

Diaconia – A strong Brand! – Between Values and Commerce

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Check Against Delivery

Thank you very much for your welcome here today and the invitation to join you at this very important conference. It is always important to listen and hear from our members and so it is a real pleasure for me to listen and here from the members of the Kaiserswerth General Conference.

Because Kaiserswerth General Conference is one of the 45 members in 32 countries that make up the Eurodiaconia network that brings together diaconal organisations across Europe. Our office is based in Brussels but our membership stretches from Iceland in the north of Europe to Armenia in the south east. We are an organisation of diversity - churches, direct services providers and special interest organisations but we are also a united organisation, united in our vision to develop dialogue and partnership between members and influence and engage with the wider society. United in aiming for inclusion, care and empowerment of the most vulnerable and excluded and ensure dignity for all. We are a community of diaconal actors and that word community defines us as more than just a network but, as the communities that make up your organisation know, community means that we share common values, common directions and common approaches.

For the members of Eurodiaconia those commonalities come from our shared commitment to Diaconia, to service, to communicating the love of God for his creation in deeds as well as words. Across Europe those ideals are being demonstrated by our members in lots of different ways, not least our members who are on the front line of the migration and asylum crisis in Europe today.

Migration and asylum are not the only crisis in Europe today. Generally, there is more poverty and social exclusion in Europe with nearly 124 million people at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Some groups of people are more at risk than others.. women, children, roma people, people with disabilities, migrants etc. We need to see stronger and better actions in Europe to address poverty and exclusion. But another issue we need to deal with, which is not restricted

to those who face exclusion, is the provision of social services. This is very much linked to your theme of Diaconia, A strong Brand, between values and commerce. Diaconal work is driven by values and for many, including the members of the Kaiserswerther General Conference, a sense of calling and vocation linked to Christian faith. Furthermore, across Eurodiaconia our members believe that quality, accessible and impactful social services are necessary to uphold human dignity and is a fundamental right. Social services run by diaconal organisations enable people to integrate or reintegrate into society, to access and retain employment, to be cared for in older or younger age and offer a route out of poverty and exclusion, reinforcing the socio-economic independence of service users.

Yet despite this commitment diaconal service providers face a number of challenges. Increasingly the provision of services is challenged by the need to be competitive in a market place where there are profit making and non-profit making providers of services as well as the usual public service providers. Whereas competition can be good for many reasons, such as quality, it can also be a challenge for some diaconal actors to keep their diaconal identity based on values such as empowerment, reconciliation and transformation when needed to be more like businesses. It is of course not impossible, and not always negative, but it is a change and change can take time and change can be both invigorating and disruptive. This challenge of identity can also be related to financing in some countries in Europe. Much funding is now contract based for a specific time duration and this can challenge our ideas in Diaconia of long term, sustainable support for people in all sorts of situations. How can we guarantee that commitment and value of we cannot be sure of our financing?

Perhaps another challenge to be addressed is the challenge of retaining the diaconal identity of an organisation. What does the diaconal identity depend on? The people, the services, the work? Can an organisation be diaconal or is it the people that make it diaconal? If it is the people, what happens when staff and volunteers may not have the same level of Christian commitment as people in previous generations did? Where are the dividing lines between diaconal organisation, NGO and business? What are those dividing lines made of and how we can we reinforce them? As you discuss brand, values and commerce this are perhaps core questions to think about.

Within Eurodiaconia we are looking at these questions as well and in 2016 will carry out some meetings to look at these questions across Europe and we will value very much the input from you. With every best wish and blessing on your discussions and work today.