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When Diaconia Became an Exhausted Millionaire

Experiences from the Coronavirus Pandemic in Finland

Abstract:

This article explores what happened to Finnish diaconia as the Coronavirus crisis hit in the spring of 2020. It is an empirical study conducted in Finland in 2021 and presents the experiences of 22 deacons regarding the impact of the Corona pandemic on their work. The data were gathered through semistructured interviews across the Porvoo diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (EvL). One contribution of the paper is the use of managerial models to analyze data in a research area where they have not been used much before (Theology and Diaconal Studies). The study shows that diaconia was hit hard by distancing restrictions in the Porvoo diocese. However, it came also in contact with new donors and volunteers. The crisis thus also offered new possibilities and ways of working. Most informants reported positive feedback from society, though some were disappointed by the lack of appreciation from within the Church itself. The pandemic showed how diaconia could benefit from exceptional times by jettisoning old conventions in favor of doing things in novel ways. The pandemic period can be seen as a liminal situation for the Church in society and for the role of diaconia, creating opportunities for change and authenticity.

Keywords:

diaconia, deacons, pandemic, Coronavirus, Covid-19, crisis, SWOT, PEST, Finland, Porvoo diocese

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic challenged society in many ways – diaconia as well. For instance, partner-related violence against women accelerated, and the number of clients seeking help in shelters for victims of domestic violence increased in Finland (Hietamäki et al., 2021). Immigrant groups in Helsinki are reported to have suffered from weakened social connections (Kalule, 2021). In Sweden, researchers conclude that the pandemic accentuated already established social structures and inequalities and amplified existing power relations and vulnerabilities. There was

a rise in anxiety across the population, more prevalent within high-risk groups including, for example, people in vulnerable situations, with diseases, and at higher age (Mulinari et al., 2021, 5). An African study concludes that death because of Covid-19 was more likely if you were socially or economically marginalized (Knoetz, 2021, 5). Such societal factors have impacted the work of diaconia across the world: Deacons had to meet new challenges as well as new possibilities in doing their work during the pandemic.

Here, I use the term “deacon” to refer to employees who do diaconal work and have formal education in the field of diaconia. In Finland, all parishes have had compulsory positions for deacons since 1944, according to the Church Law. Until 1972, the deacons also took part in municipal healthcare duties. Diaconal activities, in turn, are seen as church social work or poor relief (Hiilamo, 2012, 404–405). The purpose of diaconia is further stipulated in the Finnish law to help those in the gravest need, especially those not supported by others. The mission statement to focus on the most marginalized groups, writes Hiilamo (2012, 405), is “giving parish-level social work and nursing a character distinctive from other church activities and a large degree of freedom to address emerging needs.”

2. Background

A large-scale crisis ensued when the pandemic emerged, striking diaconia with its purpose of helping those in the gravest need. Researchers worldwide have tried to grasp what was happening and how to understand the new situations during the pandemic. Below I go through some of these studies.

Even before the Corona pandemic, there were social challenges on the macrolevel. Knijn and Lepianka (2020, 1) argue that Europe had let down its most vulnerable and fallen short of its ideals. Economic and social solidarity between states had decreased in reaction to the financial and social crises of 2008–2015, which exacerbated growing inequalities. In addition, Europe faced accelerating economic globalization and the increased demand for flexibility from the labor market coinciding with shrinking social protection. All this was already a threat to the welfare state. Additionally, populism was threatening liberal democracy, and there had been a visible drift toward authoritarianism and rising nationalism. Thus, in Europe, foreigners were confronted by antagonist attitudes, and when the pandemic reached Europe and before the Russian war against Ukraine started, many countries already showed strong resistance to welcoming the increasing number of refugees.

What did research observe on the microlevel? Kurkiala (2020, 11) describes Sweden when the pandemic occurred and depicts how people, previously detached from each other in their ideological and acoustic bubbles, suddenly became aware of the breath and cough of others, also realizing that high numbers of people

were dying alone. Under these circumstances, people experienced insecurity – but also creativity. Ordinary, often implicit rules and norms suddenly become more apparent and, consequently, scrutinized. Convention lost its authority and no longer legitimized human actions while new possibilities emerged (Kurkiala, 2020, 12). Moreover, the Covid-19 situation accentuated questions about life and death, which is also reflected in the work of diaconia (Jonsson/Babajan, 2020, 73).

Other researchers argue that the pandemic has caused enormous trauma and changed politics, economics, and geographical structures, disrupting many areas of life (Pillay, 2020). In a recent study, Hiilamo (2022) compares the pandemic effects in Finland with the economic recession the country experienced in the 1990s, focusing on poverty relief. But negative effects are not the whole picture: Crises also create winners, for instance, the rise of net-based activities. Other reports see the local becoming more global, making the world even more intertwined. Relationships during the time of Corona tended to move from the physical to the virtual, whether permanently or temporarily. The dynamics between governments and their citizens changed, too, as governmental decisions on freedom, health, economy, and democracy affected everybody. Tensions arose between scientists, on the one hand, and politicians, on the other hand, as well as between commercial and public interests, for instance, in response to vaccination (Mulinari et al., 2021).

Religious life was not exempted. Pillay argues (2020, 1) that churches have been permanently transformed, so that, consequently, there is a need to research the implications of the crisis. Beukes (2020) reflects on the possible opportunities found in the Corona crisis and concludes that in this period the Church failed to be Church outside the walls. He ponders the pros and cons of rediscovering traditional ways of being Church as a reaction to the pandemic. Cho (2021) argues for a new understanding of church community, which goes beyond a spatial definition and is based on solidarity and empathy with the community and the world. According to Cho, this is a precondition for survival in society, and also for the Church. She claims that churches must activate themselves online to a larger extent, for example, in home worship or online worship as alternatives to public worship, “[b]ecause Covid-19 now presents a situation where the church cannot offer in-person, physical worship services” (Cho, 2021, 14). However, a Finnish study (Metso et al., 2021) on virtual spiritual connectedness shows that experiences have been twofold during the pandemic: While some experienced a stronger religious relationship, others felt that virtual worship distanced them from the Church.

De Villiers (2020) elaborates on the moral challenges and opportunities for the Church in a postpandemic era. The parallel management of two crises – the pandemic and extreme economic inequality – exacerbated the situation in South Africa (De Villiers, 2020, 4). It created a need – and a chance – for the Church to mobilize its members to make a difference and provide relief. De Villiers depicts three areas of opportunity where the Church can offer moral guidance: 1) an

alternative lifestyle for the future, 2) attitudes and actions toward other people, especially those in need, as well as toward the natural environment, 3) a more just and environmentally friendly society.

Religious life can contribute to health (Williams et al., 2021), a notion not irrelevant during a global pandemic. This is revealed in a recent study of the Los Angeles area, where the authors argue that churches of various denominations (24 in total) served as sources of connection and support for spiritual well-being. Moreover, the church communities also recognized the importance of extending this support beyond the mere spiritual.

Research from Finland shows that diaconal work was flexible and developed new means of helping clients during the crisis. Especially poverty relief and food aid were reorganized to better meet the needs. It is also important to mention that diaconia did not close down at any point in the EvL. In fact, individual meetings increased during the first year 2020 by 34% over the year before (Gävert, 2021).

In short, the pandemic created chaos, unprecedented lockdowns, and suffering worldwide. But the pandemic also created opportunities, for society and for religious life, both in Finland and other countries. My interest in this article lies in taking a concrete look at what these opportunities and challenges can be.

3. Aim

This study aims to better understand the context of diaconal work in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (EvL) during the Covid-19 pandemic by asking deacons in the Porvoo diocese how the pandemic has affected their work. The interviews were conducted about 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ years into the crisis, in June–September 2021. The research question read: What is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the diaconal work in the Porvoo diocese in Finland?

This overarching qualitative research question is further divided into two sub-questions, the first descriptive, the second explorative in nature:

1. How did the Corona crisis influence diaconal work in the Porvoo diocese?
2. What lessons can be learned from the pandemic situation for future diaconal work in the Porvoo diocese and, more broadly, in Finland?

4. Method

This empirical study takes a qualitative approach. It inquires how deacons depict the influence of the pandemic on their work. In the data analysis part, I apply two models normally used outside the theological context (the PEST and SWOT

models). Because of the novel application of these two models, the study also contributes methodologically to developing the field of diaconal studies.

4.1 Data Collection

With its 3.7 million members at the beginning of 2021, the EvL comprises 65.7% of the Finnish population. In 2022, the number of parishes nationwide was 367 (Statistik om kyrkan, 2022).

Amid the Corona crisis, in June–September 2021, I conducted qualitative interviews with 22 deacons in the Porvoo diocese in Finland. The Porvoo diocese is one of nine dioceses in Finland. It stretches across vast areas of Western and Southern Finland, serving the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland as well as the German Evangelical-Lutheran congregation and Rikssvenska Olaus Petri församling (Swedish Olaus Petri congregation). The total number of members in the Porvoo diocese in 2021 was about 230,000, spread out over 47 parishes (Borgå stift, 2022). In 2021, the diocese employed 93 deacons (Statistik om kyrkan, 2022); thus, I interviewed 24% of them.

Of the 22 informants, 8 were from urban and 14 from rural Finland. Some were rather new in their office, whereas others already had several decades of experience in diaconia. There were fewer than three men, though I will not be more precise than this to ensure anonymity, as the number of men working within diaconia in the diocese is low. I approached almost all parishes in the diocese by email, asking if they would participate anonymously in the study. I received positive answers from the informants included here. I omitted the parish I live in because of a possible conflict of interest. No parish is represented by more than one deacon.

The interviews were held virtually over Zoom because of Covid-19 distancing recommendations. Afterward, I transcribed and anonymized the recorded talks, giving the respondents pseudonyms A–V. The shortest interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, the longest 90 minutes. The topics of discussion comprised the impact of the Corona crisis. Key questions were what had happened to diaconia as the pandemic hit the world in 2020, and what was happening at the time of the interview. The qualitative data collection was conducted following a semistructured interview guide. The study followed the data-protection regulation in Finland, The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK.

Being a qualitative study, it aimed at creating and understanding the research question (Alasuutari, 1995; Ragin, 1992; Yin, 1994). It was inductive in nature, as I moved from specific observations to trying to see tendencies on a more general level. Finally, the study was descriptive and explorative (Stebbins, 2001), concentrating on the Porvoo diocese case to look at the impact on diaconia.

4.2 Data Analysis

I analyzed the data exploratively using two models developed within management research: the PEST model (Political, Economic, Social, Technological) and the SWOT model (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats). Both models have been used extensively outside of business contexts and at various levels, such as individual, organizational, national, and international (Madsen, 2016, 11). A combination of these models gives a) a good understanding of a situation in a certain case and b) can provide helpful insights for developing a strategy for the object being studied. Thus, the two subresearch questions are related directly to the purpose and nature of these models.

Importing these management-developed tools into theology and diaconal studies can help to see diaconia in a new light and enhance necessary strategies and decision-making. The models “are to be understood as additional tools that organizations can use to quickly understand the immediate environment and what measures they can take in response to a crisis” (Marketing Week, 2021), not as alternatives to long-term strategic planning. However, they may shed light on the current Corona crisis and its impact on diaconia. An example of the PEST analysis outside business context is Cox (2021), who studied how the higher-education environment affects academic libraries’ strategy. He notes that one of the limitations of the PEST model is that it is insufficient on its own, requiring additional other tools, such as SWOT. Another limitation is that it is very broad in range, so only some factors may be relevant or focus on issues with varying impacts in different regions (Cox, 2021, 3). SWOT is a simple tool, which is why it appeals to many, but it has also been criticized by academics and practitioners. For example, it has the high degree of subjectivity, and the simplistic and mechanistic nature of the SWOT matrix has been noted. On the other hand, defenders of SWOT see it more as a generic framework and template that can help the users to reflect on the information they already have (Madsen, 2016, 4–5).

The PEST model builds on identifying political, economic, sociocultural/social, and technological factors. It is a tool for identifying sources of change (Sammut-Bonnici/Galea, 2015) which provides insight into the macrofactors that dominate the environment and pinpoints the key external drivers that directly impact diaconia in this case. The model is visualized in Figure 1.

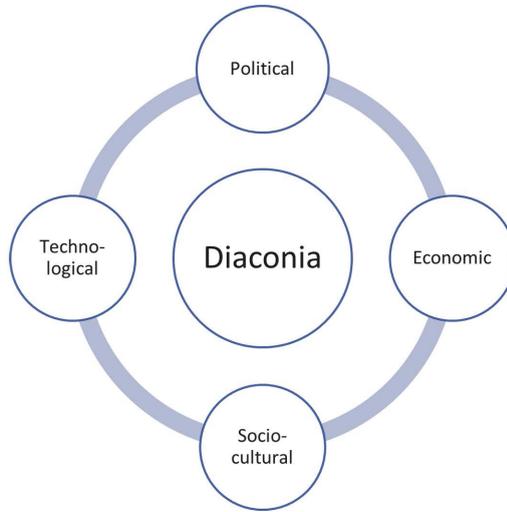


Figure 1 The PEST model, understanding diaconia as influenced by four factors (political, economic, technological, sociocultural).

The SWOT model, in turn, builds on identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for the studied object, here the diaconal work in the Porvoo diocese. This enables understanding the exposure to potential risk factors and openings and opportunities. The SWOT model is one of the most extensively used strategy tools among managers for decision-making in Finland and worldwide (Madsen, 2016, 10). A typical SWOT model is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 The SWOT model.

	Helpful	Harmful
Internal	Strengths (S)	Weaknesses (W)
External	Opportunities (O)	Threats (T)

In short, the PEST model can show the impact of the pandemic crisis on diaconia for each aspect (political, economic, social, technological), whereas the SWOT model can help to understand how diaconia (or at a higher level, the EvL) can respond to the Covid-19 or similar crisis. PEST is a tool to answer subresearch question 1: How did the Corona crisis influence diaconal work in the Porvoo diocese? SWOT, in turn, addresses subresearch question 2: What lessons can be learned from the pandemic situation for future diaconal work in the Porvoo diocese

and, more broadly, in Finland? For both models, the data analyzed consists of the transcribed interviews.

5. Empirical Results

Below, I present the results of the interview study, first based on the analysis with the PEST model, then with the SWOT model. Because the informants consequently refer to their customers/visitors/clients/guests with the Swedish word “klient,” I have used the corresponding word in English (“client”). I do not discuss here the connotations of this term, which has been debated in recent diaconal literature, since this is not the scope of this particular article.

5.1 PEST: Macrofactors and Sources of Change

The PEST model answers the first descriptive research question: How did the Corona crisis influence diaconal work in the Porvoo diocese? The model distinguishes four major drivers for change in diaconia during the pandemic, each of which is presented below: political, economic, sociocultural, and technological factors.

5.1.1 Political Factors

As the Corona pandemic hit the world, there were severe lockdowns also in Finland. The informants experienced these pandemic restrictions as greatly impacting their work. Thus, the major political factor identified in the empirical analysis is the implementation of official restrictions on meeting with people and gathering in groups. Restrictions severely limited home visits, and at times only acute visits were permitted. In particular, the harsh regulations concerning the elderly made it difficult for deacons to visit those clients living in retirement and nursing homes. Many institutions blocked all visitors during the first outbreak of Covid-19 but reopened subsequently. At times, and irrespective of the weather, meeting clients outdoors was the only option.

The most severe restrictions made us cancel all group activities, and home visits were not possible to the same extent as before. Many are over 90 years old, so these were left out. We had telephone contact with most of them. We called and sent mails with information and such. Of course, we worked from home, doing what we could, meeting over Teams, just like everybody else. There was quite a lot of that. Our office was closed during its normal opening hours, but people could call and book a visit, so only one came at a time.

(I)

Various solutions evolved for different diaconal group activities. Sometimes, it was possible to break participants up into much smaller groups or to meet at different times or in separate rooms to facilitate coming together during times of contact restrictions. At other times, meeting outdoors was the only feasible way to get together. Face masks and social distancing were obligatory for a long period.

At times, particularly when society was locked down almost entirely, some deacons were unable to do much and instead used the time to plan ahead, send regular mails, or meet over the telephone or computer. Deacons found themselves working from home and seeing colleagues and clients only on Teams. Regular opening hours of the premises were canceled in most cases, but clients could sometimes make reservations for one-to-one meetings.

All in all, these regulations and the lockdown caused chaos and insecurity as well as fear among people. Many interviewees characterized the uncertainty of restrictions as a stressful situation. The official recommendations changed repeatedly, which made planning very difficult. After the vaccine was introduced in 2021, most regulations were lifted, and things became more normalized. Many groups were reactivated, and slowly it seemed as if the most acute situation was over.

5.1.2 Economic Factors

Also, economic factors directly impacted diaconal work. The lockdown brought severe consequences for many families who lost their jobs or were unable to work for some time. In addition, Finnish schools were closed for 2 months early in the pandemic, causing all kinds of challenges for working parents and families with little money to feed their children. Consequently, many new clients contacted diaconia because of economic difficulties, particularly in urban areas.

However, financial help was also provided in new ways. For instance, the Finnish state provided more than €4.4 million in special funds to EvL to support the diaconal work of the EvL and its parishes throughout the country. The state paid this support to thank for the EvL cooperation with public authorities and for helping people in severe need, regardless of their membership in EvL (see also Gävert, 2021, 112; Kirkko ja Koti, 2020). Two informants comment on this situation:

In the spring of 2020, we were in contact with the regional schools, just to say: “Here we are, if you need help or financial support or someone to talk to, guidance to how authorities work, or anything.” Many families were in touch, and we could help them. Some we keep contact with today. Then, we sent a reminder before the summer, too, if new needs would appear during the school break. Many families received help. We got Corona money from the state, so we did the same: We sent a message and received many applications for help. We are grateful for these contacts, since at times this generation

doesn't even think of asking for help from diaconia. (I).

Last Christmas, we had lots of donations to distribute. We had thousands of euros in the parish as well as the Corona support from the state. The state donated to diaconia through the Church, and we [the parish] got over €10,000 to give to people with special needs because of the Corona virus. Some money was given as food aid or gift cards for grocery stores. (S)

This economic aid has been of great importance economically, but it is also a recognition of the work done by diaconia in Finland. In addition, many informants talk about private and institutional donors who have been very willing to help people suffering economically because of the pandemic.

5.1.3 Sociocultural Factors

At the time of interviews, society had been under severe pressure since March 2020, when the first and most severe lockdown in Finland went into effect. People reacted very differently to such strain.

First, I thought, "These lonely people, they will be even more alone now." But the lonely ones, they are used to such a situation, not having people around and not going places to participate in various activities. So, they managed quite well during the lockdown. They may have even had more people calling them than before. But people who are used to being active in various groups, who enjoyed exercising and going to various congregational groups, they experienced more stress during this situation. (T)

Deacons met people with different worries, and many needed to talk. Some were troubled by conspiracy theories, others with everyday issues such as getting food, keeping their job, and going to school.

In their own work, deacons struggled with plans that could not be realized and the difficulty of scheduling ahead. The insecurity was immense. One deacon experienced working from home as a real challenge: "A running nose sends me to a Corona test, and then I have to cancel all activities and stay at home a few days to wait for the results. Am I then at work or not?" (R)

Many deacons found that society gave a lot of credit to diaconia during the pandemic. The state showed its appreciation very clearly through extra funds (see above); the local Finnish media, too (paper/journals, radio, and television), which were active in reporting about the various initiatives and actions taken up by diaconia during the pandemic. Public social workers also gave recognition to deacons in certain areas. At times, they even relied on diaconal work when they themselves were unable to sufficiently help people in need. This appreciation was

very valuable in a situation of heavy workload. One of the deacons comments: “We see our colleagues, priests, organ players, and others, out of work, and we are overloaded.” (L)

Thus, a few interviewees would have liked to see a rise in salary, as they feel the contribution of diaconia during the pandemic has been vital.

5.1.4 Technological Factors

Meeting over the virtual platform Teams became commonplace during the pandemic. Distance work from a home office likewise. Telephone calls made contact possible, particularly when meeting in person was out of the question because of official regulations and restrictions. In short, the technological leap forward has been enormous for diaconia. Some witness this as having been given a chance to develop new practices.

We took advantage of the sudden pause, which I think was good. We had a group discussing virtual work, and we got a push out on the Internet. So, we started with prayer devotion on Facebook, and we began writing worship services. This has been a great development in many fields and on many frontiers simultaneously. So, it has not been fruitless. (B)

Despite the giant technological leap forward, most experienced it as a great drawback being unable to meet in person. After all, meeting people face to face is the most valued aspect in diaconal work, according to the informants.

5.1.5 Summary of the PEST Analysis

The PEST analysis explains the impact of the pandemic on diaconia in the diocese for each of the four aspects. In short, politically, the restrictions of the pandemic were harsh on diaconal work, making home visits, group meetings and activities, and particularly meeting senior clients difficult. Economically, many families were hit hard by unemployment and home-schooling of children over longer periods. Diaconia made contact with many new clients with financial needs, though, at the same time, financial donors emerged. The Finnish state gave several million Euros for diaconal work. Among sociocultural factors, the wide appreciation for the work done by diaconia was mentioned, especially by the media but also officially and individually. Technological factors boil down to the giant digital leap forward taken by diaconia, both in contact with colleagues and clients.

5.2 SWOT: Responding to Crisis

The SWOT model helps to analyze potential risk factors and identifies opportunities in the empirical data. This analysis answers to my second explorative subresearch question: What lessons can be learned from the pandemic situation for future diaconal work in the Porvoo diocese and in Finland more broadly? Below, I first discuss the strengths and weaknesses and then the opportunities and threats for the diaconal work in the Porvoo diocese that appeared during the pandemic.

5.2.1 Strengths

The ability of diaconia to keep up the good work despite pandemic restrictions was a clear strength. Deacons experienced that bringing hope and care in a chaotic situation was important for people suffering.

However, I still made a few home visits if the person very much wanted me to come. Then, I wore a face mask and was very cautious about safety. Sometimes relatives asked me to go see someone they were worried about who lived alone. (B)

A few interviewees did not see a great difference in workload, while most experienced extraordinary challenges. All reported that the working picture had been altered – although contact with clients was not limited. Rather, it was necessary to find new modes; for instance, instead of meeting for common meals, volunteers cooked, and the clients could come and fetch their portion or have it delivered to their homes. Many congregations started phoning all senior members over a certain age, for instance, those over 80. This was partially achieved in cooperation with public social services. Being flexible in the pandemic situation brought new activities, too, for example, time to read professional literature and find novel solutions to providing assistance. Nevertheless, the all-important home visits could not be realized to the same extent as earlier.

5.2.2 Weaknesses

Lack of personnel was a clear drawback during the pandemic, and many informants were tired and overworked. The new situation made it less clear who the clients were, which proved to be exhausting. Another weakness was that it was not always possible to set old responsibilities aside, even if the new assignments and activities would have demanded it. An informant said: “It is frustrating to feel that some groups expect entertainment when other clients are in urgent need of my time.” (R)

A lack of understanding of the situation from supervisor(s) was also repeatedly raised. One deacon portrayed the chaotic situation:

... to-do-lists, delegating work, trying to find volunteers, then sitting long hours on the phone. And the mentally ill must be met in person. Plans needed to be amended, and bureaucracy takes its time. Teams meetings took up vast amounts of time. And then meeting the ones I really work for who are in urgent need of it. It has been a tough time. (P)

A lot of diaconal work in Finland consists of economic aid (Hiilamo 2022), which was accentuated during the pandemic (see above). Informants said it was often up to the deacon to assess any client's real needs, which differs from the procedure in public social services, where one relies on tables and figures (D). According to one informant (L), restrictions in place and masks that cover most facial expressions made it much more difficult to read people. It was noted, too, that there are always people who try to take advantage of the situation. Frequently, clients had multiple problems, and what appeared at first sight might not be the most urgent difficulty. A deacon said: "Diaconia is about helping, physically, mentally, economically, and spiritually, which is why I really prioritize meeting a new client in person the first time, taking all safety instructions into account." (L)

Additionally, some deacons reported that it was difficult to restart some activities as society gradually opened up again. Clients experienced much loneliness but were, nevertheless, reluctant to get back on track. Informants found it exhausting when the application of Covid regulations varied internally; for example, instructions for counting participants at a gathering or when/when not to wear masks. Moreover, the lack of volunteers at hand was also identified as a weakness, since most helpers were elderly themselves and therefore could not come since the high risk of infection made them extra cautious.

5.2.3 Opportunities

The pandemic implied a clear opportunity for more diaconal cooperation with institutions, private actors, and public actors, although official network meetings became less frequent. Contacts with new private donors and various associations were established. New cooperations materialized, not only new ways of doing the work.

Cooperating partners are actors who accept the Church. Current partnerships are very positive and acknowledge our resources. Also, they appreciate our values; similar values are not expressed by public actors. (S)

Another major and meaningful opportunity emerged in engaging volunteers in different diaconal tasks, for instance, phoning the elderly and asking what they need, donating food packages, or cooking meals for delivery. Grocery shops provided diaconia with shopping carts where people could donate products when shopping for themselves. There was a clear rise in the need for basic food supplies, which diaconia partly tried to meet with gift cards. Finnish diaconia has commonly been engaged in food aid (e. g., Hiilamo, 2012, 2022), which has often been done locally with other enablers. The need for economic assistance was most acute early in the pandemic but was later normalized, according to the interviews.

The Corona crisis hit unevenly. Some informants saw a 70–80% rise in clientele at the beginning of the pandemic, while others say their number of clients remained the same. Such a rise in clientele offered a clear chance for diaconia to reach out to people, not only economically. The need for psychological support was also recognized: People needed to meet and speak.

New ways of organizing the work demanded flexibility from most deacons. The data shows creative solutions such as dividing groups into smaller ones, using WhatsApp for registration before events, planning and communicating, anticipating changes in advance, reorganizing work, or leaving anniversary gifts for the elderly in the mailbox and calling them on the phone. The crisis caused by the pandemic was a wake-up call to reevaluate how things were traditionally done.

5.2.4 Threats

Corona restrictions made most gatherings impossible, for all ages and all groups alike. This was a significant constraint despite all attempts to uphold contact. Many informants stated that human contacts suffered a great deal; many new clients did come forward for economic aid, but at the same time, spontaneous meetings decreased. One informant said: “Before the Corona pandemic, we would sit at a café an hour a week, so that anybody could come to talk to us about anything.” (P)

Another indicated that the sudden loss of contact with existing clients was a source of stress. “I thought, ‘should I now start contacting all these who came here before, or should I just assume they are alright if not in touch?’” (B)

For most informants, the Corona pandemic seems to have brought more work. Everybody was faced with insecurity, plans needed to be amended constantly, and there was a strong demand for flexibility. As a result, exhaustion threatened diaconal work during the pandemic.

5.2.5 Summary of the SWOT Analysis

The SWOT analysis evaluates how well diaconia in the diocese can respond to the Covid-19 pandemic or a similar crisis in the future. In short, clear strengths of

diaconia in the crisis were the deacons' emerging flexibility and creativity. These traits were needed to keep in contact with clients despite harsh restrictive regulations and lockdowns. The unclear purpose of the work was a weakness, as was the lack of supervisory support. Extra work, more insecurity, and fewer familiar routines made the scarcity of personnel more acute, and tiredness was common. But the crisis also brought novel working methods, fresh cooperation possibilities, and new volunteers. It offered opportunities to do diaconal work in a new way as well as to scrap some outdated traditions. The stress caused by losing clients and having to deal with constant insecurity in addition to a too-demanding need for flexibility was a threat to diaconia. In addition, valuable human contacts suffered.

6. Summary of Results

The results of the empirical analysis show that the pandemic had at least the following effects on diaconia in the Porvoo diocese: Severe restrictions on diaconal work made it difficult to meet with clients, especially older people. Families faced economic difficulties, but financial help came from new, both private and state, financial donors. Diaconia was widely appreciated for its work in society, providing aid for people in acute need. The workers took a virtual leap forward in their working procedures, both with colleagues and with clients.

During the crisis, diaconia showed flexibility and creativity in keeping up its work despite regulations and lockdowns. However, the lack of supervisory support, unclear purpose, and fewer routines, together with lack of personnel, exhausted diaconal staff. On the other hand, novel ways of working, cooperation, and volunteering provided new opportunities. This implied as a drawback stress of losing clients, constant insecurity, and a tiring constant need for flexibility.

7. Discussion

The empirical data of this article are geographically limited to the Porvoo diocese. Therefore, it does not reflect the overall situation in Finland; rather, it reflects tendencies that have also been observed in other studies about the EvL. An example is that diaconia rearranged its work smoothly and flexibly, as Gävert (2021) reported. When Covid-19 hit, the pandemic challenged outdated routines. For example, R in the study was frustrated to have spent time "entertaining" groups instead of helping people acutely in need. The diaconal work during the pandemic can be understood from the liminal perspective of an "in-between" time (Kurkiala, 2020, 11), where new possibilities appear as previous frames of reference no longer legitimize certain

actions. In this sense, crises create opportunity (Kurkiala, 2020; Mulinari et al., 2021; de Villiers, 2020).

Some of the articles that I referred to earlier argue that it is essential for churches to find novel ways to react when they are in a crisis. While Cho (2021) suggests churches must become virtual to survive, this connection is questioned by the study of Metso et al. (2021). My study shows that diaconia in the EvL responded in new ways by taking a huge virtual leap forward or organizing individual meetings in a different manner, for instance, by walking and talking outside. Cho (2021) claims that churches must show empathy and solidarity. The empirical data confirms that diaconia was experienced as empathetic and solidary. This is, for example, expressed by the positive feedback from society and the Finnish state (see also Gävert, 2021; Kirkko ja Koti, 2020) or by new volunteers (who replaced the more elderly ones who had to adhere to contact restrictions) and donors wanting to cooperate with diaconia.

Results from the study raise the question of whether diaconia can once again be the actor who takes the lead in finding a solution to a critical situation. Does the current Corona crisis provide a way for diaconia to return to being pioneers, facilitating a move backward (or forward?) to being what Beukes (2020, 1) calls a “church with integrity”? This shift would demand a willingness from supervisors in the Church to allow deacons to use the flexibility they showed during the crisis to search for frontiers, the real root of diaconia, where people face their most acute needs. It is here, on the frontiers, where diaconia can change society. And it is also the place to be when pondering what it can imply that the Church Law of the EvL establishes compulsory positions for deacons (Hiilamo, 2012, 405). To this end, it would be important to allow the weaknesses identified to be turned into new ideas and novel ways of doing the work. For instance, the time invested in one-to-one meetings with clients was seen as important and should continue to be prioritized after the pandemic (P). However, another example from the data reveals how open offices were no longer needed because the crisis showed that clients can – and do – find their way to diaconia through other channels, which gives more flexibility (I).

Throughout history, diaconia has been a catalyst for change, focusing on alleviating the situation of people in difficulty. Diaconia has transformed society. With the present Church in crisis (resulting from fewer members and less income), the Church itself also needs a transformation. One way forward would be to allow diaconia, strengthened by lessons learned from the pandemic crisis, to show how to respond to other types of crises. After all, as shown, for instance, by Williams et al. (2021), the Church helps to increase mental and physical help and thus contributes to much more than spiritual support in creating a better life for people.

8. Conclusion

The article set out to qualitatively ask: What was the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the diaconal work in the Porvoo diocese in Finland? This general research question was empirically addressed in the SWOT and PEST analyses above, each of which answered one of subresearch questions. The study is based on empirical data of 22 deacons answering the question on how the Corona pandemic affected their work. It elaborates on how diaconia can respond to a similar crisis in the future by examining the strengths and shortcomings that occurred during the pandemic. Methodologically, two management models were used in a novel context bringing forward new perspectives.

The crisis is still ongoing as this paper is being written: We are still in what Kurkiala (2020, 11) calls an “in-between,” a term that reminds us of the concept of liminality, which describes the disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of a *rite de passage*, when one status is left behind but the new not yet established. The concept of *rite de passage* was more recently also used to describe the postindustrial society as well as political, social, and cultural changes (e. g., Thomassen, 2009). The position of the Church in society but also the situation of diaconia can, in this pandemic situation, be understood as undergoing a rite of passage, at the time of empirical data collection and data analysis. The continuity of the tradition of how to “do diaconia” becomes uncertain, while things might not be what they once in the future. Deacons, for instance, may leave behind groups they used to work with and turn to helping people with more acute needs. Clients explore new digital ways of contacting diaconia, and the network of diaconal cooperation is altered, to name a few examples. This fluid situation will continue, and it is as yet unknown where the rite de passage will lead. Consequently, it is necessary to do more research to follow up on where the situation is taking Church and diaconia, both on a more general level but also specifically in the Porvoo diocese. In a liminal sense, no final outcomes can yet be seen from this pandemic, in the midst of which my research was conducted. Thus, further research in this area is needed.

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