RELIGION & STATE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

*A German-South African dialogue on
historical and current challenges*

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The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) approach to diaconal work: History is always a long story

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In the Reformed tradition it is generally accepted that the church has four core ministries, i.e. *leitourgia* (worship), *kerugma* (proclamation), *diaconia* (service) and *koinonia* (community). Diaconia entails self-denying acts of loving service to your neighbour and to creation. During the 20th century the DRC excelled in its diaconal service to alleviate the plight of its members and the Afrikaner people in general. British imperialism had impoverished the Afrikaner people and deprived them of capital, the means of production and of land. Afrikaner leaders responded to the challenge and rolled out an extensive reconstruction and development plan which empowered the people with education, skills, access to developmental capital and a vision for sustained independence. The crucial role of the DRC in providing welfare services, medical care, working colonies and access to education cannot be overestimated. *The Poor White Problem in South Africa: Report of the Carnegie Commission* (1932) was a study of poverty among white South Africans. Among other things, it made recommendations about segregation that some have argued would later serve as a blueprint for apartheid. The report was funded and published by the Carnegie Corporation. After the Afrikaner people achieved political power in the general election of 1948, their power escalated

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to the point where they could use the means of the state to erect an extensive welfare infrastructure for the use of whites only.

The emphasis on institutional professional welfare services increased over the years. The organic diaconate of church members was by and large replaced by the professional institutions which rendered services through their offices with well-trained welfare officers who worked in the fields of child care, old age care, family care and care for people with physical and intellectual disabilities, and also those with alcohol and drug addictions. These institutions became increasingly dependent on subsidies and the social grant system of the state. To qualify for the contributions from the state, the institutions were positioned at a proverbial arms-length distance from the church bodies which had originally established them. The subsequent process of alienation of the church and the professional welfare bodies (Badisa, Tutela, Caritas and many Christian Welfare Councils) is to this day a challenge to both the churches and the welfare institutions. Another unintended consequence was that local congregations reverted to an ad hoc reactionary approach to diaconal services. Soup kitchens, the collection of clothes and food for the poor, blankets for the destitute and toys for children constituted the full spectrum of congregational diaconal activities. Although these contributions should never be disregarded, this approach failed to address the origins of the social crisis.

South Africa in a socio-economic crisis

The rapid increase of poverty in South Africa since the 1990s and the ever-increasing unemployment rate have over the last decade forced the DRC to review its approach to diaconal work. The DRC, like all other churches in South Africa, is confronted with the plight of the whole nation and is often called upon to apply its knowledge and experience from the past to meet the current challenge. It must be said that the challenges of 20th-century South Africa are nothing compared to the complexities of the 21st-century Rainbow Nation. The scale of poverty, the extent of criminality and the seemingly total inability of the state to make profound decisive interventions to reverse the socio-economic decline are enough to undermine the efforts of churches and non-governmental organizations and cause despondency.

The about-turn of the DRC during the period between 1982 and 1990 from a preoccupation with race to a calling to serve the whole nation must be recorded as the most incisive and comprehensive theological and ideological reversal of a mainstream church in modern history. The DRC did not only confess its sins of purporting to provide a theological basis for apartheid, as well as their practical support to the dehumanizing ideology of apartheid, but profoundly committed itself to restitution and the rebuilding of society.

Professional welfare services

The ten synods of the DRC have all established professional welfare organizations that serve the respective regions with excellent professional work. Although it is not the purpose of this article to elaborate on the comprehensive contribution of these bodies, it is necessary to mention that the DRC plays a significant role in enabling and sustaining these organizations. Their combined effort amounts to R1.2 billion. They annually deliver services to more than a million beneficiaries. Conservative calculations indicate that this benefits about 5 million people in a direct or indirect way. There are also many good examples where the local congregation and office of the professional welfare institution work in close collaboration.

Missional theology

The General Synod of the DRC took an important decision in 2013 when it decided to transform the church to become a missional church. This means that the emphasis and focus of the church would shift from institutional maintenance to participation in God's missional movement in the world. This decision was of profound significance to all the ministries of the church, including their diaconal work. The new challenge was to have a thorough understanding of the dynamics of societies, become part of it by the formation of local networks and comprehend the actual needs of particular people in a particular context. A focus on systemic interventions replaced the ad hoc eclectic approach of benevolent support from donors with an ill-informed knowledge of the perceived needs of poor people.

When in the past white people benevolently tried to help and support black people, they were often left with a distinct feeling that all their good intentions were in vain. All their efforts could not create true gratitude and recognition, let alone lasting relationships. Over many years it has become clear that closing the gap between white and black communities in South Africa entails more than just being goodhearted or having good intentions.

To cross the divide you also need to have a profound commitment to acknowledge the authenticity and legitimacy of other people's paradigms, backgrounds, assumptions and perspectives, although you may not be able to fully comprehend their logic, value or significance. But more than that, as a white person, you need to understand that these are not to be changed or transformed by whites to eventually suit their own preoccupied white agendas. The underlying logic of white ideology is the fallacy that one can be objective and know what others need and how they should conduct themselves.

Trust and reciprocal understanding are the product of free spaces of listening, encountering the worlds of others, learning to be respectful, acknowledging your own blind spots, engaging the pain of your compatriots, embracing each other, moving forward from deep empathy to restorative thinking and exploring ways in which the trust that was gained could be multiplied and structurally embedded in society.

Ubuntu is the African philosophy undergirding human dignity. *Ubuntu* (*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*), meaning 'I am because we are', also needs to be the philosophical premise undergirding our efforts to redress the mistakes of our past, or else we will not only fail to make a contribution, but actually be detrimental in realising the vision of dignity for all. So, whatever we do, we need to do together. One of our indigenous languages, SePedi, has a proverb for this: *Mphiri o tee ga o lle* – one bangle makes no sound. But working in harmony can create a beautiful symphony!

It is against this backdrop that one needs to understand and evaluate the contributions of the DRC in the current quest to recover from our shared woundedness. A new approach of systemic interventions evolved from our missional commitment. An understanding that the church needs to collaborate with the institutions of the state, non-governmental organizations, ecumenical

bodies and the business sector evolved from its more profound engagement with people and communities. A community development approach is a direct result of collaboration and the nurturing of a collective vision.

Early childhood development (ECD)

During 2015 the DRC engaged in thorough discussions with leading economists to determine the best contribution and most effective possible interventions that the church could make in addressing the poverty cycle of so many South Africans. Participants were almost unanimous that the DRC with its history of systemic socio-economic interventions, capacity and knowledge should play an important role in early childhood development. More discussions about the reasons why people are caught in a poverty trap led to a preferential option to intervene in the cycle of poverty during a person's early childhood development phase. This coincided with the new emphasis from the state on early childhood development. Many non-governmental organizations were also already working in this field and have done profound local research to support their emphasis on the development of children. Non-governmental organizations such as the DG Murray Trust, SmartStart, Nal'ibali, Common Good and many others were already thoroughly engaged in the field and developed excellent sustainable programmes and supporting systems to make a lasting difference in the lives of thousands of children.

The first 1,000 days of life - the time roughly between conception and one's second birthday - is a unique period of opportunity when the foundations of optimum health, growth and neurodevelopment across the lifespan are established. Safety, nutrition, neurological stimulation, exercise, controlled exposure to the environment and education are all vital factors when a child is prepared to enter the schooling system at the age of 6 or 7. Research has shown that the lack of school readiness is the most important factor in the inability of pupils to keep up in the school system and achieve the expected milestones towards their independence. The alarmingly high prevalence of dropping out of the school system, with the subsequent high rate of dependency on social support, needs to be addressed at the root of the problem, which is school readiness.

Little Seeds

The advantage of the DRC family was that it has a footprint across the country with the presence of more than two thousand congregations. Most of these congregations have well-equipped facilities and members who are trained teachers, nurses, and social practitioners. The DRC's diaconal services in the Western Cape teamed up with one of the church's professional welfare organizations, Badisa, to establish an organization called Little Seeds. The approach of Little Seeds is to establish thousands of home-based care centres where mothers of young children are trained and equipped with early childhood development programmes, skills and training materials to enhance the development of the children under their care. The strong framework of legislation regulating this work supports the approach of safety first and responsible overview. Only six children are allowed in these small home-based groups. Thousands of these ECD groups have already been established in many parts of South Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic unfortunately interrupted this process and much effort will be needed to re-establish what had already existed. The approach of Little Seeds to work collaboratively with other non-governmental organizations, congregations, professional welfare services and the communities in which their services were needed, paid off. Parents were also responsible for paying for the care of their children and an income was provided to thousands of mothers who established home-based groups. Accountability and respect were promoted as well as community support for the protection of children.

Little Seeds also became a franchise of SmartStart, a well established ECD organization. SmartStart provided good research on the dynamics of home-based small groups and supported the efforts of the franchise holders by giving financial incentives to growing franchises. On Saturday 23 November 2019 SmartStart had its annual League of Stars Award Ceremony in Johannesburg. More than 1,200 franchises attended the event. The first lady of South Africa, Dr Tshepo Motsepe Rhamaphosa, Dr David Harrison (CEO of DG Murray Trust) and Grace Mathlape, (CEO of SmartStart) were the guests of honour. Clubs compete in leagues against other regional franchisors. They are assessed on a variety of aspects, including creativity, taking action, club meeting attendance, having passed their own quality assurance assessment as facilitators, and on how well

they are functioning as a club. There are also category winners for the categories of creativity, taking action, parent engagement and leaving nobody behind. Lastly there is a prize for the Club of the Year and for the Club Coach of the Year. Diaconia (Little Seeds) won the prizes for the club of the year and the club coach and quite a few other prizes.

The congregations of the DRC family are currently re-establishing the ECD projects and even expanding their efforts to more communities.

Natural disasters

Water scarcity is a huge problem in South Africa. Climate change and the depletion of resources has become a serious threat to communities, but also to the sustainability of particular sectors of agriculture and food security.

Although the response of congregations and church members in their personal capacity to the numerous droughts in Southern Africa is not quantifiable, we know that help to the value of hundreds of millions of rands has been disseminated over the past five years to drought-stricken areas. This happened in the form of food, medicine, animal feed, transport of animal feed and cash contributions. In the Western Cape a 30-town project was launched where R100 000 was contributed from the diaconal office of the synod to 30 congregations in drought-stricken areas. Voluntary prosperous congregations were also connected to these congregations and communities to support them with prayer, pastoral care and material means. The support that evolved from this initiative was almost overwhelming to those who were on the receiving end.

Field and bush fires also took their toll. The support of congregations and church members across all boundaries created new inspiring narratives. South Africans embraced their common destiny and understood their calling to serve one another in new ways.

COVID-19

The rapid response of the church after the first impact of the level-5 COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa in March 2019 was exemplary. The diaconal structures

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were spurred into action and started to deliver services to the poorest of the poor who did not have access to food and resources. What impressed most was the ecumenical cooperation and the formation of numerous new networks of cooperation. The South African Council of Churches launched a local ecumenical action network (LEAN) initiative. But it was the existing ecumenical networks which delivered the most successful services.

Collaboration between local and provincial governments, churches and non-governmental organizations thrived under the pressure of the need of millions of people who were deprived of income. Research in the DRC showed that more than 90% of congregations were involved in some kind of relief action. Many of these congregations cooperated with other churches and non-governmental organizations.

Farmers, many of whom are members of the DRC, contributed by way of donations of wheat, maize, fresh vegetables and fruit. Masses of food and household necessities were collected in congregations and distributed to needy people. Some of the synods established a relief fund and collected financial contributions to be disseminated to crisis areas. One of the synods donated R2.4 m and disseminated the funds to support the efforts of local congregations.

All these relief efforts changed the landscape of diaconal service. The unquantifiable number of networks that have emerged has become a new access route to build cross-border relationships, break down stereotypes and strengthen the nation's destiny.