

## Lack as an Advantage

### Christian Ministry in the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren between the Organisation and its Network

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#### Abstract:

The article, on the basis of archival documents and interviews with the actors of the events, represents the Christian ministry in the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren and its development especially after the communist coup in the second half of the 20th century. It follows the key characteristics which are based on neighbourhood, reciprocity, and community. Consequently, it applies this empirical form of congregational diakonia to the theological discussion about the process of church diakonia and it suggests possible perspectives for the development of congregational diakonia and reflections on the societal contribution of churches within the sociological paradigm of 'network society'. In such a society, the power of Christian ministry does not lie in organised activities but in the social capital of the church.

**Keywords:** Christian ministry, diakonia, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, community work, the Church in the form of diakonia, network society

Christian ministry is a designation for diaconal work in the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (further referred to as ECCB). Its form has developed in a very limited structure after the forced liquidation of organised diakonia after 1948. The Regulations for Diaconia and Its Work of the ECCB (*Řád diakonické práce ČCE*), published in 1998, understands this activity as a fundamental form of diakonia which 'has its foundation in parish congregations'. It is referred to as 'care carried out within the ECCB congregations', and it is 'largely provided by volunteers'.<sup>1</sup> At the present time (influenced by the growth of the organised Diaconia of the ECCB), we can observe the decline of Christian ministry in congregations and the helplessness of the Church leadership in the area of further direction. Therefore, in this article, we will first introduce diakonia. Then we will link the discussion about congregational diakonia and the diaconal Church (as developed by theologians in the 20th century in the ecumenical scope). In the end, we will try to contribute to the vision of congregational diakonia in the 21st century and to the theoretical framework for its reflection.

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1 © *Řád diakonické práce ČCE* (online), available at: <http://www.evangelnet.cz/cce/czr/rdp.html>, cited 5<sup>th</sup> May 2018.

## Christian Ministry in the ECCB

Abigail Hudcová summarises the activities of Christian ministry in the era of socialism in this way:

Christian ministry focused on the members of the Church (or of the congregation) in need. It mapped the situation of the Church members and focused primarily on the old and the abandoned. It organised bazaars and collections in some congregations. Then it used raised money for financial help for the needy, or for presents (for people who were celebrating their anniversary). Using this money, it also provided entertainment for various congregational or elders meetings, etc.<sup>2</sup>

This quantitative enumeration can be supplemented by the concept of Christian ministry in the contemporary text. It is a Circular of the Church-wide Advisory Department for Christian Ministry (Oběžník celocírkevního poradního odboru křesťanské služby) signed by the chairman F. M. Dobiáš and the secretary E. Zelený in 1966.

Since a certain time, our Church has had no constitutions or other facilities to exercise Christian ministry, our congregations can practice only the helping activities called help among neighbours. It is an effort to help people in our congregation and in the neighbourhood who are in trouble not only because they are sick (or disabled due to their age) but also because they are in some other situation, and they need help. This is the immediate Christian ministry. Our congregations are challenged by the Scripture to fulfil this duty which is based Christian fellowship. Moreover, Christian ministry creates this fellowship, and it belongs to the essence of Christian testimony. Christian testimony, especially today, is unconvincing unless it is accompanied by this unpretending, loving interest in neighbours who are in trouble or in need.

This ministry should therefore be a natural, effortless, and obvious manifestation of congregational life. This does not mean that it should be done by chance. It needs to be done in a planned, thoughtful and organised way if one wants it to be effective. This is not against the Holy Spirit who certainly leads to a well-done ministry. It is best if there are several brothers and sisters in the congregation who strive to know about everyone in need. Their task is then to find them in the congregation. If they cannot help themselves, they should find someone who will provide this help.

Today, we learn to understand that our congregations, of course, must not be focused on themselves. They should be a place where members are awakened and educated in order to serve people in every place, not only in the congregation but also outside. We also learn to understand that our time and society undergoes great social changes. While changing, it is a source of new troubles that have not been known before. The family no longer fulfils all the functions that it has performed before. (...)

On the other hand, today's society is replacing most of the old-style Christian ministry in the area of caring. Yet even today there are people who need help. Our congregations should know about those people. They should look for ways to help them. In this way, they should educate their members. They should teach them to keep their eyes open for the troubles of today's world, and to find a common way to help wherever needed. They will obey their Lord this way.<sup>3</sup>

The quoted text can be easily understood as a summary and interpretation of the issue of congregational diakonia in the ECCB. The circular begins with a look back at the past, specifically with

2 © Českobratrská církev evangelická. *Průvodce čili baedeker*, p. 63 (online), available at: [https://www.evangelnet.cz/files/831-cce\\_pruvodce\\_cili\\_baedeker.pdf](https://www.evangelnet.cz/files/831-cce_pruvodce_cili_baedeker.pdf), cited 5<sup>th</sup> May 2018.

3 *Oběžník Poradního odboru křesťanské služby z 13. 1. 1966 seniorátním a sborovým odborům křesťanské služby*, Central Archives of the ECCB (Ústřední archiv ČCE), Amendments to the Archive Fund of ECCB (Dodatky k archivnímu fondu SR ČCE, PO KS), unsorted material.

reference to the time when the Church administered facilities and institutes in the area of diakonia (for example, in 1918 it took over six orphanages). Increasing attention to the social issue in the Church is evidenced by the gradual establishment of social departments at various levels, ranging from parish congregations,<sup>4</sup> to the establishment of the Social Care Centre (Ústředí sociální péče) with a six-member committee in 1939. The 1940 report talks about 11 institutes, three shelters for adolescents and one home for seniors.

However, it is still necessary to add the activity of the association Czech Diacona (Česká diakonie).<sup>5</sup> It was founded in 1903 on an interdenominational basis and on the principle of an association of diakonia branches according to the German model. The work of these branches is described by the subtitle of the name of the association: 'established for the care of the sick and the poor' (after the First World War it was the 'evangelical society for the care of patients and social care'). Diaconia branches, associated around their home base in Prague, focused on nursing in hospitals and homes. Czech Diacona was originally built on a panreformation basis. However, in 1924 there is a note saying that the association now links only the diakonia branches of Czech Brethren. The reason was that after the establishment of an independent republic in 1918, individual churches began to establish their own organisations, and part of the diakonia branches joined them. After the communists came to power, the activity of these associations was cancelled. The activity of Czech Diacona was incorporated into the structures of the ECCB Social Care Centre (Ústředí sociální péče ČCE) first. During the 1950s, organised church social work (homes, shelters, etc.) was gradually phased out. This period culminated in 1960 when the Church's retirement homes had to be handed over to the state.

In order to understand the self-concept of Christian ministry in the ECCB, it is important to know how this forced externality is viewed and evaluated inside the Church itself. This assessment – at least as far as the statements in the written documents are concerned – is positive. While this can be understood (in the context of the period) as an attempt to adapt to the communist regime, legitimate theological accents also come into play. In the 1949 annual report, Stříteský understands the new situation as a return to apostolic practice in which there were no Church facilities of institutional care type. Emphasis is placed on congregational social work based on the reference in the Bible of Gal 6:2 ('Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.'). The state of diakonia incorporated into the Church is seen as the desired situation. It is a counterbalance to the state social welfare system: 'Following the example of the first church, congregational social care is a necessary complement to the pastoral care given by the pastor and the elders. It has its place even with the existence of more developed state welfare.'<sup>6</sup>

Christian ministry departments are being created not at church level but also at elders and congregational level. Congregational diakonia is understood as an auxiliary congregational ministry or as help among neighbours. In particular, it searches for people in need within the church and coordinates help. Minutes created during the meeting of the Headquarters of Social Care (Zápis

4 Thus, in 1924, the church regulations of social departments were created. In 1935, these words were added: 'A social work department is established in each congregation.' This document also specifies the areas of action for these departments including, for example, education for social justice. The regulations were newly updated in 1938, and in 1941 they were replaced by the Regulations for Social Care (Řád pro sociální péči), which talks about congregational, elders, and central social departments.

5 For those who are interested in a deeper understanding of the history of Czech Diacona, the following publications can be recommended: Vlastimil JAŠA, *Co církev udělala na poli sociálně ethickém v období 1918–1938*, a thesis written as part of the second professional examination in social theology at Comenius Protestant Theological Faculty in Prague, 1956; Daniel MATOUŠ, *Dějiny české diakonické práce*, a thesis written as a part of the second professional examination at ETF UK in Prague, 1994; Josef SMOLÍK, Die tschechische (böhmische) Diakonie, in: *Beiträge zur ostdeutschen Kirchengeschichte*, (BOKG) Folge 5, Münster, 2002, pp. 124–130.

6 Minutes created during the meeting of the Headquarters of Social Care (Zápis z Ústředí sociální péče), 15<sup>th</sup> March 1948, Archive Fund (Archivní fond SR ČCE, VII L 2, 1940–1978).

z Ústředí sociální péče) (13/5/1949) mention some of the areas of social work: a visiting service for patients in hospitals, visits to institutions for the blind (reading, accompaniment to worship), care for evangelical children from institutions (e.g., accompaniment to Sunday school), help for old people (e.g., with the household), obtaining babysitters during the worship (at that time, this service allowed parents to be focused during the worship), and help with the organisation of bazaars or public collections. In the guidelines sent to the congregations, the aforementioned department emphasises the fact that special assistance is a 'necessary addition' to the congregational work. It also emphasises the need for expertise and cooperation with the public care system and the need for the basis in the form of its own social department.

Professionalism should be guaranteed at least in larger congregations. There should be a paid congregational nurse whose service should be supplemented by part-time workers, volunteers, youth, etc. The 1952 report mentions that such a department existed in 80 congregations of the ECCB, and a circular of the Synod Council (3/12/1952) also calls for the establishment of elders Christian ministry departments. In 1953, the Social Care Center (Ústředí sociální péče) and the Preparation for Christian Ministry Department (odbor Příprava ke křesťanské službě) were merged to form a Christian ministry department (odbor křesťanské služby).

Key concepts for understanding congregational diakonia are community, neighbourhood, and reciprocity. A Circular of the Church-wide Advisory Department for Christian Ministry (13/1/1966) addressed to elders committees and elders departments of Christian ministry, speaks 'about our most natural auxiliary ministry of our congregations, a help to our neighbours'. It is therefore a mutual help to neighbours within the congregation which, however, does not interfere with the need for coordination and organisation. People who are responsible for the congregational diakonia should, primarily, make the congregation sensitive to the social dimension of Christian life. In an undated proposal for a congregational days programme and educational evenings of Christian ministry, it is stated: 'The community is ministry and Christian ministry is a community effort within a congregation.' In 1959, Eugen Zelený reacts to scepticism about the possibility of Christian ministry in the face of advanced state social welfare. He emphasises the foundation and uniqueness of congregational diakonia with the emphasis on 'fraternal fellowship'. The activities of the Christian ministry department, besides joint meetings, focus primarily on organising annual meetings of those interested in the issue. These annual meetings are in the form of Christian ministry days, usually held in Vrbno pod Pradědem. These meetings were more than just training for Christian ministry workers in congregations. Their important element was the act of being together. Their thematic horizon focused not only on the issue of social care and help. It was more broadly aimed at finding forms of Christian action and testimony in everyday life. In other words, the understanding of Christian ministry was not only focused on the elderly and the sick but also on the problems of families, people at 'the peak of their life powers', on how to reach Christian life in its fullness.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, social issues played an important role in the Church in the 1960s. For example, between 1960 and 1963, almost 60 articles were published in the Church press. These articles dealt with the issue of diakonia from a historical, theological, and practical point of view. Jan Šoltész, one of the chairmen of the church-wide advisory department for Christian ministry, recalls the two basic tasks of the appointed Bureau: to initiate local congregational and elders activities and to offer training support. The goal was to show that 'Congregational life is not just

7 For example, the topic of Christian Ministry Days in 1965 was 'The Christian's Responsibility for the Workplace and in the Workplace'. Using the terminology of that time, it was an open topic presenting the Christian relationship to work.

attending worship only. There is a mutual service among members, or help to people outside the church.' According to Šoltész, the basic idea of Christian ministry focuses on the congregation as a 'living community', a 'great family'. A church should be not seen as an organisation that holds worship, lectures or other activities.<sup>8</sup>

In connection with the change in social conditions around 1989, there was some tension between Christian ministry and the newly developing Diaconia of the ECCB. In addition to theological reasons,<sup>9</sup> there was another matter. The first director of the renewed Diaconia, Karel Schwarz, remembers that, especially before 1990, the initiators of Diaconia were often associated with dissent while the representatives of the existing Christian ministry were connected with the normalisation era of the church (and with the form of Christian ministry of that time). Later, it turned out that Diaconia was built by people from the edge of the church rather than by the traditional Protestants.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, Schwarz also notes other facts that show certain 'structural incompatibility' of organised Diaconia and Christian ministry. He says that 'Diaconia and its centres were created in the places where Christian ministry did not work. In the places where Christian ministry was strong, the centres could not be created.' This fact led to an escalation of mutual tension in some places (Schwarz mentions the situation in Ostrava).<sup>11</sup> The 1991 Diaconia Newsletter (*Zpravodaj Diakonie*) presents the following assessment of the first year of the organisation's development:

At the beginning of DIACONIA's work, we wanted to build only new and small facilities. However, the new social situation has given us new, unexpected tasks. We are taking over four large former religious retirement homes (obtained from the state). We participate in helping people who were freed due to amnesty, are imprisoned, the socially unadaptive, mentally unbalanced, disabled, and those who are in some other need.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, at their meeting on 27<sup>th</sup> October 1990, members of the church-wide advisory department for Christian ministry raise critical comments on the status of Diaconia:

The introduction is too exaggerated. After all, Christian ministry and care for the old, abandoned, lonely, sick, disabled, and those otherwise in need is a matter of the congregations. The purpose-built diaconal facility cannot 'provide' it. It should be taken into account that Christian ministry departments have been operating in the Church for many years and should not be subordinate to diakonia. They should be rather associated with it.

The text confirms the fact that representatives of Christian ministry structures – not entirely unjustifiably – perceived some superiority of organised Diaconia. This was caused primarily by the disproportion and growth of its structures in comparison to the congregational diakonia. Also, the Church's attention was increasingly paid to the growing Diaconia whose existence and propagation led to a lower self-confidence of congregational diakonia, delegation of the Church's social responsibility to superior structures (i.e., superior to congregations), or delegation to the state aid

8 Audio recording of an interview with Jan Šoltész, recorded on 27<sup>th</sup> August 2017, author's archive.

9 These are documented in Karel ŠIMR, *Církevní, nebo světská diakonie?*, *Caritas et veritas* 2/2016, pp. 284–298.

10 I follow my personal communication with Karel Schwarz. This comes specifically from his e-mail statement of 25<sup>th</sup> March 2018.

11 Audio recording of an interview with Karel Schwarz, dated 29<sup>th</sup> March 2016, author's archive.

12 Informace o Diakonii, in: *Zpravodaj Diakonie* 1 and 2/1991, p. 2.



system. Consequently, this all led to a declining interest in Christian ministry, declining participation in its meetings, etc. For example, the effort to divide the work of Diaconia and Christian ministry is expressed in the minutes created during the meeting of the Christian ministry department (11/2/1994):

The work of Christian ministry is connected with pastoral work, the work of Diaconia with the business of a medical type ... It is also necessary to set a line between Christian ministry and Diaconia. The Christian ministry's main focus should be in the congregation and its work while Diaconia should be in institutions (even in those with a secular character). The Christian ministry is subsidised voluntarily in congregations, and Diaconia is subsidised by the state and foreign donations.<sup>13</sup>

The process resulted in the abolition of the Christian ministry advisory department by the synod council with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> September 2012.<sup>14</sup> According to Miloš Vavrečka, the last chairman of the church-wide Christian ministry department, this was mainly related to a lack of interest among the members of congregations in the traditional provision of meetings and education by the department. At the same time, however, he emphasises that Christian ministry cannot be built on the reputation of their activities. It has to be built on community and it must grow from the spiritual life of the congregation – and as such does not need a 'department'. Therefore, he sees the recess of the Christian ministry in the context of the weakening and transformation of the congregational life. It also lies in the fact that, in the new social situation, it has not been possible to find a theological foundation and new leadership ideas for the congregational diakonia.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, the extinction of the church-wide Christian ministry department does not mean the end of congregational diakonia.<sup>16</sup> According to the regulation of the church, this is still the basic form of diakonia. However, the real meaning of such diakonia for the church is examined. The possibilities of organising mutual help among neighbours within a particular congregational community (which is, in some way, a natural form of help) are also examined. Certainly, the gradual shrinking of evangelical congregations, and the transformation of the church also play a part in this process. Specifically, the people's church is becoming a church which is a well-arranged core community of those who know and help each other within the congregation without the need for an organisational framework in the form of an institution.

If we tried to characterise the Christian service in the ECCB in some sociological sense, its similarity to the self-supporting group model is useful for this purpose. The church's social responsibility was somehow closed at the beginning. It was related to the confessional distinctiveness of the period after the foundation of the church, to the mentality of the ghetto at the time of 'socialism and its formation', and to identity seeking in relation to Diaconia (as an ecclesiastical organisation which was opened to the outside world). The self-supporting character of Christian ministry, which is aimed at mutual help within the community, is (based on current trends that will be

13 Minutes created during the meeting of the Christian ministry department, 11<sup>th</sup> February 1994, Archival Fund of ECCB (Archivní fond SR ČCE).

14 © Zasedání synodní rady ČCE dne 4<sup>th</sup> September 2012 (online), available at: <https://www.ustredicce.cz/clanek/2677-Zasedani-synodni-rady-ČCE-ze-dne-4-9-2012/index.htm>, cited 9<sup>th</sup> May 2018.

15 Audio recording of an interview with Miloš Vavrečka, created on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2016, author's archive

16 Indeed, in many places there are still relevant advisory departments at elder and congregational level. An example is the activity of the Advisory Department of the West Bohemian Elder (PO KS západočeského seniorátu) which published a publication in 2014 (cf. © 'Hledání diakonického sboru'. Available at: [http://diakonie-zapad.evangelnet.cz/sites/diakonie-zapad.evangelnet.cz/files/hledani\\_diakonického\\_sboru.pdf](http://diakonie-zapad.evangelnet.cz/sites/diakonie-zapad.evangelnet.cz/files/hledani_diakonického_sboru.pdf), cited 5<sup>th</sup> May 2018.

described later) a very significant and ‘modern’ form of diakonia which, instead of relying on state or an organisational type of aid (i.e., the support of large organisations), offers a certain relief to the system in the form of socially limited aid. The specific Czech context, in which Christian service has developed, has also brought some distortions in the form of a strict focus on church members, and an understanding of diakonia as a manifestation of congregational community, and an instrument used for its development. Although this form of diakonia is threatened by the loss of openness, on the other hand it corresponds to the biblical basis in Gal 6:10: ‘Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.’ Traditionally, ‘Christian ministry’ is built on some kind of ‘sisters’ clubs’. These form a mutual community. It is thus possible to perceive them, in a positive way, as a kind of initial groups or – biblically speaking – yeast. But it is especially the question of the place and mission of the Church in a free society that asks for a new approach and development of congregational diakonia.

### Congregational Diakonia and Diaconal Congregation

We have noticed that the forced takeover of diakonia and its work by the church has been perceived (paradoxically) positively in official church documents. According to the church, it was necessary to give diakonia a certain ecclesiastical character. The state, which prevented churches from operating in the public space and forced them to restrict their activities, to operate only in the area of congregations and parishes, and to concentrate only on their own religious life, basically forced churches to think of diakonia as a form of care of their own members. The restored Diaconia (after the coup in 1989) looked at this concept of Christian ministry with some disdain. However, this way carries an important element in it which has become an important topic in the theory of diakonia – it is the idea of a diaconal congregation.

This idea is still perceived as a ‘dangerous memory’ from the beginnings of the Church. It is a call to create a ‘society of a contrast’, a Christian alternative to the prevailing trends based on delegation and social services. Diakonia presenting itself as a sign of the Christian congregation (not as an outward activity) is inherently connected with the beginnings of the Church. It was the mutual help within the first Christian communities that had a great visual effect in ancient society: ‘See how they love each other.’<sup>17</sup> Obviously, this dimension of the Church’s life fell behind in the medieval Church in which the connection of throne and the altar was predominant. It was in this way even in the modern-day state church in which the Christian and civic community were essentially still united. According to Schäfer, in Germany, we can talk about restoring the congregation in the late 19th century when this unity began to crumble. The evangelical pastor Emil Sulze from Dresden called the congregations clear pastoral districts. In his proposal, he divided the mass parish into these pastoral districts. One district consisted of 3,000 to 5,000 people and was managed by one pastor. Then the whole district was divided into 250-member sections each with one presbyter who took care of it pastorally and diaconically.<sup>18</sup> Another significant shift in Germany was the emergence of the Relief Work of the German Evangelical Churches after World War II. It was founded by the Evangelical Church of Germany itself, in addition to the existing Internal Mission on the federal principle. It represented the expression of the fact that diakonia

17 Gerhard K. SCHÄFER, Gemeindediakonie: Geschichtliche Entwicklungen, in: *Nah dran. Werkstattbuch für Gemeindediakonie*, ed. Gerhard K. SCHÄFER, Joachim DETERDING, Barbara MONTAG and Christian ZWINGMANN, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlagsgesellschaft, 2015, p. 203.

18 Ibid., p. 209.

is an essential part of the Church's mission which cannot be delegated to the external elements or used as a means of mission. The first director of the Relief Work of German Evangelical Churches, Eugen Gerstenmaier, saw diakonia as a 'church in action.' He wanted to activate the diakonia of the congregations which was understood as a 'brotherhood in action.' However, the further development of diakonia in Germany (that is, the incorporation of church diakonia and its work in the state welfare structures) did not support this way of thinking. Yet the idea of a diaconal congregation was still developing as an alternative to the prevailing form of the church diakonia within the social state.

In the early 1960s, there was a controversy between Phillipi and Wendland. Paul Philippi pointed out (taking into account his dialectical and christologically justified opinion) that diakonia must be rooted in the congregation. This should be its main contribution to society. Twenty years later, Jürgen Moltmann followed this emphasis in a similar vein. According to Moltmann, the identity of diakonia lies in congregational diakonia (i.e., in diaconal congregations), not in its greater ecclesial character. Another significant ecclesiological approach to diakonia is presented by Ulrich Bach. In his response to Guidelines for the Diaconate and Recommendations for an Action Plan (*Leitlinien zum Diakonat und Empfehlungen zu einem Aktionsplan*), published by the Evangelical Church of Germany in 1975, he distinguished between two terms: the concept of 'social strategy' and the 'Body of Christ' when thinking about diakonia. In the concept of social strategy, we think about service for 'people in need.' If the Church is seen as the Body of Christ, there is a reciprocity (cf. 1 Cor 12: 12ff.). In diakonia, we meet (in principle) at the same level.<sup>19</sup> We consciously rely on Christ – our Deacon, and we also need each other. The question should not only be asked in the sense of how we can help a person in need, but also: What does a person in a situation of greater or lesser reliance on the help of others bring to the community? In what way would the community be poorer without him? In his contribution 'The Diaconal Church as a Free Space for All of Us' ('Die diakonische Kirche als Freiraum für uns alle'), Bach followed Käseman's distinction that says: 'God reveals Himself in the Bible in the same way, as Baal and as Yahweh, as the God of Jesus, or as God who represents himself in the form of gods...'<sup>20</sup> Behind the 'Baal' image is the idea of God of the strong ones. His task is to take away hard situations, to guarantee life happiness, and to maintain stability. Yahweh, by contrast, is the God of the Crucified One. From the point of view of the theology of revelation, we should understand Käseman's statement more as a provocative remark. However, we cannot deny its significant correlations with, for example, Luther's concept of God hidden and revealed, or his theology of glory and theology of cross distinction. Ulrich Bach applies this typology to diakonia. The typology which may be unconsciously based on the 'Baal' as an image of God wants to help all. It is an 'impressive repair shop and for the rest of sad ones, there is a good hope for eternity'.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, diakonia based on Yahweh as an image of God is realised in the mutual service of those who are baptised (and in that way is connected with the Crucified and Resurrected Christ). Through 'the word of the cross' Jesus calls us to follow him in his humiliation. The Church always exists as a collective of patients where there are the sick only (Luther).<sup>22</sup> This suggests that the Church becomes diaconal not only through its activities but also through its confession. If the Church identifies itself with

19 Ulrich BACH, *Boden unter den Füßen hat keiner. Plädoyer für eine solidarische Diakonie*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986, pp. 122–123.

20 Ernst Käseman expressed this idea in a panel discussion at the Evangelical Kirchentag in Hanover in 1967. Cf. BACH, *Boden...*, p. 194.

21 Ibid., p. 198.

22 Ibid., pp. 201–203.



the Father of Jesus Christ, and with God in his humiliation, then it can exist also in the form of a church which is 'down'. In anthropology, this approach emphasises the awareness of human vulnerability and weakness (and the need for their integration into our consciousness<sup>23</sup>), and (in piety) experiencing diakonia of Christ as a prerequisite for our diakonia and such activities.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Marc Edouard Kohler argues that the diaconal congregation begins with the experience of forgiveness in which one experiences himself as a person in need.<sup>25</sup> Although Bach's concept may be perceived as a certain ecclesiological narrowing of diakonia and its implementation in the public sphere (in a secularised society) as debatable, in the field of congregational diakonia (and in the process of the formation of diaconal congregation) it represents a supporting perspective that develops what is specifically Christian. Such an approach exists in our society as a certain counter-culture, and, at the same time, it might act as 'yeast'.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Hermann Steinkamp stated that the programme of the diaconal congregation was broadly endorsed but without significant changes in the practice of parishes and congregations.<sup>26</sup> As we have seen, the application of the desired process of diakonia in the whole church must be understood in at least two forms. First is the idea of the 'church for the others' (Bonhoeffer, Lange), a call for the engagement of the church in diakonia outside. The second is the idea of a diaconal congregation that does not primarily do diakonia but has the character of diakonia within itself. The Church's engagement in diakonia can be seen as a bridge between the Church and society. However, without diakonia within congregations, this bridge would lack supporting columns.<sup>27</sup> As Schäfer summarises, the idea of 'congregation for others' contains risks. Its forces could be wasted in boundless activism and Christian faith could be transformed into mere ethics. Instead of a foundation in mutual help and consciousness of reliance on Christ's diakonia towards us, this approach could lead to the misunderstanding that in diakonia 'it is about dedication to the needy based on the attitude of superior Christian helpers'.<sup>28</sup>

## Community-focused Congregational Diakonia

When we reflected (in the previous chapter) on the development of Christian ministry in the context of a certain theological programme aimed at diakonia (that is, at giving congregations the characteristics of diakonia), we highlighted (in particular) the emphasis on a congregation as a community of help among neighbours (as the Christian ministry in the ECCB was understood in the times of communist persecution). On the other hand, it is necessary to mention that (in a free society situation) this forced closure (as a result of the learned ghetto mentality) has become a stumbling block to the further development of congregational diakonia in the new context. The fact that a congregation owes 'itself' to society cannot be understood (in the context of the diaconal mission of the Church) merely as an invitation to participate in the internal life of the congregation. It must be understood also as the presence and engagement of the congregation as a local Christian community in the public space.

In this sense, according to Steinkamp, there is a special type of diakonia which has been devel-

23 Ibid., p. 208.

24 Ibid., p. 211.

25 Marc Edouard KOHLER, *Diakonie*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1995, p. 28.

26 Hermann STEINKAMP, *Sozialpastoral*, Freiburg i.B.: Lambertus, 1991, p. 134.

27 KOHLER, *Diakonie...*, p. 27.

28 SCHÄFER, *Gemeindediakonie...*, p. 213.

oping in Germany since the 1960s. It is a community-focused diakonia (Gemeinwesendiakonie) presented as a new method of congregational work.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, from the evangelical perspective, Hans-Jürgen Benedict argues that ‘traditional congregational diakonia has evolved (during collaboration with the super-congregational Diaconia and community-based programmes for development) into diakonia focused on a community within the neighbourhood.’<sup>30</sup> It is important for such congregational diakonia to be open to cooperation with other actors in the community – both with the institutional Diaconia and with self-government and civic activities.<sup>31</sup>

This approach was developed in Germany as a specific development of community work (Gemeinwesenarbeit). It is one of the methods of social work which wants people to be able to help themselves. According to Oelschlägel, community work is ‘a social spatial strategy that takes into account the entire urban district, not just the individual. It works with the local resources and inhabitants to overcome their deficits.’<sup>32</sup> The formation of community work is related to the social changes at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, specifically to the development of industry and related social problems. These problems emerged due to the collapse of family and neighbourhood support networks in big cities. In the American and European cities, there were initiatives to change the situation of people in slums. Such actions often started in the ecclesial environment, and they were often done in cooperation with these people in need. These initiatives are known as the settlement movement (the first was Toynbee Hall in London in 1884, then Hull House in Chicago in 1889, and Volksheim in Hamburg in 1901). In Europe, community work appeared to be a more important topic later, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was inspired in particular by ideas from the US and the Netherlands. The social crises of the 1960s, which showed limited possibilities for social assistance providers, represented an important impetus.<sup>33</sup> While initially it was mainly about organising people within the location (in the sense of community work as the third method of social work in addition to individual case work and group work), since the 1990s the emphasis has been on social space. This orientation on social space accentuates the social process and seeks to connect the micro, meso, and macro levels (that is, to connect individuals, links within a given community, and social development).<sup>34</sup> Community work supports networks and activates people to take responsibility for themselves and the community in which they live.

The Evangelical Church in Germany officially supported the idea of a community-oriented diakonia in the document ‘Handlungsoption Gemeinwesendiakonie’ in 2007. It formulates the self-concept of Diaconia. According to this concept, Diaconia does not act only as a provider of social services, it also accepts social responsibility for the city. Together with local congregations and other non-church partners, it seeks to create a functional social space and to alleviate poverty. It is not just about acting for others; it is acting together with the others.<sup>35</sup>

29 Hermann STEINKAMP, *Diakonie – Kennzeichen der Gemeinde*, Freiburg i. B.: Lambertus, 1985, p. 76.

30 Hans-Jürgen BENEDICT, *Kirchliche Gemeinwesenarbeit*, in: *Kirche aktiv gegen Armut und Ausgrenzung. Theologische Grundlagen und praktische Ansätze für Diakonie und Gemeinde*, ed. Johannes EURICH, Florian BARTH, Klaus BAUMANN and Gerhard WEGNER, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2011, p. 275.

31 To know more about the topic, see, for example, Stefanie RAUSCH, *Gemeinwesendiakonie als strategische Orientierung kirchlicher Träger*, Wiesbaden: Springer, 2015; Martin HORSTMANN and Elke NEUHAUSEN, *Mutig mittendrin. Gemeinwesendiakonie in Deutschland*, Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010.

32 Dieter OELSCHLÄGEL, *Art. Gemeinwesenarbeit*, in: *Handbuch Sozialarbeit/Sozialpädagogik*, eds. Hans-Uwe OTTO and Hans THIERSCH, Neuwied, 2001, p. 653.

33 Hans-Jürgen BENEDICT, *Kirchliche Gemeinwesenarbeit*, in: *Kirche aktiv gegen Armut und Ausgrenzung...*, p. 265.

34 Martin BECKER, *Soziale Stadtentwicklungen und Gemeinwesenarbeit in der Sozialen Arbeit*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2014, pp. 14–28.

35 BENEDICT, *Kirchliche Gemeinwesenarbeit...*, p. 271.

In 1998, Theodor Strohm suggested using the term *Wichern III* for this understanding of diakonia.<sup>36</sup> The work of Wichern himself, in the 19th century, sought immediate rescue and assistance connected with the effort to restore Christianity in society and diakonia in the church. Wichern II then became a designation for the development of diakonia after the Second World War in the spirit of its integration into society.<sup>37</sup> *Wichern III* expresses community orientation, participation, and informal networks. This link to the founder of modern diakonia is not only symbolic. In his memorandum of internal mission for the German nation, Wichern himself sees the creation of 'Christian associations for social purposes (concerning family, property, and labour)' as a future challenge.<sup>38</sup> The future task of diakonia should not only be the organisation of assistance for people in need, but also their own association in order to be able to help each other. Wichern thus sees the desire for an association of oppressed people (in order to help each other) as a true moment (even if changed into a caricature by the socialist movement in his time) which must also be grasped by Christians.

### The Power of the Weak, the Connection

In the process of finding new ideas and concepts for congregational diakonia or diaconal congregations, the key question is still what the specific contribution of Christian communities (in community-based approaches to social problems and their management) can be. And this is in the face of limited possibilities and powers. The weakening of Christian service in the CCE seems to be related to its quasi-organisational nature, manifesting itself in the existence and maintenance of institutional departments or special staff. This fact inevitably leads to an unequal 'fight' with a professionally organised Diaconia. What is the strength of the congregations and parishes – even when they seem to be weak outwardly?

As the form of diakonia always relates to a given social order, the new paradigm for Christian ministry can be linked to the sociological description of contemporary society as a society of networks.<sup>39</sup> The reflection of society as a society of networks is particularly linked to the sociologist Manuel Castells. He says on the subject: 'Networks have been historically used for personal interaction, for solidarity, for reciprocal support.'<sup>40</sup> The network as a 'set of interconnected nodes' has its advantages in flexibility and adaptability. There are, of course, disadvantages. One is unable to manage complexity set in large entities.<sup>41</sup> The advantage of bottom-up congregational diakonia, however, is precisely the fact that such a task can be freely given to other types of social systems. The growing importance of networks is related to the 'strength of weak links'. In terms of social psychology, strong links are primarily in the family and in relationships among friends. The weak links are among acquaintances, colleagues, or among people who meet, for example, within associations, or parishes and congregations. There are studies showing the importance of

36 Theodor STROHM, 'Wichern drei' – auf dem Weg zu einer neuen Kultur des Sozialen, in: *Wichern drei – gemeinwesendiakonische Impulse*, ed. Volker HERMANN and Martin HORSTMANN, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlagsgesellschaft, 2010, pp. 17–22.

37 The concept was programmatically used by Eugen Gerstenmaier, the initiator and first director of the Evangelical Aid organisation (Evangelisches Hilfswerk) after World War II. Cf. Eugen GERSTENMAIER, 'Wichern zwei'. Zum Verhältnis von Diakonie und Sozialpolitik, in: *Das diakonische Amt der Kirche*, ed. Herbert KRIMM, Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1953, pp. 467ff.

38 Johann Hinrich WICHERN, Die innere Mission der deutschen evangelischen Kirche. Eine Denkschrift an die deutsche Nation, in: Johann Hinrich WICHERN, *Sämtliche Werke, Band 1*, Berlin and Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1962, p. 274.

39 Cf. Karel ŠIMR, Trojí diakonie. K diferenciaci křesťanského pomáhajícího jednání v moderní společnosti, *Studia theologica* 4/2018, pp. 161–162.

40 Manuel Castells, Toward a Sociology of the Network Society, in: *Contemporary Sociology* 5/2000, p. 695.

41 Ibid.

these weak links, for example, when one is looking for a job.<sup>42</sup> The new ‘network’ paradigm, in the development of congregations, has a distinct accent of diakonia. The ability of networks to cross the boundaries of different spaces, layers, and milieus<sup>43</sup> is characteristic for the original sense of diakonia.

From this perspective, the Christian ministry does not lose its importance with social transformations. It is rather the opposite. When one sees it as an organisation, it is rather insufficient. It is more appropriate to perceive it as a network (Netz), and (in this sense) to actively develop it (Netz-Werk).<sup>44</sup> Congregational diakonia, when understood in this way, significantly precedes the organised activities of institutionalised social services, and it also complements them. In a given type of Christian help, it is more about creating ‘nodes’ or ‘core groups’ rather than about a clearly defined membership. If the concepts of neighbourhood, community, and reciprocity are a fundamental ideological support for Christian ministry, then a potential Christian service department will not be a ‘provider’ of services to the people in need within the congregation. It will rather be a community which activates others for diakonia within the parish, and it will be the sympathetic linking of the diverse needs and resources in and around the congregation. The strength of congregational diakonia will be (instead of long-term solid programmes that are characteristic of organisations) adaptability and flexibility to respond ad hoc to emerging needs.

Obviously, the desired ‘networking’ is no Christian phenomenon. On the contrary, it makes it possible to connect the church environment with our society. Heinrich Bedford-Stroh, however, sees congregations as a suitable environment for cultivating weak links. This is an important and distinctive contribution of the congregations to civil society.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

The Christian ministry in the ECCB is formed in connection with the forced withdrawal of the church and its diaconal work from the public space after the communist takeover in 1948. This unfavourable situation is reflected positively in a number of texts. It is presented as a return to the original form of the diaconal dimension of the Church. In contemporary church directives, congregational diakonia is understood as the basic form of the diaconal mission of the church even if its real significance has been weakened by the change in social conditions after 1989 and the development of organised diakonia. Key concepts for its formation are communities and help among neighbours. The emphasis is on reciprocity.

From the theological point of view, it can be understood and reflected upon as an interesting form of realisation of the diaconal congregation – as a concept developed (in a wide ecumenical scope) by theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They present it as a certain ideal of the diaconal self-realisation of the Church. In the case of organised diakonia, we can speak about the self-realisation of the Church very little. It is precisely the congregational Christian service where one can find the ‘Sitz im Leben’ – a theory of the constitutive features of the Church.

42 Ulrich JAKUBEK, *Beziehungsweisen – oder: Die Stärke schwacher Bindungen*, in: *Netzwerke sichtbar machen. Impulse für Gemeindeentwicklung*, ed. Ulrich JAKUBEK and Florian STRAUS, Nürnberg: Amt für Gemeindedienst in der Evang.-Luth. Kirche in Bayern, 2014, pp. 49–50.

43 Florian STRAUS, *Komplexität gemeinsam reduzieren. Konzeptionelle Aspekte der Netzwerkidee*, in: *Netzwerke sichtbar machen. Impulse für Gemeindeentwicklung*, ed. Ulrich JAKUBEK and Florian STRAUS, Nürnberg: Amt für Gemeindedienst in der Evang.-Luth. Kirche in Bayern, 2014, p. 56.

44 An example of an informal Christian service having such a function in the congregation was described by a fellow pastor. It could be a spontaneous conversation in front of a church in which the worshipers exchange information about the situation of absent members (such as the sick and the old ones) and decide what to do for them.

45 JAKUBEK, *Beziehungsweisen...*, p. 52.



Consequently, congregational diakonia constitutes an important 'social capital' and an opportunity to complement professional services which are limited by their clearly defined programmes and sources of funding. The Christian ministry builds on communication, community integration, natural proximity and informal networking, space for volunteer engagement, and mutual help among its members.<sup>46</sup> When developing the Christian character of diakonia as an organisation, the emphasis lies in its 'top-down' management. The identifying feature of congregational diakonia, though, is its 'bottom-up' formation. There is an emphasis on communion, reciprocity, and inclusion not only into the Christian community but into the entire community.

Despite unfavourable social conditions (or because of them), the development of diakonia in the ECCB in the form of congregational Christian service can be perceived as a remarkable and up-to-date<sup>47</sup> contribution to the diaconal formation of the church and to the creation of the diaconal congregation. It is valid despite the objection that this form of diakonia is limited to the inner space of the church. The challenge for congregational diakonia in the ECCB thus remains the search for a concept of Christian service which would preserve its foundation within the congregation and, at the same time, develop it in a free society, justify it theologically, and which would practically link its ecclesiastical anchorage with its role in civil society. This process can be guided by the sociological concept of the 'network society', and by the awareness of the 'strength of weak links' and their development and cultivation.

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46 Gerhard K. SCHÄFER, *Diakonie und Gemeinde*, in: *Theologie und Diakonie*, ed. Michael SCHIBILSKY and Renate ZITT, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2004, pp. 413ff.

47 Let us remind ourselves that the emphasis on community and neighbourhood is one of the dominant paradigms in many areas. At the level of official church statements, the call for neighbourhood became the main theme, for example, the declaration of the World Council of Churches in Larnaca in 1986. © *World Consultation on Interchurch Aid, Refugee and World Service, Diakonia 2000*, available at: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/justice-diakonia-and-responsibility-for-creation/ecumenical-solidarity/larnaca-declaration>, cited 5<sup>th</sup> May 2018.