is a key expression of the strong link between what the churches are and do. Reflection on ecumenical *diakonia* requires understanding both dimensions: the churches' being and their joint action as a worldwide communion of Christians and institutions.

The second perspective is practical, describing how churches are engaged in diaconal action across confessional and geographical boundaries. The presentation in this document focuses on the ecumenical movement and its role in promoting and coordinating diaconal work. The World Council of Churches has played a pivotal role from its founding in 1948. Since then, the WCC has engaged in a vast number of programmes and projects with a clear diaconal profile, even without always using the term *diakonia*. As part of this diaconal praxis, the WCC has stimulated its member churches to engage in ecumenical *diakonia* and to strengthen their diaconal capacities. In partnership with the LWF, the WCC contributed to the founding of ACT Alliance with the goal of establishing a coordinated platform for ecumenical *diakonia*, expressing the joint vision of the ecumenical movement with its member churches and related agencies to assist people in need and to work for a better world.

Diakonia aims to respond to contextual challenges when moving in changing landscapes. This document includes analysis of the social and political environment in which ecumenical *diakonia* is

engaged. It refers to basic trends in today's world that challenge diaconal action, and at the same time offer opportunities for innovative practice. It also reflects on the changing ecumenical landscape that affects ecumenical *diakonia*.

The document contains ten chapters. The first chapter presents background information and introduces a definition of ecumenical *diakonia*. It outlines some major trends in the contemporary context that are challenging active diaconal agents to reflect on the distinctiveness of faith- and rights-based action and how best to be innovative in their practice.

Chapter 2 introduces the history of ecumenical *diakonia*. It demonstrates that this history starts in the faith and practice of the early church and its commitment to serve people in need. Such practice continued in different forms throughout the history of the church as an integral part of missionary outreach. It then focuses on the development of *diakonia* within the ecumenical movement, its beginning as interchurch aid in the aftermath of the world wars, later widening its mandate to include development work and to engage in public advocacy. The second chapter concludes by presenting the formation of the ACT Alliance and its vision of providing coordination and cooperation within the area of ecumenical *diakonia*.

Chapter 3 presents the place of *diakonia* within today's polycentric ecumenical movement. Its main point of reference is the WCC's 10th Assembly at Busan in 2013 and its outcome, in particular the challenge to reflect on *diakonia* from the perspective of the margins, and as part of the invitation to a pilgrimage of justice and peace.

Chapter 4 provides some basic theological reflection on *diakonia*. It sketches the use of the term "*diakonia*" and related vocabulary in the New Testament, and presents the term in trinitarian, ecclesial and missiological perspectives. It then reviews the role of *diakonia* as a dimension of Christian discipleship and concludes by discussing the relationship between *diakonia* and proclamation.

Chapter 5 begins by describing the changing landscape of diaconal action and the new faces of poverty in today's world. It presents the UN Sustainable Development Goals as a relevant platform for diaconal engagement. The chapter indicates some specific themes as priority areas for diaconal action, such as migration and refugees, economic justice, climate justice, gender justice and health justice.

Chapter 6 reflects on the distinctiveness of diaconal practice, how its identity as both faith- and rights-based action forms its mission, objectives and methods. It presents diaconal assets, both tangible and intangible resources that are at hand for diaconal action, and indicates the advantages of developing a diaconal language. Finally, it points to the importance of building diaconal capacity and presents core elements of diaconal professionalism.

Chapter 7 presents contemporary challenges and opportunities, wrapping up what we have learned in the previous chapters. It deals with the challenge of shrinking financial resources and the importance of innovative practices in sharing resources, as well as highlighting the importance of partnerships and of building networks. Finally, it underscores advocacy as an integral dimension of diaconal work, affirming its prophetic vocation.

Chapter 8 looks at ecumenical *diakonia* in different confessional contexts, showing areas of similarity and dissimilarity amongst the confessions, thus leading towards greater mutual understanding and learning.

Chapter 9 describes ecumenical *diakonia* in different regional contexts, based on practices as well as socio-economic, social-political, environmental and other challenges in each area covered by the Regional Ecumenical Organisations (REOs).

Chapter 10 concludes this study by indicating the way forward. It invites the ecumenical movement, its member churches and related agencies to affirm the vision and the mandate of ecumenical *diakonia*, and finally proposes measures for strengthening the structures of shared action and networks of cooperation.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction



Photo: Paul Jeffrey/Life on Earth