

## Diakonia a strong Brand?! – Between Values and Commerce

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Greetings

Only the spoken word counts!

Salutation,

*Diakonia a strong Brand ?! – Between Values and Commerce.* Why a question mark *and* an exclamation point? Any marketing expert would advise strongly to use just a clear and unmistakable exclamation mark. And should we do this also?

Diakonia is involved in many areas of social work. This ministry has a strong reputation. It is a sign for quality. They have well qualified and highly motivated personnel. Diakonia is innovative. Not everyone is aware that many new ideas and innovative developments come out of the big, traditional companies of the free welfare institutions. They arise out of the daily work with people.

Our values are the basis of this strong brand. And commerce is part of these values, because we are called to be good stewards of the gifts given to us.

So, why the question mark? Why question that diakonia is a strong brand? And on top of that, why question it ourselves? Would it not be enough if our competition does it? Why *between* values and commerce? Why not an *and*, which would eliminate all differences?

I want to share some thoughts why I myself am comfortable with the question mark.

In my opinion diakonia is a strong brand, but it is more than that. Diakonia does not fit into an economic frame easily. It is reluctant to be reduced to the language of economy and marketing. Diakonia needs this resistance. And because of this, we have to bear this tension. For I think the reason is the gospel itself. Diakonia as part of the church is following its own mission, grounded within the gospel.

Diakonia taking sides originates from Christian faith. We make visible the reason and conditions of poverty and social marginalization. We raise our prophetic voice on behalf of the interests of those at social margins. And we do not start our help by asking whether this is economical, what financial impacts occur and who will pay for it.

Diakonia is also working in those areas where there is no competition, at those margins where no private company is interested in making business. Although everybody can see that there are people in need, that there is poverty and social marginalization. This leads to more and more diaconal offers like shops to distribute clothes, food and everyday goods.

This growing palette of diaconal offers can lead to the danger that the social government will reduce their own engagement in these areas, although it is a central part of its duties. The

good intention is changed into its contrary – mercy becomes a legitimation for cutting down social liabilities.

This is the place where diakonia, where we as an evangelical association are called to engage in social politics. Diakonia and church are not allowed to do their ministry quietly – for the sake of the people. They are not allowed to become *charity-offerers* but have to raise their prophetic voice on behalf of people in need against unjust structures.

And what is the situation in those areas where obviously conditions of commerce are already in use? Is it possible to harmonize gospel and commerce?

To supply people in need of care is a task for all society, including the government. In the area of elderly care we are experiencing increasing competition. Politics and society want that. Private companies have discovered elderly care as a profitable market. So diakonia is working with a lot of competition.

The basis of our diaconal concept for care is our mandate coming directly from the gospel. Diaconal work is based on being personalized and interactive. To reach out to people and help them in their different situations, you have to meet them with sensibility, respect and appreciation. Care in dignity needs time and attention. It has to respect the individual needs. All people involved in the care process need respect and appreciation for their work: people in need of care, their relatives, volunteers and professional nurses.

The aim of good diaconal care has to give attention to the needs and personal situation, without looking into the financial possibilities, refinancing systems and cost pressure. Care must not be dependent on income or status of the government finances.

We experience every day that reality is different.

Under present economic and financial frame conditions the quality of care in Germany is significantly different from the way we as diakonia want to care according to our Christian image of people.

Social-diaconal involvement is contrary to a growing tendency to economize social work. This is why the small word *between* in your conference theme is more than appropriate.

Market, competition and commerce are unquestionably part of diakonia. This is how our diaconal institutions work. But I think that we should concentrate on our fight against the growing tendency to economize social work. We have to make sure that a strong brand diakonia always comes together with a strong engagement in social politics in favor of those who are depending on help, financial grants and assistance. It is connected with the question how much our society is willing to pay for social matters, like helping families and handicapped or others that need care.

So I want to understand the question mark in the title of my greeting as a memory of our mission, coming out of the gospel. Under this umbrella which mirrors our broad mission we want to do our diaconal ministry in a creative way. We should not limit ourselves to a single provider – strong or weak – on the market or to a diaconal stopgap for a government that does not live up to its expectations.

I wish us all strength, creativity and inspiration for this task.

When I look into the conference program, I will expect to gain this inspiration from the spiritual impulses, from the interesting speeches as well as from many examples of good practical work.

But also – and therefore you have to come to Austria – I benefit from the community and talk over a good meal, an *Austrian Evening*.

At the end I want to thank you for your invitation. I was very happy about it, and I look forward to many opportunities for meeting and I appreciate our common engagement in diakonia and social politics.

Thank you very much!