

# **Conflation of Diakonia with Charity: An Analysis of the Annual Mission Week in the Evangelical Lutheran Church – Morogoro Diocese**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the Annual Mission Week (AMW) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Morogoro Diocese (ELCT-MD) and its understanding of diakonia. The central thesis is that the AMW embraces a flawed concept of diakonia, i.e., mere charity. This conflation limits the potential of diakonia to foster genuine social transformation and empowerment. Methodologically, the article draws on systematic-theological reflections on diakonia and charity. Its primary sources are ecumenical documents and the works of African scholars, such as Mercy A. Oduyoye. These theological perspectives challenge a narrow misunderstanding of diakonia as charity and advocate for a nuanced understanding of service that includes community empowerment and systemic change. To analyse the AMW and its understanding and practice of diakonia, this study also employs qualitative research methods. These are semi-structured interviews with 15 pastors responsible for the organisation and management of the AMW. The major findings were that many respondents expressed a desire for a broader interpretation of diakonia that encompasses not just immediate relief but also sustainable development and

social justice. Furthermore, the interviews revealed key themes, including the importance of spiritual care, social empowerment, and structural justice. Finally, this paper brings these empirical insights into a dialogue with the theological grounding of diakonia. It concludes by calling for a more comprehensive understanding of diakonia through the AMW.

### **Key Words**

Diakonia, Charity, Annual Mission Week, ELCT – Morogoro Diocese

### **Introduction**

The AMW in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the ELCT-MD represents a significant period of community engagement, spiritual renewal, and outreach. This one-week event serves as a focal point for the church's mission, bringing together congregants and community members to participate in various activities that aim at both spiritual enrichment and social support. The overarching goal of this initiative is to not only spread the gospel but also to embody the principles of diakonia service and ministry that reflect Christ's teachings through acts of love and compassion. The AMW is part of the general strategy of the diaconical ministry of ELCT-MD. The latter adopts a comprehensive approach to diaconia and social justice, aiming to empower individuals and communities to transform injustices in society. Particular initiatives that bring this strategy into action are, e.g., health care services, the “Women Power”

project, which assists prostitute women to explore alternative income-opportunities, and advocacy programmes that strive for the empowerment of girls and women facing various forms of gender-based violence.

However, the AMW stands in stark contrast with the general strategy and agenda of the ELCT-MD. Whereas the latter defines and connects diakonia with practices of empowerment and advocacy services that aim at sustainable transformation on a long-term basis, the AMW does not. Despite claiming to embrace diaconal activities, it rather limits itself to short-term relief actions, such as distributing food and clothing. In other words, the AMW is all about charity, but not diakonia. This article aims to address this discrepancy. There has been no scholarly exploration of the AMW and its understanding and realisation of diakonia to date. Thus, this study represents the first academic attempt to address this issue, as it aims to explore the conflation of diakonia with charity and the factors contributing to it.<sup>1</sup>

By situating the discussion within a theological and practical/empirical context, this article employs systematic theological reflections on diakonia and charity to highlight the necessity of viewing diakonia as a transformative force that advocates for justice and fosters community empowerment. From there, this study empirically examines perspectives on the AMW of the ELCT-MD, particularly the understanding of diakonia and factors that contribute to a

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1 This article, in addition to further resources, draws on the first author's master's thesis, submitted at Tumaini University of Makumira in July 2025. Jörg Zehelein supervised this work and collaborated with Nestar Kyobya to author this article.

possible conflation of diakonia with charity. Further methodological remarks regarding this empirical approach will be provided below, where the results of the qualitative study are presented.

## **Diakonia and Charity - Defined**

This paper employs a definition of diakonia that aligns with the overall strategy of diakonia in the ELCT-MD.<sup>2</sup> Diakonia, derived from the Greek word for service, embodies a call to action in response to human suffering, promoting empowerment, transformation, and reconciliation. Diakonia ministry encompasses a range of activities, including social welfare programs, educational initiatives, advocacy, political engagement, and pastoral care services.<sup>3</sup> Such a comprehensive understanding of diakonia is opposed to the narrow and short-term-oriented idea of charity. Robert D. Lupton, in this regard, coined the term “toxic charity.” This form of aid attempts to meet superficial and short-term needs, thereby creating dependencies and disempowerment.<sup>4</sup> Whereas diakonia has a comprehensive

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2 ‘5 Years Strategic Plan 2018 -2023’ (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania – Morogoro Diocese, 2018). Despite the fact that this document differentiates diaconal services outreach (mostly health services) from social justice’s enhancement and gender justice (advocacy) it becomes clear that what this article terms as diakonia is fully accepted and aimed at by this official 5 Years Strategic Plan.

3 John N Collins, *Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Source* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 10; *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2009), 8.

4 Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)* (New York: HarperOne, 2011). Despite the lack of more significant grounding of arguments by Lupton (see Stephen E. McMillin,

agenda of justice and transformation, charity is merely short-term action.<sup>5</sup> Against such a narrow approach of charity, for the context of the South African Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), Nioma Venter pleads for a collaborative-integrated, missional-diaconal praxis that will help “the DRC to get out of the groove of its traditional short-term, charity approach.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, charity is a short-term, non-sustainable way of giving. It is a limited form of assistance that addresses immediate needs without tackling the systemic issues underlying poverty and social injustice.

In terms of deconstructing power relations, charity typically involves reaching out from positions of privilege vis-à-vis those in need who will appear as passive recipients rather than active participants.<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, donors may seek recognition for their contributions, which shifts the focus from the beneficiaries to the donors

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<sup>5</sup>Book Review of *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)*, *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 37, no. 3 (2018): 325–27), Lupton is convincing in that he argues for philanthropical practices that go beyond immediate, non-transformative aid which mirrors the comprehensive understanding of diakonia that this article embraces.

<sup>5</sup>Stéphan van der Watt, ‘Transforming Diaconia in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa: Compassionate Service Demanding Justice and Reconciliation’, in *Diaconia: Acts, Understanding and Stories in a Pluralistic Southern Africa*, ed. Johannes Knoetze and Jacques W. Beukes (Wellington, [South Africa]: Barnabas Academic Publishers, 2024), 117.

<sup>6</sup>Nioma Venter, ‘Little Seeds: A Prototype of Collaborative-Integrated, Missional-Diaconal Praxis’ (Doctoral Dissertation, Pretoria, University of Pretoria, 2023), vi.

<sup>7</sup>Lupton, Robert D. Lupton. *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)*. New York: HarperOne, 2011. 191 pp. Hardcover., p. 9.

themselves.<sup>8</sup> Charity may, thus, primarily benefit the giver, and it will affirm the difference between a powerful giver and a powerless receiver.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, *Diakonia in Context* analyses that “the provision of help may deepen differences and create a situation where some people always are ‘resourced helpers’, while others always are ‘helpless receivers.’”<sup>10</sup> Consequently, as Corbett and Fikkert hold, charity can reinforce inequalities.<sup>11</sup> This dynamic can create a narrative that emphasises the generosity of the donor rather than the transformational potential of the community.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, charity is a short-term relief action that affirms the difference between the donors and recipients and thus reinforces inequalities. It does not pave the way for participation and empowerment of marginalised people and communities. Conversely, diakonia is a concept and practice that aims at both short-term and long-term transformation and empowerment, intending to create spaces for the agency and empowerment of those at the margins of a society.

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8 Susan Horne, ‘The Ethics of Donor Recognition: Navigating the Fine Line between Appreciation and Self-Promotion’, *Nonprofit Management & Leadership* 22, no. 3 (2012): 298.

9 As we will see later, charity cannot be condemned completely; it is not necessarily harmful. Especially in situations of emergency and/or as rudimentary support, charity is essential.

10 *Diakonia in Context*, 49.

11 Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor-- and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012). 151.

12 See Beth Breeze, ‘Giving in the UK: Philanthropy Embedded in a Welfare State Society’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Philanthropy*, ed. Pamala Wiepking and Femida Handy (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 285–306.

## Theological Foundations of Diakonia

Diakonia, rooted in the Greek term for service, emphasises a comprehensive approach that aims at transforming lives and communities.<sup>13</sup> Biblical reflection on diakonia and charity reveals a profound connection between service and love, emphasising that true diakonia extends beyond mere acts of charity to encompass a holistic response to the needs of others. Passages of Scripture such as the final judgement according to Matt 25:35–40 illustrate that serving those in need is serving Christ. Such diaconal action implies not only the distribution of food and clothing (Matt 25:35–36), but also visiting prisoners and welcoming strangers. These actions reach beyond charity and call for advocating for a compassionate engagement that transforms both the giver and the receiver.<sup>14</sup> In similar vein, Johannes J. Kritzinger, Peter G. J. Meiring and Willem A. Saayman hold: ‘The followers of Jesus Christ, who live out of [God’s] magnificent grace, can never acquiesce in any passive acceptance of injustice and oppression, or be satisfied merely to provide charity to the victims’<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, the biblical framework calls for a more profound commitment to love in action, where diakonia transforms into a way of life.

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13 Collins, *Diakonia*, 10.

14 David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books., 1991), 80.

15 Johannes J. Kritzinger, Peter G. J. Meiring and Willem A. Saayman, *On being witnesses* (Johannesburg: Orion Publishers, Halfway House, 1994), 3, cited in Attie van Niekerk, ‘Dabar as Word and Deed: Exploring the Relation Between Helping Those in Need and Winning People for Christ’, in *Diaconia: Acts, Understanding and Stories in a Pluralistic Southern Africa*, ed. Johannes Knoetze and Jacques W. Beukes (Wellington, [South Africa]: Barnabas Academic Publishers, 2024), 79.

By internalising the values and experiences gained through diakonia, individuals can integrate these principles into their daily lives, thereby reflecting God's grace and justice in the world.<sup>16</sup>

From an African theological point of view, Mercy Amba Oduyoye emphasised that the role of the church and its ministry is to actively participate in God's mission to bring about systemic change. This calls for a shift away from a charity-based service toward one that aims for justice, empowerment, dignity, lasting relationships, and societal transformation.<sup>17</sup> In the same way, African theologian Emmanuel Twesigye further emphasises the church's role in advocating for systemic change, moving beyond mere charity to engage in actions that promote justice and liberation.<sup>18</sup>

*“This means that as the church is called to partake in the missio Dei, its work must be holistic, oriented towards the Father, in loving custodianship of the earth, and in fellowship with all humanity in caring for the vulnerable and the poor. However, being rooted in the reign of Christ moves this beyond mere charity*

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16 Johan Pillay, ‘The Significance of Social Justice and Diakonia in the Reformed Tradition’, In *Die Skriflig* 56, no. 4 (2022): 5.

17 Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 122.

18 Samuel K. Elolia, Afeosemimo U. Adogame, and Emmanuel Twesigye, eds., ‘The Church and State Conflict in Uganda: Presidential Idi Amin Kills the Anglican Archbishop’, in *Religion, Conflict, and Democracy in Modern Africa: The Role of Civil Society in Political Engagement*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, Or.: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 148–92; see even Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarch* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 199.



or acts of mercy, lending a political and social dimension to the diaconate of the Church ‘that includes matters such as structural injustice, human dignity, and much more’<sup>19</sup>

This statement affirms what *Diakonia in Context*, published by the Lutheran World Federation, envisions as diakonia. This document unfolds diakonia as a multifaceted ministry that encompasses short-term emergency action, long-term engagement, advocacy for justice, and empowerment at the congregational and institutional levels.<sup>20</sup> Diakonia focuses on empowerment and transformative justice.<sup>21</sup> More recently, the concept of diakonia has also been applied to environmental care. As climate change and environmental degradation threaten the entire ecosystem, the call to diakonia will also embrace an ecological dimension.<sup>22</sup> In this vein, diakonia must provide ways for a church that seeks to empower people in need and to pave the way for the realisation of their agency. Such an understanding of diakonia cannot accept that the church is

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19 Yolande Steenkamp and Nadia von Wielligh, ‘Diaconia, Social Work and Sustainable Development: Beyond Pragmatics to a Dialogue of Normative Frameworks’, in *Diaconia: Acts, Understanding and Stories in a Pluralistic Southern Africa*, ed. Johannes Knoetze and Jacques W. Beukes (Wellington, [South Africa]: Barnabas Academic Publishers, 2024), 322.

20 *Diakonia in Context*, 8, 9, 62.

21 Knut Nordstokke, ‘Ecumenical Diakonia: Responding to the Signs of the Times’, *The Ecumenical Review* 66, no. 3 (2014): 269.

22 See Kuzipa Nalwamba and Teddy C. Sakupapa, ‘Ecology and Fellowship (Koinonia): A Community of Life’, in *The Church in God’s Household: Protestant Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ecology*, ed. Clive W. Ayre and Emilie M. Conradie, with Kate Davies (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2016), 75–93.

the donor “for the poor” rather than the facilitator of empowerment “with the poor.” *Diakonia in Context* argues, furthermore, that a charity approach “tends to be paternalistic and alienating, as it is organised according to what benefits and serves the needs of the helpers. In Latin America, this practice is often called ‘asistencialismo,’ as its aim is to assist, and not to give space for equality and mutuality.”<sup>23</sup>

Stéphan van der Watt interprets the distinction between the church for others and the church with others as the difference between charity and the ministry of “truly empowering and transforming marginalised communities,” which we define here as diakonia.<sup>24</sup> With Michael Biehl, we claim: “This could even be understood as a decolonising approach, as it can dissolve the distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’, a binary that is strongly entrenched in traditional mission paradigms and in diaconia understood as charity.”<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, as South African theologian Molefe Tsele, cited in *Diakonia in Context*, holds: “We must resist the tendency to turn charity into a dirty word. God is charitable to his entire creation. Society as a whole needs to be made more charitable.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, there is a (limited) contribution of charity at the bottom of a diaconical developmental hierarchy:

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23 *Diakonia in Context*, p. 49.

24 Van der Watt, *Transforming Diaconia*, 114 (FN 3).

25 Michael Biehl, ‘Diaconia as a Practice of Hospitality?’, in *Diaconia: Acts, Understanding and Stories in a Pluralistic Southern Africa*, ed. Johannes Knoetze and Jacques W. Beukes (Wellington, [South Africa]: Barnabas Academic Publishers, 2024), 160.

26 Johannesburg report, p. 54, as cited in *Diakonia in Context*, 49.

“First-generation projects can be characterised as charity (to give people fish), second-generation projects teach people how to fish for themselves, and third-generation projects involve lobbying authorities (alongside those learning to catch fish) to advocate for changes in existing legislation and policies that exclude or oppress homeless people.”<sup>27</sup>

Thus, charity as part of a comprehensive concept of diakonia can have its actual benefits, especially in emergency situations when immediate help is needed. Nevertheless, charity as a short-term relief and a tool for reinforcing inequalities must never replace or marginalise practices that aim at long-lasting and justice-oriented impact on society (diakonia). True philanthropic service aims at community and justice. Community-based diakonia fosters inclusiveness and mutuality in addressing the challenges of suffering and injustice. It affirms the value of doing things together and the conviction that all persons are gifted and able to participate in working for what is good and right. It resembles the African saying: “If you want to hurry, walk alone. If you want to go far, walk together.”<sup>28</sup>

In short, Diakonia encompasses charitable acts, but it extends far beyond such short-term relief practices. As part of God’s mission to the world (*missio dei*), diakonia intends

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27 Jacques W. Beukes, ‘Can Engaged Scholarship Be Regarded as Diaconia? A Critical Investigation of Theological Academic Institutions’ Community Engagement Projects and Diaconia’, in *Diaconia: Acts, Understanding and Stories in a Pluralistic Southern Africa*, ed. Johannes Knoetze and Jacques W. Beukes (Wellington, [South Africa]: Barnabas Academic Publishers, 2024), 337.

28 Diakonia in Context, 49.

to work for systemic transformation that does not follow the model of the church *for* others, but the church *with* others. Diakonia is a collaborative ministry that aims to empower everyone involved in diaconical practices, not reinforcing the difference between donor and receiver, but implementing mutuality, solidarity, and equality.

## **Practices of Diakonia in the Church**

According to *Theological Perspectives on Diakonia in 21st Century*, diakonia encompasses a wide range of services, including advocacy, education, and healthcare, rooted in the historical commitment to serving others.<sup>29</sup> According to the Lambeth Conference of 1998, the Anglican church expresses its call to mission through the Five Marks of Mission.

1. *“To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom*
2. *To teach, baptise and nurture new believers*
3. *To respond to human need by loving service*
4. *To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation*

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29 ‘Theological Perspectives on Diakonia in 21st Century’, World Council of Churches, 2012, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/theological-perspectives-on-diakonia-in-21st-century>.

5. *To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth*<sup>30</sup>

These marks are also applicable beyond the Anglican Communion, as they outline five dimensions of holistic mission that delineate the scope of a Lutheran or Ecumenical vision of the church's calling to holistic mission and its practice.<sup>31</sup> Especially marks 3 – 5 are of particular relevance. The third mark emphasises diaconal and charitable work, as it demonstrates compassionate care for others in their needs. It emphasises the Christian duty to actively engage in practical acts of compassion and service to alleviate human suffering. It encompasses activities such as providing food, shelter, healthcare, and education to those in need, irrespective of their background or circumstances. The fourth mark is to transform unjust societal structures, challenge all forms of violence, and actively pursue peace and reconciliation. A recent publication and joint statement by ACT Alliance and World Council of Churches (WCC) voices a call to such transformation as a realisation of ecumenical

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30 Anglican Communion Office, 'Anglican Communion: Marks of Mission', Anglican Communion Website, accessed 16 July 2025, <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>.

31 Cf. Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment: An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Mission (Geneva, Switzerland: Lutheran World Federation, Dept. for Mission and Development, 2004); Jooseop Keum, ed., Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes: With a Practical Guide (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches Publications, 2013); see Jörg Zehelein, Die Bedeutung der Gemeinschaft der Glaubenden für Mission eine Studie zu theologischen Perspektiven aus Wissenschaft und missionarischer Gemeinde, Missionswissenschaftliche Forschungen (Neuendettelsau: Erlanger Verlag für Mission und Ökumene, 2018), 67.

diakonia.<sup>32</sup> This principle implies that a comprehensive concept of diakonia extends beyond charity, encompassing advocacy and activism for social justice. It calls for addressing the root causes of poverty, inequality, and violence through systemic change. It is about getting involved in advocating for human rights, promoting peacebuilding initiatives, and confronting issues such as ethnic conflicts, political oppression, and economic injustices. This can involve challenging power imbalances and advocating for the rights of vulnerable groups, recognising that true diakonia extends beyond immediate aid to address the root causes of inequality.<sup>33</sup> This evolves into what Rudelmar Bueno de Faria recently termed “Diakonia as Public Service and Public Witness,” i.e., diaconical practices that are public, or in other words, political.<sup>34</sup> African womanist theologian Oduyoye reflects on how women in African communities engage in diakonia by supporting one another through various challenges, including economic hardships, health issues, and social injustices. She says that “we need to take on our share in enabling others to recover their worth as women and to empower other women to survive and struggle against

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32 ACT Alliance and World Council of Churches, *Called to Transformation – Ecumenical Diakonia* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 2022), <https://actalliance.org/act-news/diakonia/>.

33 Kuruvilla C. Abraham, ‘Chapter 7: From Diakonia to Political Responsibility – Religion Online’, *Religion Online*, n.d., accessed 16 July 2025, <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-7-from-diakonia-to-political-responsibility/>.

34 Rudelmar B. de Faria, ‘Diakonia as Public Service and Public Witness’, in *The Diaconal Church*, First edition, ed. Stephanie Dietrich et al., with Martin Junge (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2019), 251–64.

justice.”<sup>35</sup> This approach to diakonia builds on a radical spirituality dedicated to transforming sinful social structures and liberating their victims.

Finally, the fifth mark is to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, i.e., to care for the natural environment. This principle underscores the stewardship role of Christians who are called to preserve life and promote environmentally friendly, sustainable practices. It recognises the interconnectedness between environmental health and human well-being. As Isaiah Kipyegon Toroitich and Guillermo Kerber hold, Diakonia is intricately connected with concerns for sustainability in the face of climate change. In this regard, diakonia has “a broader understanding, looking not only at human beings but at the whole creation, which is under threat.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, practices of environmental care and preservation of life on this earth are part of the Christian calling to service, as African theologians Kuzipa Nalwamba and Teddy Chalwe Sakupapa argue.<sup>37</sup>

Together, these marks illustrate a holistic approach to mission and a comprehensive concept of diakonia that integrates immediate acts of charity with long-term commitments to social justice and empowerment, as well as taking action for environmental preservation.

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35 Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 199.

36 Isaiah Kipyegon Toroitich and Guillermo Kerber, ‘Diakonia, Sustainability, and Climate Change’, *The Ecumenical Review* 66, no. 3 (October 2014): 288.

37 Nalwamba and Sakupapa, *Ecology and Fellowship*, 83.

## **The Annual Mission Week in the Evangelical Lutheran Church – Morogoro Diocese**

### *Methodological Remarks*

This study utilised a qualitative research approach to explore the AMW of ELCT-MD and its understanding and realisation of diakonia. For that, the lived experiences and perceptions of pastors responsible for organising and overseeing the AMW were at the centre of attention.

Fifteen participants were selected through purposive sampling to create relevant and rich data. The sample consisted of only pastors who are responsible for organising and managing the AMW. These facilitators offer a unique perspective on the spiritual and operational aspects of diakonia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data, ensuring that discussions remained focused on key themes related to participants' understanding, experiences, and expectations of diakonia during the AMW. Data collected from the interviews was analysed thematically, which involved identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The process of data collection and analysis adhered to ethical standards, which included obtaining informed consent from all participants, maintaining confidentiality, and implementing a data security protocol. This approach allowed for a nuanced exploration of the understanding of diakonia expressed by the AMW of ELCT-MD. The extent to which diakonia is mistaken for charity is particularly relevant in this context. Furthermore, factors of the possible conflation of diakonia with charity and helpful approaches for fostering an



appropriate understanding of diakonia ministry through the AMW were addressed. The findings of this qualitative study were discussed from the perspectives of both theological and practical understandings of diakonia. By integrating both empirical research and theological discourse, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis that addresses the complexities of diakonia, as represented in the AMW.

### *Diakonia in the ELCT – Morogoro Diocese*

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania runs a Mission and Evangelism department. This is committed to holistic human service, including evangelism, education, health ministry, and diakonia, among other support activities.<sup>38</sup> ELCT-MD embraces the same approach. This diocese considers diakonia a central part of the church's mission. In the 5-Year Strategic Plan 2018-2023, “Diaconal Services Outreach” is one of seven main areas that need improvement.<sup>39</sup> This is primarily concerned with healthcare, including the management and establishment of health centres, health education, and health services. Furthermore, it wants to “implement a diocese-wide Good Samaritan week for the benefit of those in need in our community.” This Good Samaritan week is another label for the AMW, which this article addresses. These health initiatives, termed diaconical services, are seen in company with social justice initiatives and ministries for gender justice

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38 Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, Mission and Evangelism, n.d., <https://elct.or.tz/index.php/mission-and-evangelism/>.

39 ‘5 Years Strategic Plan 2018 -2023’ (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania – Morogoro Diocese, 2018). A new strategic plan beyond 2023 is not available.

(especially advocacy). While the 5 Years Strategic Plan distinguishes between diakonia and social or gender justice, the secretary of planning and development in ELCT-MD reported that Diakonia ministry initiatives involve the “Women Power” project to empower prostitute women economically, alongside healthcare services such as Mkulazi and Kiganila dispensary located at Ngerengere and advocacy programs like “Girls with a Purpose project” and “Kimbilio House” to rescue women and young girls who are facing gender violence together with fighting against early marriage, genital mutilation and promote gender equality. Additionally, the ELCT-MD introduced the AMW, which the members of the organisational team run every year in October.<sup>40</sup> Despite some terminological incongruencies, it becomes clear that diakonia includes or intricately ties in with issues of health services, social justice, and advocacy work. Environmental aspects are not explicitly mentioned.

### *Agenda of the Annual Mission Week*

Through the AMW, the organisers reach out to remote areas within ELCT-MD. They hold that these communities are in particular need of the proclamation of the Christian gospel, as they claim to have limited exposure to it, and that there is a specific need for diakonia work. These efforts are coordinated by the Mission and Evangelism department under the Assistant Bishop's office. The AMW is a significant event among the activities of ELCT-MD throughout the year. It provides an opportunity for the church community to

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with the Secretary of Planning and Development in the ELCT Morogoro Diocese on 11th May 2024.

come together in solidarity and service. In terms of diakonia, the event emphasises charitable acts such as distributing food and clothing to those in need. This is remarkable, as the general concept of diakonia within the diocese's ministry is quite broad and holistic. By narrowly focusing on charity, which in Swahili is referred to as “matendo ya hisani,” the AMW does not launch or introduce programmes that foster sustainable community development, education, healthcare access, environmental preservation, and economic empowerment, despite labelling the AMW’s efforts as diakonia.

### *The Conflation of Diakonia and Charity During Annual Mission Week in the ELCT Morogoro Diocese*

Despite the crucial role of diakonia ministry, which encompasses advocacy, education, transformation, environmental care, reconciliation, and empowerment, its understanding is often limited, as exemplified by the AMW and its charitable practices, such as distributing clothes and food to those in need in the ELCT-MD. This conflation becomes evident in how the mission week is perceived and executed, often prioritising immediate relief over sustainable community development. The mission week falls short of fully embodying the transformative potential of diakonia, which is intended to address systemic issues and promote social and ecological transformation. The following sections explore this issue of the conflation of diakonia with charity in terms of the factors contributing to the conflation or misunderstanding.

## **Factors Contributing to the Conflation of Diakonia with Charity**

### *Lack of Understanding of Diakonia*

A high number of respondents' answers revealed that the concept of carrying out philanthropic activities during the AMW is often too narrow, focusing solely on charity. Many organisers of the AMW view diakonia solely as charitable acts, such as distributing food and clothes, and as an appendix to preaching the word of God. Some respondents point out this discrepancy. Respondent (R) 1 pointed out that people often fail to understand that diakonia should aim for lasting positive change, not just meeting immediate needs. R2, R3, and R6 emphasised that a lack of understanding of the comprehensive concept of diakonia results in a focus on immediate material support rather than transformation or empowerment. R14 illustrated that true diakonia involves not just preaching but engaging and teaching the community for holistic growth. This lack of a comprehensive understanding hinders the execution of activities such as empowerment, advocacy, and transformation during Mission Week (R1 interviewed on 20th Sept 2024, R6 interviewed on 15th Oct 2024, and R14 interviewed on 4th Mar 2025). Respondent R8 and R5 pointed out that while preaching and distributing material aid might meet immediate needs, empowerment and advocacy often don't take place because the focus remains on short-term charity. Nevertheless, respondents R10 and R4 noted that empowerment or advocacy would occur occasionally, such as when specific community issues, like family conflicts or

gender injustices, were addressed. However, these instances are the exception, not the norm (R8 interviewed on 16th Oct 2024, R5 interviewed on 15th Oct 2024, R10 interviewed on 15th Jan 2025, and R4 interviewed on 9th Oct 2024). In summary, one aspect of the conflation of diakonia with charity in the AMW is the lack of a comprehensive understanding of diakonia.

### *Resource Constraints*

Another critical issue identified is the lack of resources necessary to carry out more extensive diakonia activities, such as empowerment programs or advocacy efforts. Many respondents agreed that these activities require specialists, funding, and long-term commitment, which are often unavailable for the organisers of the AMW. R7 and R8 expressed that limited funds and resources mean the church can only focus on what can be accomplished within a short timeframe, i.e., preaching and distributing goods. R15 also mentioned that while the church has occasionally managed to organise special activities, such as providing free legal or health services, this has been rare and costly. This issue is complicated by the fact that diakonia, especially in the sense of empowerment and transformation, requires professionals like health workers, counsellors, and educators, whose services can be expensive and difficult to secure for a one-week event (R7 interviewed on 15th Oct 2024, R8 interviewed on 16th Oct 2024, and R15 interviewed 5th Mar 2025). Funding, therefore, is a critical issue regarding the implementation of the full agenda of diakonia.

## *Socio-political transformation as a task of the Government*

Both R5 and R15 clearly emphasise a differentiation of roles between the church and the government regarding social engagement. R5 explained that empowerment, advocacy, and community development are viewed as social matters and are considered the responsibility of the government. Therefore, the church would not prioritise these activities during the AMW. The church provides community service to some extent only to demonstrate God's love by giving the needy clothes, food, etc. (R5 interviewed 15th Oct 2024). Echoing R5's perspective, R15 emphasises that the church cannot take on every responsibility because the government exists to manage necessary social changes. The church shall focus on its spiritual role, while the government handles social matters in the communities (R15 interviewed 5th Mar 2025). These voices convey the conviction among some AMW organisers that profound socio-political engagement is not the task of the church, but rather of the state.

## *Lack of Long-Term Planning and Impact*

Several respondents emphasised that the AMW lacks long-term. They suggested that a deeper engagement with community needs, including follow-up and continued support, is essential for fostering real change. R6 noted that there is rarely any follow-up after the AMW to assess the long-term impact on the community, thus failing to create sustainable change. R9 argued that with better preparation, the AMW could have more structured programs aimed at

empowering the community economically. But this requires careful planning and long-term commitment. Without these considerations, as R6 and R9 indicate, the activities of the AMW remain limited in scope and impact, failing to move beyond charity to sustainable transformation (R6 interviewed 15th Oct 2024, and R9 interviewed 4th Nov 2024). According to these inputs, the AMW appears as an isolated event in the year with no commitment to an agenda before or after that particular week.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The findings reveal several factors contributing to the conflation of diakonia with charity during the AMW. First, there is a lack of understanding of diakonia, according to which many respondents believe that diakonia merely consists of charitable acts, such as distributing food and clothing. Second, resource constraints, such as a lack of funds and/or professionals, hinder the implementation of comprehensive programs. Third, cultural and institutional factors are barriers to addressing deeper community issues, e.g., a culture of silence about being in need. Fourth, some respondents view the church as having only a limited responsibility, as the state is responsible for social transformation. Finally, a lack of long-term planning and impact is another reason why diakonia is conflated with charity during the AMW.

## Discussion

The finding revealed that the ELCT-MD, in their entire strategy and vision, despite being silent about the ecological dimension, embraces a quite comprehensive concept of diakonia. The AMW, however, embodies a misunderstanding of diakonia. In response to the reduction of diakonia to charity, scholars and ecumenical statements from around the world, including those from Africa, have argued that diakonia must involve much more. As we outlined above, diakonia should encompass systemic change and empowerment, as well as social, political, and ecological transformation. It shall shift from short-term relief to long-term solutions. Oduyoye, furthermore, asserts that true diakonia involves engaging communities in ways that promote self-reliance and social justice.<sup>41</sup> This perspective resonates with R1's observation that diakonia should strive for lasting positive change rather than merely addressing immediate needs. Without a deeper understanding of diakonia's goals, community members may miss opportunities to engage in initiatives that foster genuine empowerment and transformation. Acts of charity, which in the case of the AMW are clearly no emergency supply, are in danger of turning out to become "toxic charity" (Lupton). This critique is echoed in the findings, where respondents, such as R6 and R14, emphasise the need for diakonia to engage in advocacy and education, which involves teaching and community engagement that fosters self-reliance and empowerment among the people being served. Another

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41 Oduyoye 1995, 45.



aspect is the ecological dimension. The most recent WCC's official statement of mission, *Together Towards Life*, voices a profound call to care for the environment. African scholars like Nalwamba and Sakupapa call for the inclusion of the preservation of nature into a concept of diakonia.<sup>42</sup> Neither the 5-Year Strategic Plan of ELCT-MD nor the AMW pays particular attention to this dimension of diakonia. The fifth mark of mission of the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church seems to be neglected. This ecological gap between ELCT-MD and the AMW stands out as one significant concern, namely the lack of a comprehensive understanding of diakonia, shared by the organisers of the AMW (and the ELCT-MD).

The AMW could serve as an integral part of a comprehensive strategy of diakonia. Still, it falls short in its potential for long-term impact without sustained efforts to integrate its ideals into ongoing community engagement. Here, the lack of long-term planning is a crucial factor. While the format of the AMW is undoubtedly limited in its capacity to produce long-term impact within a couple of days, it can still serve as an opportunity to catalyse awareness and engagement. This week could raise awareness about the broader principles of diakonia, serving as a platform for presenting good-practice examples and encouraging community members to reflect on their roles in promoting justice, empowerment, and care for creation. By initiating discussions and activities around these themes, the mission week could spark interest in ongoing efforts beyond the

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42 Keum (ed.), *Together Towards Life*.

event itself. A sustained commitment to follow up on the ideas and initiatives introduced or represented during this week could help to exploit the potential for lasting change.

The findings highlight a critical issue regarding resource constraints that hinder the execution of comprehensive diakonia activities, such as empowerment programs and advocacy efforts. Respondents noted that the focus during the AMW often centres on immediate actions, such as distributing goods, predominantly due to limited funding and resources (R7, R8, R15). This situation reflects the broader challenge of balancing short-term relief with long-term strategic initiatives in church activities. Recognising that meaningful change cannot occur in just one week, it is essential to establish ongoing initiatives that run throughout the year, focusing on specific community needs. David McCullough calls for a church that is ready to cooperate with organisations and professionals to implement sustainable transformation.<sup>43</sup> This approach is echoed in the findings, where the respondents indicated that specialists, such as health workers and counsellors, are essential for successful empowerment initiatives but are often unavailable or too costly during a one-week event. The lack of funds is a serious problem, as many respondents mentioned. Nevertheless, the existing funds available for buying or collecting food and clothes are evidence that there is, however limited, potential.

The findings reveal that some respondents (R5, R15) regard the state as responsible for social or political

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43 David McCullough, 'The Role of the Church in Community Development', *Journal of Urban Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2004): 115.

transformation. This division is challenged by arguments presented by theologians like David J. Bosch, who contends that the church must actively engage in political issues rather than relegating them entirely to governmental authorities. Bosch argues that the church's mission should transcend mere charity, advocating for justice and systemic change as a fundamental aspect of its calling.<sup>44</sup> The same idea is taken up by the aforementioned Rudelmar Bueno de Faria, who calls for a public witness of diakonia. Furthermore, Oduyoye emphasises that the church's mission involves an active partnership with the community in addressing social or political issues, reinforcing the idea that the church should not shy away from its responsibility in advocacy.<sup>45</sup> The findings suggest a reluctance to adopt this broader understanding, which may limit the church's potential to effect positive change in society.

## Conclusion

The AMW has a long tradition and is a crucial part of the ELCT-MD's annual agenda. This week-long activity aims to proclaim the Gospel and serve people in need. Our research has revealed that this service, however, is limited and, at worst, harmful. Despite the claim that what happens during the AMW is diakonia, it is predominantly charity. This can turn into toxic charity (Lupton) if there is no comprehensive concept of diakonia that aims at the

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44 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books., 1991), 370.

45 Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 58.

sustainable transformation of individuals, communities, and the preservation of the environment. This research has identified several factors that explain the conflation of diakonia with charity by the organisers of the AMW. These are the lack of understanding of diakonia, resource constraints, an apolitical definition of the church's role in society, and a lack of long-term planning and impact. This study underscores the need for a paradigm shift towards a comprehensive understanding of diakonia that integrates individual and communal empowerment, social justice, community development, and environmental care. Key areas of focus for the AMW should include economic empowerment, environmental care, gender equality, and human rights advocacy. By integrating a comprehensive approach into the AMW, churches can effectively address systemic issues and foster long-term transformation within communities. Collaborating with local organisations will enhance the efforts and create a network of support. By re- envisioning its role, the ELCT can embody the true essence of diakonia, aligning compassion, justice, and ecology as integral components of its diaconical calling. This strategy enables the church to capitalise on the awareness generated during the AMW, thereby building momentum for ongoing initiatives that truly embody the principles of diakonia.

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