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## Religious Heritage and Change in the North

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# Wind of change

## Exploring the value creation of diaconia

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The value of diaconia is difficult to measure, its immaterial assets not easily grasped. In this article, I contribute to the area in analysing the perspective of 22 deacons on what is most important in their job and what could potentially be of greatest value if there were no restrictions of money and other resources. Data were collected in the midst of the Corona crisis in 2021 in the Porvoo diocese in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The timing of data collection therefore coincides with a unique chance to rethink ways of doing things. International research shows that the religious heritage of diaconia has changed from merely supporting people in need to also advocating marginalized groups and building bridges to other actors. This intangible heritage is sensitive to changes in society, whereby latent sources of value creation may be traced. Key contributions are identifying new areas of development of this religious heritage and assessing the value creation taking place – now and in a potential future. For this, understanding the changed role of diaconia in society and in the church are central.

### Introduction

Diaconia is an old church tradition; the early church already had the office of deacon, and deacons are mentioned in the New Testament, even if the term ‘diaconia’ is not used for the ‘social-caritative acts’ of the church (Latvus 2017: 74). Still today, diaconia reflects the frontiers of society as it meets people in acute need. Thus, diaconia is found in the interface of change while

also constituting an immaterial/intangible religious heritage. In fact, Johannes Eurich (2018) argues that religious traditions have had a great influence on social order and eventually on the formation of the type of welfare states that took over responsibility for socio-political matters, in which the Scandinavian countries were among the first.

The ideas of cultural heritage and religious heritage are intertwined, but still disparate (Agadjanian 2021). Cultural heritage is a self-realization process in which immaterial and material objects become meaningful for the identity-building of humanity, nations or individuals. In present-day Finland cultural heritage is a term that can refer to almost anything, and research in the field has grown exponentially (Immonen 2021). While last century debated mainly tangible heritage, the twenty-first century sees a shift to manifestations of intangible heritage, identities, sustainable development and cultural sustainability (Immonen 2021: 344–5, also Djabarouti 2021: 391). The key word of cultural heritage, as summarized by Visa Immonen (2021: 353), is process. A so-called culturalization of religion, meaning reframing the religious as cultural heritage, is a more or less universal modern process,

argues Johnathan Agadjanian (2021). In consequence, diaconia can, in light of Johannes Eurich (2018), be seen as a legitimate holder of national culture (a true *Kulturträger*, cf. Agadjanian 2021: 398) and not merely a religious institution/tradition.

In 2022, Finnish diaconia celebrated its 150th anniversary, commemorating the first deaconess Mathilda Hoffman. At that time diaconia was primarily provided through institutions, not by parishes (Huhanantti and Wallenius 2022: 8).

Modern diaconia arose as a reaction against abused and mistreated groups and aimed to reach out to marginal groups in society. Therefore, to be faithful to its own roots, 'Christianity must be committed to asking who the poor are, who suffers most and who are exploited locally, as well as globally' (Latvus 2017: 98). As for diaconia, Kari Latvus (p. 11) identifies three existing ecumenical megatrends worldwide: 1. the growing importance and awareness of diaconia/care, 2. the interest in the permanent caritative ministry of deacons, and 3. the scholarly debate on the origin and meaning of the lexis of diaconia.

In such a peculiar situation of change, on the border of past traditions and being a pioneer of future challenges, as described by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and ACT Alliance (Called to Transformation 2022: 73), it is of interest to know where diaconia is now and where it is heading, and to look at one example of self-realization and identity-building that characterize the process of intangible cultural heritage (Immonen 2021). This is the aim of my article, as I am *asking what value is created by diaconal work in the case of the Porvoo diocese in Finland*. The diocese is one of nine in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF). With its 3.7 million members at the beginning of 2021, the ELCF comprised 65.7 per cent of the Finnish

population (Statistik om kyrkan 2022). My study can be seen as part of the discussion on the professionalism of the diaconal work. As stressed by Beate Hofmann (2017), there is need for reflection of what diaconia is and a need for corporate culture supporting a constant reflection of professional action. Marianne Rodriguez Nygaard (2017) on the other hand wants to place diaconia at the centre of the church.

I first define the key terms of this study, after which I present a theoretical framework on how diaconia has developed and how to understand diaconia. After this, I move on to present the aim of my study in more detail, followed by the method and material. The empirical results are then analysed and discussed before a conclusion ends the article.

## Definitions

The term diaconia has many notions and perspectives. One of the key features of the practice of diaconia is working at the margins of society (Rodriguez Nygaard 2017: 166). In Finland, all ELCF parishes have compulsory positions for deacons, according to the Church Law. Diaconal activities are seen as church social work or poor relief (Hiilamo 2012: 404–5; Kyrkolag 1993: 1§2). Diaconia's purpose is further stipulated to help those in gravest need, especially those not helped by others (Kyrkoordning 1991/93: 4§3). On the international, ecumenical arena, diaconia (or diakonia) is used increasingly to describe the social action and engagement of a church locally, in society, and globally. While the European Protestant tradition has used this term frequently (especially over the last two centuries), others would use other words, such as *caritas* in the Roman Catholic tradition, or they associate diaconia mainly with the deacon's ministry as a first stage on the way to priesthood, as in the Anglican, Roman

Catholic and Orthodox traditions, with merely liturgical functions (Dietrich 2014: 13). Kjell Nordstokke (2014b: 47) adds that diaconia is often referred to as ‘social ministry’ in international traditions, as it is not a much-used word in theological English, but rather belongs to the Nordic and German spheres. Carlos Ham (2014: 108), in turn, argues that diaconia is ‘not an end in itself, but rather an instrument used by God, together with others, to build an inclusive and just community, an oikos (household) in which the entire creation is included, enjoying the fullness of life intended for all’.

‘Deacon’ is also a term used in various ways, sometimes referring to a professional church worker focused on social caritative tasks, or to a lower-ranked pastor or layperson helping out with certain practical tasks (Latvus 2017: 23). Here, I use the term in the former sense, addressing the employed professionals in the ELCF working within the diaconal practice. In Finland these have the title of Fi. *diakonissa* or Sw. *diakon*; in English I will use the term deacon.

Value creation is a key feature of business research, but value is also central in other traditions for instance in philosophy, mathematics and theology. In order to describe and explore the value creation that takes place within diaconia, a suitable approach is to make use of the network research tradition (e.g. Kothandaraman and Wilson 2001: 382), which emphasizes how value is co-created by two or more actors in a relationship, rather than in a linear sense such as in the value chain (Porter 1998: 40). The interconnectedness in the network enables co-invention and combined values that cannot always be measured and that are more than merely economic (e.g. Ramírez 1999). Values in diaconal research have been approached, for instance, by Hofmann, who contends

that practising values and reflecting over these form the cornerstone of diaconal professionalism (Hofmann 2017: 144).

UNESCO has defined intangible cultural heritage as follows:

The ‘intangible cultural heritage’ means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO 2003: 5)

The intangible cultural (or in this case also religious) heritage is thus what a certain group, such as ELCF or Porvoo diocese, transmits from generation to generation – but also recreates constantly in response to the environment. It constitutes a sense of identity and continuity. Some researchers speak of a religion that resides ‘in the culture’, not requesting active belief or participation. Here, continuity with generations and a contrast with rival groups and identities matter, as well as its central place in national history.<sup>1</sup>

Intangible cultural heritage, writes Solomon Gwervevende (2023: 6), is ‘made

1 For instance, the study of Demerath (2000) on Irish, Swedish and Polish churches; also Laniel 2016: 380–1.

up of all immaterial manifestations of culture', which 'represents the variety of living heritage of humanity as well as the most important vehicle of cultural diversity' (cf. Lenzerini 2011). This argument clearly shows why this heritage matters for diaconia, for which humanity is a key concern.

### Previous research and a paradigm shift within diaconia

Most research in the Nordic countries revolves around the caritative role of diaconia (Latvus 2017), with the deacon in the centre and where care is a moral duty for church and individuals alike, in expressing the Christian faith both in church and in society. One example is the attempt by the Church of Sweden in 2015–18 to measure its caritative work. The work of diaconia was divided into categories depending on what kind of crises the work dealt with. The least-demanding task was dealing with *quality of life and a good society: affirming life rather than solving problems*, such as soup lunches, language cafés and group activities. The middle category consisted of *common problems of human life*: dealing, for example, with challenges of divorces, sorrow or ageing. The most demanding type was *serious social or mental problems*: dealing with complex situations such as mental illness, addiction or extremism (Hollmer 2022). Another study concluded that Swedish congregations are most suited to dealing with less complex tasks of social work that demand a flexible organization, either with their own or external financing (Christiansson *et al.* 2022: 269–70).

Diaconal research is also very dependent on the perspective taken to its changing role within the religious heritage, which I will go through below.

### A post-colonial perspective, and beyond

According to Emmanuel Y. Lartey (2022: 663–4), post-colonial studies have revolved first around an analysis of the various strategies employed by colonizers to construct images of and to exercise dominance over the colonized. Second, they refer to the study of the agency of the colonized with the aim of empowering these: 'If all people are created in and bear the image of God, then all have a contribution to make in the presentation of the God of all creation and in the care of all humanity' (p. 662). This connotes key diaconal assets such as promoting the value of being the subject of one's life and having a task to fulfil (Called to Transformation 2022). Accordingly, the post-colonial approach can in this second sense be a metaphor for making sense (Weick 1995) of how church employees reach out to marginalized clients and empower them. The idea of applying Lartey's perspective is then to interpret, and find meaning and plausible explanations for what is studied (Kristensson Ugglå 2002). Below I will show how.

Modern diaconia is a result of change and development. Carlos E. Ham (2014: 109–10) presents three phases/models of diaconia observed in the ecumenical movement of the WCC. Sometimes the phases show conflicting signs and tension, sometimes trends complementing each other.

- a. *The charity model* is marked by the transfer of funds between churches in a vertical, top-down way, to support diaconal projects and persons in need. This phase is characterized by seeing people as objects of the aid, which comes from the most powerful churches and church-related organizations, mainly from the global North. This phase lasts from the early twentieth century up until the

beginning of the 1980s. The outcome of this model is aid.

- b. *The reciprocity model* is represented by a process of sharing resources, which developed in the 1980s and inaugurated a paradigm shift. Voices and ministries from the churches in the global south were getting their voices heard. This phase is characterized by diaconia's emerging notions and practices of empowerment.<sup>2</sup> In a more intentional and collective way, the horizontal level is accentuated in assessing the needs, the challenges and the problems. Resources that are expected to be shared are not solely financial, but also human resources. However, the 'we-they' mentality is still quite prominent. This model lasts up to the first decade of the twenty-first century. The outcome of the model is a move towards change.
- c. *The transformative model* is characterized by inclusiveness and integration, with a stronger relationship to each other, initiated by those often excluded by society and even by the churches. These people from the periphery and the margins (disabled, women, indigenous people, Afro-descendants, impoverished) are empowered to change society in a bottom-up approach, in an inductive manner (see also Lartey 2022; Leijman and Zetterqvist 2022: 211). This phase is now ongoing. The outcome of this model is transformation.

In different words, but with the same sense of change, Stephanie Dietrich (2014) thoroughly discusses the theory of diaconia. She calls the paradigm shift of care within academia 'a move from post-colonial

professional care to autonomy-orientated assistance' (p. 14). By this, she means that today's focus is on partnership such as mutuality, reciprocity and sharing, rather than on offering help. In this network, people are sometimes givers, sometimes recipients, with a profound understanding of the other's autonomy and right to decide on their own. Dietrich argues for a professionalized and institutionalized care for others, which should also be motivated personally and related to the community in which it is embedded. This paradigm shift of diaconia is also discussed by Kari K. Korslien (2014).

### Similar studies

Kari Jordheim (2014) has studied the role of the deacon and the diaconate in different churches. The most important tasks she found to be of caritative character, educational tasks, pastoral and liturgical tasks, administrative tasks and advocacy work. She also identified an interesting development in the identity of deacons from humble servants of people in need to advocates (or bridge-builders/go-betweens) of the needs of marginalized groups (p. 196). In Denmark, Jakob Egeris Thorsen (2020), taking a more conceptual stance, studied the role of the (changing) identity of diaconia in diaconal organizations and institutions. As Christianity no longer forms the common moral and religious framework, ecclesial anchoring and Christian identity are downplayed in favour of an immanent and exclusivist humanist framework, he argues, and he questions whether this poses a challenge to diaconia. He argues that diaconal work should keep its Christian character as an essential expression of the church and a mark of Christian identity. Thereby, diaconia stands as the church's unique and authentic contribution in a pluralistic society.

2 For a literature review on 'empowerment' see Hellöre 2020: 54–7.

Another study of interest (Nordstokke 2014a) combines the value<sup>3</sup> aspect with development work of faith-based organizations (FBO). Mobilized by Christian faith, these FBOs promote human dignity to construct a just and participatory society by delivering services and being involved. Nordstokke elaborates with the idea of diaconal assets and calls for identifying tangible and intangible resources that may make a difference in the struggle for a better world. Diaconal assets he defines 'as elements that bring diaconal practice into being and doing, assets that motivate, mobilise, transform and empower people, congregations and organisations for diaconal involvement' (p. 217). This asset-based approach identifies strengths within communities, instead of focusing on needs, and it should be carried out inter-disciplinarily to develop professional competence (p. 223). An asset-based approach has also been adopted by Zo Ramiandra Rakotoarison and her colleagues (2019) in a study on congregational asset-based community development in a Lutheran church in Madagascar. The researchers see community-driven development as resting on the principle of participation, and in this development FBOs, like congregations, can be important stakeholders for civil society. However, they also conclude that the resources offered do not always benefit the local communities, as institutional structures in the church may claim their share. A joint publication of the WCC and ACT Alliance (Called to Transformation 2022), aiming to strengthen institutional capacity of those involved in diaconia and foster dialogue and co-operation ecumenically,

3 Researching value and value creation from a business perspective has been discussed in length in Lindfelt 2004: 52–62.

has a section on diaconal assets, where the term is defined as follows:

Within development work, there has been a shift of focus from a needs-based to an assets-based approach, which means emphasizing local resources and competence rather than what is lacking. When referring to assets, we are talking about kinds of social capital that a community, a group, or even an organization may possess. It may link to their collective experiences and insight, their social practices, their faith and to the richness of individual talents and skills. ... Local churches, diaconal institutions and departments as well as international agencies contribute with resources of different kinds, both tangible and intangible. These diaconal assets, as we may name them, affirm the distinctiveness of diaconal action, its core values and the basis of its professional strength. (Called to Transformation 2022: 73)

The publication lists the individual Christian as the primary asset of diaconal service. As diaconal action relies on skilled personnel, human resources (HR) further constitute a large group of tangible assets. Also economic resources are foundational for diaconal action, which is possible thanks to funds and foundations, and to properties, but also to donors and financial supporters, private and public. Additionally, communication resources are crucial, such as publications, educational material and other forms of communication that are used to promote attitudes, responsibilities, opportunities, and the relevant competence to work for change. Intangible assets are more difficult to grasp, but may include collective memory of the past, for instance

narratives such as the biblical stories about Jesus and his caring for the sick, the hungry and the poor. Also rites and rituals in various ways form intangible assets as people share sacred moments of faith, hope and love. Closely connected to this is the understanding of life as sacred and the aim of the vocation as directed to protecting and defending human life: the diaconal ethos. This is based on value systems promoting the practice of justice, fairness, inclusiveness, mercy and care. Communities also carry a sense of belonging together and of being part of an extended family, which bears a notion of having a role and fosters expressions of mutual care. Finally, the list includes trust as an important asset in networking and co-operating. Diaconal professionals must understand the potential of these assets and know how to relate to them: this is the key message. When undercommunicating or neglecting these, which often happens (especially with the intangible assets), added value is lost and with it a missed opportunity of articulating the distinctiveness of professional diaconal action and its core values (Called to Transformation 2022: 73–5).

In Finland, the role of the deacon in the ELCF is investigated bi-annually. The most recent report ‘Diakoniabarometri 2022’ was answered by 355 deacons (27 per cent of all) and focused on the impact of the Covid crisis (Hammarén *et al.* 2022). The study revealed the importance of diaconia’s wide co-operation between various agencies and professions to enhance the welfare and inclusion of clients. Such a network consists, for example, of local grocery shops, health-care authorities and various home services, companies and electrical providers, where the deacon is often the facilitator enabling contact between the client and other agents (Ryökäs *et al.* 2022: 148). One remarkable finding was

that almost all respondents saw a need for deacons to better advocate for people’s illness in the public debate, but many did not know how to do this. Knowledge of politics was lacking as well as know-how on how to influence society. The capability of handling change had soared since the last study two years ago (p. 149).

Ulla Jokela (2011) researched diaconia in ELCF from the standpoint of the clients, where she relied on empirical data from both clients and diaconal workers. She argues that the collapse of the welfare system imposes new assignments, or spaces, for diaconia. But she also concludes that because of lack of resources, diaconal workers fail in their advocacy work on a societal level, although on an individual level this is often what the work is about (see also Jordheim 2014: 196). Jokela emphasizes the importance of taking people’s experiences seriously.

In sum, several studies on diaconal assets depart from developing work (Nordstokke 2014a; Rakotoarison *et al.* 2019; Called to Transformation 2022) but I consider that the approach to diaconal assets, value creation and potential may be applied also in a more developed part of the world. The study of Jordheim (2014) has a broader geographical scope, but her question of the role of the deacon is relevant for a smaller geographical region with more limited representation of denominations. In Finland, ‘Diakoniabarometri 2022’ shows that deacons want to change society, but don’t know how, and at the same time eagerness for change has soared, maybe due to the Covid crisis, which absorbed lots of resources. All in all, there is reason to combine and extend previous research to investigate a smaller geographical case and ask about the potential of the key religious heritage, the self-realization process, of the diaconal work. Diaconal assets are a way to



understand the changing role of the deacon as a bridge-builder, servant of people in need and advocate of the marginalized. I have chosen the Porvoo diocese for my contribution to this field.

### Aim and research questions

It should by now be clear that diaconia is a central immaterial feature of religious and cultural heritage (e.g. Immonen 2021; Astor *et al.* 2017; Djabarouti 2021) and the welfare tradition in the Nordic countries, and that its assets create a considerable value for the people who receive its help. The value is, however, difficult to assess, be it spiritual, economic or human, just to mention a few possibilities. The activities of diaconia are measured by the ELCF each year and statistics can be found on, for instance, the number of appointments, donations or home visits (Statistik om kyrkan 2022). Here, I am not interested in quantifying the number of visits or euros, but rather in the immaterial value created within diaconal activities, which in many ways better reflects the essence of the church than monetary and measurable issues. According to the idea of value co-creation, interactions or offerings are the units of analysis (Ramírez 1999), which in this study could equal the input of the diaconal work. From a post-colonial view (Lartey 2022), the best approach would be to ask the clients themselves about what diaconia has brought to their lives, though, for reasons of accessibility, this is very difficult. Therefore, my focus will be on the deacons, who are at the core of the activities that (co-)create value, with the aim of exploring the potential value creation in their job.

For this I pose the following research questions to be answered in my study:<sup>4</sup>

1. What activities do deacons see as valuable in their work?
2. What potential for value creation do deacons see in their work?
3. Is the value created by diaconia equal to the value it could create, and why or why not?

The limitations of the empirical study are as follows. The views are those of deacons, the geographical area is the Porvoo diocese in Finland, and the empirical data were collected in 2021. Methodologically, the study is a qualitative study with an explorative and a descriptive approach (Stebbins 2001; Strauss 1987), allowing the possibility of additional normative contributions. The focus is on interpreting the data and on a holistic understanding of the case studied.

### Method and material

Recently, diaconia has been researched increasingly through empirical studies, where the emphasis has been on relevant and solid knowledge of diaconal practices, the users and relational processes in the profession of the deacon, according to Hans Stifoss-Hanssen (2014: 64, see also Bobrowicz and Mannerfelt 2021: 48). He argues that using methodologically transparent research, the empirical approach can be useful in revealing structural conditions and connections as well as helping evaluate the actions and strategies of the professionals and the parishes (descriptive contribution). But studies of practices can also focus on improving strategies and developing reflection, for example on practice and theory (normative contribution), as well as establishing links between theory and practice. This qualitative study follows a hermeneutical (Vikström 2005; Stålsett 2019) social-con-

formulating these research questions.

<sup>4</sup> Special thanks to Professor Wilhelm Barner-Rasmussen for co-operation in

structivist (Berger and Luckmann 1966) and interpretative process (Kristensson Uggla 2002; Weick 1995), which is in line with many studies in practical theology (e.g. Prosén 2021; Vähäkangas 2023; Stiles-Ocran 2021). I favour innovative perspectives to find new viewpoints. I argue this approach is sometimes necessary or even called for to find alternative perspectives on the object studied. When previous knowledge relating to the research problem is scarce, an explorative approach is useful. My contribution is descriptive, but also explorative and normative.

In June–September 2021, I conducted qualitative interviews with 22 deacons (24 per cent) in the Swedish-speaking Porvoo diocese in Finland. It is one of nine dioceses in Finland and stretches across vast areas of western and southern Finland, serving the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland as well as the local German Evangelical-Lutheran congregation and Swedish Olaus Petri congregation. The total number of members in the Porvoo diocese in 2021 was about 230,000, spread out over 47 parishes (Om Borgå stift 2022). In 2021, the diocese employed 93 deacons (Statistik om kyrkan 2022). The interviews were held virtually over Zoom (because of the Covid crisis and subsequent restrictions), transcribed and anonymized, giving the respondents pseudonyms A–V. The shortest interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, the longest about 90 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide with 17 questions on value, networks and the role of diaconia was used and the influence of the researcher on the content of the talk was minimized. The data were analysed through a qualitative content analysis, across both questions and persons.

Of the 22 informants, 8 were from urban and 14 from rural Finland. Their professional experience ranged from a few

months to a couple of decades. 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. The selection of informants was made by approaching almost all parishes in the diocese by email, asking if they wanted to participate anonymously in the study. I omitted the parish I live in because of a possible conflict of interest. No parish is represented by more than one deacon. The data collection followed the data-protection regulation in Finland, The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK).

### Empirical analysis and results

Because the study is explorative, I consider that it is justifiable to report the analysis procedure alongside the results. The tables show the main empirical results, which I have left for the reader to follow, as a transparent analysis increases the reliability of the study. Below follow three sections, each reflecting a research question, beginning with 1. what the empirical data say on current value creation in diaconia, continued by 2. possible value creation as expressed by deacons and ending with 3. a comparison between these two.

### Value creation in current diaconia

In the interviews the deacons were asked *where can they create most value – and of what type?* One informant pointed out that today many are ‘religiously distanced’ in a different sense from before: and the situation in larger cities is distinct from that in the countryside.

Spiritually the situation is very different nowadays. Before, there was a natural connection to the sacred, people maybe had a grandmother who introduced evening prayers or similar, but

I do think there has been a secularization: the natural spiritual connection is more absent when talking to people. And the work tends to go towards meeting people's basic needs and the spiritual is quite low-rank there. Financial matters are high-rank in my work at the moment. On the other hand, it may be good to have a neutral external reason for getting in touch; it is not possible to hit right onto spiritual stuff directly – it may come up as a side issue. It may be good to have a neutral reason to meet people, to get to know each other, and with time get more into deeper things in life. It is important to meet the human being as they are, to give them a value; many feel they are only a number in society and in a larger city there is a bigger risk in becoming one case among many. (O)<sup>5</sup>

When analysing the empirical data, I found it useful to categorize the twenty-two answers (A–V) into human value, spiritual value and/or economic value. Although not always separable from each other, the value categories form an instrument making data-analysis possible. In the analysis I strove to find the key core value to categorize in one or several of the boxes. See Table 1.

Most respondents see human value as the key source of value creation in their work. When meeting a fellow human being and acknowledging them just as they are, even if it doesn't lead to a substantial change in the client's life, something essential happens, according to the data. Respondents characterize the typical diaconal client as being worn down by setbacks that make

them feel not as capable or important as others.

In meeting people, the human value. Just taking one example, someone with addiction problems, maybe also homeless, they don't feel as valuable as others, but I think we should lift them up, showing that they are of equal value to everybody else and that anyone can do good or bad. All of us experience peaks and deep valleys in our lives, not just them. (I)

Often deacons can help with practical issues such as financial support or food aid, even if many say these bring about only short-term gains. The same clients often return with the same problem at hand.

Oh, I do feel it's important to help these people who get into economic distress. But I do not see it creates so much value, even if it is a relief when they have their bills paid, but off it goes again ... I do feel it is very temporary. But the greatest value, well that is the value of eternity, being able to help someone get in touch with God and find this connection. This is the most valuable aspect. It's hardly ever possible to see my own role in that process; my piece of support is just one of many in the puzzle. But as for children, supporting this connection is even more important, because it's easier when they are kids. But with people who face crises, it feels very valuable, for instance in groups of grieving people. We aim to meet twice a year, and it's something close to my heart for me, I really feel it means a lot for the people there to get support. In the same way, I belong to the crisis group organized by the municipi-

5 All interview excerpts are translated from Swedish to English by the author.

**Table 1.** Core value-creating aspect of the diaconal work (HV = human value, SV = spiritual value, EV = economic value)

Answers from deacons (A-V)		HV	SV	EV
A	Focusing on how valuable everyone is, that each one of us is equally created by God. Everyone is a sinner, and everyone is forgiven. No one is better than others.	x	x	
B	The value of eternity, to help people get in touch with God, which is especially important for children. To help financially, even if it is often only in the short term and does not create value in the long run. To help and offer support in acute crises, such as in grief and deaths.	x	x	x
C	Helping people in crisis with their life situation, the lonely and people in need. The need can be physical, mental, financial or spiritual. Spiritual value exists but is often unspoken.	x	x	
D	How God guides people in the miracles that happen when needs meet donations or benevolence.		x	
E	Being able to acknowledge a person and their needs, even if not being able to change the situation at hand.	x		
F	The sole meeting with another human being, during a home visit or during a gathering of some kind. Talking about life or something else. The meeting itself is the essential piece of value.	x		
G	Good meetings with people, where everyone is faced with the same respect, value, and equality. Being able to transmit the love given through faith, to communicate hope.	x	x	
H	Talking with a person about life. Noticing the individual human being.	x		
I	Meeting people, to share an individual's ups and downs, without seeing these as defining a person's worth.	x		
J	Making people understand that they are valuable, that there is a task and hope for each one. God is always present in the talks because he is in the deacon, and he is in the room.	x	x	
K	Meetings with people, in what happens on several levels. In meeting both individuals and groups alike.	x		
L	Giving hope to people in difficulties. Being able to meet and ponder issues together. Giving hope to people also includes a spiritual dimension.	x	x	
M	Being able to support a person in a difficult situation; this goes deeper than financial support, which is often only temporary. Sometimes I have had the chance to pray with someone, for instance at their death bed.	x	x	
N	Sometimes we can contribute (financially) to something really good. Sometimes it does not matter what we do. Sometimes our help is contradictory and makes things even worse.			x
O	Financial help is indeed very central in my work at the moment.			x
P	Being able to share a part of a person's path, even if not being able to change that person's situation. Offering a community.	x		

Q	Acknowledging a person is what's most important, if you can do it so that God is illuminated, that's the best. To offer support financially in a difficult situation is important for a person to be able to cope with circumstances.	x	x	x
R	The human value: some many feel excluded and lonely, they feel unimportant and of no use. Quite a few wish to have the spiritual part, that I read something, pray <i>Fader Vår (Our Father)</i> or <i>Herrens välsignelse (The Lord's Blessing)</i> , or that I pray for something very concrete. Many are over-indebted or in deep financial trouble, and then it is valuable being able to help out financially.	x	x	x
S	Human value, a loving and merciful approach.	x		
T	Spiritually, a depth can be reached, where words cannot get through, only prayer: where God can touch someone's heart.		x	
U	Human value, offering value to a person who experiences no worth due to external issues.	x		
V	Meeting people in grief, where one touches right at the core of things.	x		
Summary		18	11	5

pal health services and our debriefings after sudden deaths is very valuable work too. Of course, it's quite temporary, but it's good being there and supporting people to a better quality of life. (B)

In short, the deacons describe the value creation in their work as being closely connected to acknowledging the intrinsic value of the human being, which is the same for everyone. But financial and spiritual dimensions also create value, as well as helping out in acute situations of crisis. In the categorization of key values in a respondent's work, human value was pinpointed by 18 respondents, spiritual value by 11, and economic value by 5.

### Latent diaconal assets

To grasp the latent diaconal assets, deacons were asked a hypothetical question: *If you were to have unlimited resources – both time and money – where could you make the largest difference in your work, where would your effort be most important (most value-*

*creating)?* For some the answer was easy, a long-time dream to be put into words, while for others it was more difficult. A few respondents wished to create an oasis for troubled people, be it a café or a pub (K) or a place where people could work at their own pace and be accepted for this (S).

Inner healing is close to my heart. When I meet people with broken lives, then I think of some kind of retreat centre or place for caring for souls, where struggling people could come and stay for a while. There would be pastoral care, daily prayers, but also a lot of being out-of-doors in nature. And then I think specifically about women. (T)

But many also wished to keep up the good work of diaconia and have more time to do the same work, but with more time and personnel. To spend more time with the lonely, the mentally ill or the cognitively disabled, to have enough time to talk to people and support them. A few

also mentioned preventative work such as courses or classes to teach people the difficult art of life (E), or how to manage money, work and relationships (A).

I think about money and other things that get out of hand; I would like preventative actions before things get really difficult. Sometimes when clients come to us it is already too late and the financial problems are too huge. We cannot really help any more. (M)

Table 2 shows an overview of how the informants answered.

Deacons do not desire any dramatic and utopian solutions to maximize value in their job. Many see the greatest potential in helping clients with financial problems, women with troubled backgrounds, people with challenges in acquiring and keeping a job, single parents with many children.

I sympathize most with families with children, especially single parents with many kids; here I feel very insufficient. I'd love to support much more, both physically and mentally, so that this person would not be so lonely. I'd like to have a huge network of volunteers around these people, being able to go in there and help these exhausted single parents with simple things such as cleaning or baking or taking a child to some kind of activity, helping financially so that they can join in some kind of hobby, because these are so expensive nowadays, yes, this is where I would allocate time and money. (Q)

In short, the informants wish to minimize differences in society, helping especially women, people with mental illness, the unemployed, children and youngsters, the

lonely in society. Of special interest is the notion of helping Muslim women, because these are not part of the ELCF parishes, which shows concretely how diaconia engages across denominations and beliefs. Also, being able to support the marginalized who do not even manage to seek help themselves is a latent diaconal asset. Many informants also mention teaching people how to better manage life. A thread of empowerment is noticeable throughout the answers: helping clients help themselves. In the categorization of values, human value was pinpointed by 17 respondents, spiritual value by only 2, and economic value by 7.

### What deacons do and what they could potentially achieve

What, then, can be concluded in comparing existing value creation to potential value creation? First, had the deacons unlimited resources, they would probably be able to proactively help society better in fighting marginalization and inequalities. Second, the existing focus on *seeing* the other is replaced in the vision to some extent by *empowering* the clients by more effective means (a café, a retreat centre, teaching people how to handle financial issues, physical training etc.) A third notion is that value creation in the current work is more similar among the respondents, while in the hypothetical situation a few groups stand out (women, Muslims, children, elderly, single parents, economically distressed etc.). Deacons see potential in being able to do more for a certain group of clients instead of just scratching at the surface of many people's difficulties. Finally, as for the various types of value, human value remains stable, being the key driver for value creation both in the current and in a hypothetical situation. Spiritual value received more attention in the current work for deacons than in the vision. With

**Table 2.** A vision of the most value-creating diaconal work (HV = human value, SV = spiritual value, EV = economic value)

Answers from deacons (A-V)		HV	SV	EV
A	Preventative work to keep marriages intact, such as offering pre-marriage classes, and on the strengthening of people's identity, tuition on relations, on handling of conflicts and on the art of living.	x		
B	Work with victims of different crises. Helping children and youngsters with mental illness, a complex problem which would need unlimited resources and research, what is it really all about?	x		
C	Work with immigrants, especially with Muslim citizens.	x		
D	Reaching those who cannot, for various reasons, seek help themselves. Those who cannot even manage to call for help or come knocking on the door.	x		
E	Educating people in the art of life, especially clients asking for economic support and food aid. Teaching them not only how to get a job, but how to manage it and keep it. Educating people on how to handle money, conflicts and relationships in a sound manner, methods of talking to one another.	x		x
F	I don't know.			
G	A retreat centre with possibilities for tranquility and quietness, for people to calm down and get help and support in developing their inner life and be together with others to deepen their relationship with God.		x	
H	Helping people in financial trouble, even if it doesn't solve all problems. Talking more to people, since often other issues lie behind financial problems.			x
I	Youngsters and children! Maybe through scholarships, so that everyone would have the same access to education, clothing, shoes and bags, stuff that everybody else has. Meaningful programme during spare time, places to just hang around, without having to produce a great lot, where people can do sports, cook, or play games and such.	x		x
J	More personnel resources for supporting people with mental illness, more open activities, educated personnel and time to make company, why not even every day. And opportunities to educate people in everyday financial issues, preferably from an early school age, before things go wrong.	x		x
K	Some kind of café where people can meet and hang around.	x		
L	Having enough time to meet people, to listen and discuss things in peace. More resources and more personnel.	x		
M	Being there for the lonely, being able to give time for the individual meeting and provide preventative input before things get out of hand for these people.	x		
N	Having more time to do things properly and not just scratch at the surface, extinguish fires, but work profoundly and really make a difference.	x		
O	I don't know.			

P	A workshop where asylum seekers are engaged, and others in our society who are out of work, also for the marginalized. Various projects that give a salary to frustrated people and income to the church.	x		x
Q	More allowance and much more help for families with children to manage both physically and mentally, especially for single parents with many children.	x		x
R	Greater investment and focus on the lonely, the elderly and those not feeling part of society, people with mental illness.	x		
S	Support for people in economic distress, who have VIP-loans or are in real financial trouble and don't know how to get out of it. Meaningful occupation for people out of work for a long time and creating networks where one can give and take, share resources.	x		x
T	A retreat camp or centre for care of souls in a scenic place, for inner healing, where violated people could come, especially women.		x	
U	Providing training, especially for female victims of violence. Giving the feeling of being able to manage, succeed and be together. When strong in body, it also strengthens one's mind. Building self-confidence through functional strength.	x		
V	Wider resources for the cognitively disabled.	x		
<b>Summary</b>		<b>17</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>

economic value it was quite the opposite; in the present work not many saw it created much value, but when freely envisioning where one can make a great difference, more deacons mentioned economic support for special groups of people, including the possibility of schooling people how to handle their financial affairs, a central pillar in managing life today.

## Discussion

As the aim of this article has been to explore the potential of value creation in the work of deacons in Finland today, I want to underline why this is important from the perspective of cultural and/or religious heritage. I have already stressed how intangible cultural heritage is concerned with the living heritage of humanity, a key concern for diaconia (Gwervevde 2023: 6; Lenzerini 2011). Also, how the intangible heritage is a process (Immonen 2021) interacting directly with the environment,

which forces it to be constantly recreated by its communities and groups to provide a sense of identity (UNESCO 2003: 5). The question of value creation though diaconal work is one example of how the religious heritage is moulded in the interaction between ELCF, society and the welfare state of Finland, making it also part of the intangible cultural heritage that is transmitted from generation to generation, whether as a confessing member of the church or not (Demerath 2000; Laniel 2016: 380–1).

To better understand potential diaconal assets for development, I find it useful to go back to the classification of diaconia by the Church of Sweden (Hollmer 2022). In the empirical data, all three grades of crisis can be noted. The lightest form, *addressing people's quality of life and a good society*, is exemplified in the vision of cafés as places to hang around in (K) and workshops/projects for marginalized people and asylum seekers (P). The middle form, dealing with



*common problems of a human life*, is frequently noted, for instance in the examples of exercise for victims of violence (U) and being there for the lonely and/or elderly (R, M). Also educating/supporting people in the art of life (A, B, E) and helping the financially vulnerable (H, I, Q) is part of this category, as well as providing retreat centres for the exhausted (G, T). The most demanding level is when diaconia deals with *complex, even extreme, situations of social or mental nature*. Although not very frequent, this category is seen in deacons' actions in order to reach people who cannot manage to seek help themselves (D) and in helping people in extreme financial difficulties (P). Working with asylum seekers (S), with female victims of violence (U) or the cognitively disabled (V) could also exemplify this degree, depending on the acuteness of the crisis.

My results show that deacons see their greatest potential for value creation in addressing specifically the middle form, common problems in a normal human life. In other words, for anybody troubled by crises in life and for the marginalized who do not qualify for sufficient help in the Finnish social security network. When comparing this to what the Church Order (Kyrkoordning 1991/93: 4§3), ratified by the Synod (Kyrkomötet), in Finland proclaims – helping those in the gravest need, especially those not helped by others – a discrepancy can be noted. Diaconia does help people who fall between the chairs, but not necessarily those in greatest need. This inconsistency confirms the Swedish findings that more profound tasks which demand complex organizational assets are not suitable for diaconia (Christiansson *et al.* 2022: 270). The role of deacons, then, is to address issues not requiring special competencies or too much engagement. The Church Order is thereby inconsistent with

the results of previous studies and with my empirical data. If diaconia is to help those in gravest need, a reallocation of assets would be necessary, either helping fewer people more, or allocating more funds and expertise to diaconia and better identifying people in the gravest need; or else reformulate the Church Order.

This equation is even more complex when questioning whether 'those in the gravest need' should relate to the whole world, or simply to the country, region or parish where one lives and works. This is a dilemma for diaconia, which does not appear at all in my empirical data: no one regarded it as a value-creating task to engage in helping people further away, beyond their own parish. Whether it is a matter of the church to engage in the welfare of society is in fact a current theological discussion (Christiansson *et al.* 2022: 277; Wijkström 2014; Hellöre and Vikström 2022; also Hiilamo 2012), but I will not go further into it here owing to lack of space. The fact that the Church Order stipulates helping 'those especially those not helped by others' (Kyrkoordning 1991/93: 4§3) should not exempt Finnish authorities from their responsibility to meet the basic needs of their own citizens.

In this respect, one should also not overlook the newer understanding of diaconal assets that depart from finding strengths within communities, instead of focusing on needs (Nordstokke 2014a; Rakotoarison *et al.* 2019), and from following a principle of participation of the stakeholders through networking and interdisciplinary co-operation (see also Hammarén *et al.* 2022). As the welfare system seems to be in difficulties, diaconia acquires more and new spaces with clients with acute needs. Jokela (2011), Jordheim (2014) and Thorsen (2020) all raised the issue of the changing role of diaconia. While Thorsen argued that

the identity of diaconia needs to be linked to its Christian character, Jokela found that diaconia fails in advocacy work on a societal level, and the importance of this advocacy work was raised by Jordheim (2014: 196).

One way to handle this changing identity of diaconia is to apply Ham's (2014: 109–10) development of diaconia. This showed how *the charity model* was replaced in the 1980s by *the reciprocity model* and, after the turn of the millennium, *the transformative model*. My data reflect remnants of the charity model, seeing people as objects of aid, for instance in how the term 'client' is used by all deacons in the interviews. This reflects the phase where the notion of financial support (top-to-bottom) is central. As financial aid causes much disagreement among deacons in my material, I raise the question, whether it is because this praxis is outdated in the mainstream development of diaconia.

Empowerment is seen in many deacons' visions for the future. One very clear example is the following:

I would like to start a gym for functional training, a wellness class where everybody succeeds, no matter what you do, step by step. It is great to hear 'Well done!' or 'Wow, that's a great job!' Getting the feeling of success together with others, exercising and become stronger, that's what I very much dream of doing in my work: to strengthen one's mind by strengthening one's body. Especially with female victims of violence, to rebuild their self-confidence. But also for teenagers to become strong and confident individuals, not just on the outside, but on the inside too. I would love to offer it to all ages and all groups, had I only the chance. (U)

This citation reflects practices of the reciprocity model, where not only financial resources are expected to be shared, but also human resources. A few answers also clearly show influx of the last phase, the transformative model, where change takes place in an inductive manner:

I would love to have a workshop to engage asylum seekers and other frustrated people without a mission in our society. Some kind of their own employment agency, to map what people can do and just start various projects and the church would get the money. There would be a café, gardening work, and anything people want to do would be possible. And they would get paid for this instead of walking around and being frustrated. (P)

The change would here be initiated by the church and run in co-operation with people often excluded by society. People from the periphery and the margins would be empowered to change society in a bottom-up approach, where the competence departs from the people on the margin or in need. This practice also very much resembles Dietrich's (2014: 14) 'autonomy-oriented assistance', which highlights partnership, mutuality and sharing, rather than traditional help. People are both givers and receivers in the quotation above, which supports independence and an individual right to decide.

A drawback of my study is, of course, the voice of what deacons refer to as their clients (which has been accomplished by Jokela 2011). To deepen the understanding of the post-colonial (Lartey 2022), autonomy-oriented (Dietrich 2014) or transformative phase of diaconia (Ham 2014) – I see all of these as reflections of the recent academic study of diaconia – further

studies are called for that give voice to the clients of diaconia in assessing potential assets or development. This is needed to further the research in the field, if the question of accessibility and anonymity could be solved. Crucial would also be to further study whether diaconal professionals understand the potential of the tangible and intangible assets as expressed by WCC and ACT Alliance (Called to Transformation 2022: 73–5) and whether they know how to relate to them. This would assess whether potential added value is lost and what missed opportunities there are in the work of professional diaconia and its core values.

### Conclusion

This study set out to determine the value creation in diaconia from the perspective of deacons in the Porvoo diocese in Finland in 2021. Through interviews I mapped 1. what deacons see as valuable in their work, 2. the potential for value creation and 3. whether the value created is equal to what could be created. Key results showed that the most valuable aspects of diaconal work were to acknowledge and see the client and empower them, as well as to help in acute crises. In a situation of limitless resources, deacons would like to further minimize differences in society and find ways of accessing early help, such as schooling in money matters or the art of life. Whether deacons create the value they potentially could or not is twofold: yes, to some extent, as it seems deacons to a large extent already do what they can, within their limits, in showing people their value and fighting marginalization; no, because with more resources, deacons could create a win-win-win situation for society, the clients and diaconia alike. The human value created in their work is stable and high, followed by the economic value, where dea-

cons feel a greater potential than in spiritual value creation.

This study contributes with its empirical results and raises normative questions on what should be done with the discrepancy between what the Church Order stipulates on the one hand (helping those in the gravest need) and on the other what research shows is a suitable arena for diaconia (less complex tasks of social work that demand a flexible organization) and where diaconia actually creates most value (common problems in a normal human life). This is a wide and important question, which deserves a space in theological discussion, both for academics and practitioners. It is also a question of the intangible cultural and religious heritage that is continuously formed in the interaction between church and society. Closely related to this comes another normative question, to what degree the ELCF/the church should engage in the welfare society, a question that has already received attention in the current discussion on a more general level. My contribution to this discussion is that deacons in fact would like to do more to prevent problems from arising on both the individual and the societal level. Diaconia is still sensitive to flaws in our society and acts as a pioneer in it. It therefore would be wise to give more resources and a flexible mandate to deacons for activities which could create a win-win-win situation for all parties involved. By letting diaconia enter the new diaconal paradigm full-heartedly, it can co-create much value for society, the church and the marginalized individual alike. The religious heritage of diaconia could thus show the way for a real change in both society and church alike. ■

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