

Crossroads of Grace

A Report on the Diakonia World Assembly, July 20th to July 27th 2009, Atlanta, Georgia, USA

by Klaus Kießling

From the south state Georgia comes Jimmy Carter, one of the predecessors of Barack Obama in terms of being president of the United States of America. Its capital Atlanta is world-famous as place of activity of Martin Luther King and therefore it attracts many people – besides them in July 2009 all these women and men that belong to the World Federation of diaconal associations and diaconal communities or that at least sympathize with it. To the latter I count myself after I got to know *Louise Williams* from Valparaiso, Indiana, in 2008, a Lutheran and President of the Diakonia World Federation since 2001. She accepted my invitation to Vienna and together with *Ulrike Kellner*, who is secretary and member of the executive committee of the Diakonia World Federation and resides in Munich, and further representatives of diaconal associations and diaconal communities, she participated at the Study Conference of the International Diaconate Center that took place from March 26th to 29th in 2009. While we were at it, the President argues for a confessional cooperation between the World Federation and the International Diaconate Centre. I share this request and would like to emphasize and to



*Ulrike Kellner –
Klaus Kießling – Louise Williams*

expedite it with regards to content by my presence in Atlanta and my engagement at the 20th World Assembly. During it takes place this report develops on-site.

“Do you also come from Microsoft?”

After arriving at my place of destination and ten hours flying time, I enqueue in the long waiting line of businessmen, that also started in Frankfurt and now want to enter the USA. When it is my turn, I present my passport and further documents, let make fingerprints and a photo and answer to different questions, thereunder this one: “Do you also come from Microsoft?” – “No, I come from the Catholic Church!” – “Wow, you are the first from the machine, that is not from Microsoft, and you are the first ever since I have been working here, that says, he enters the USA on behalf of the Catholic Church!”

64 organizations and communities in 33 countries ...

The Diakonia World Federation was launched in 1947 in the Netherlands. The foundation considered itself a chance to new life and reconciliation against the background of the Second World War. Both options remain programme until today as the title of the assembly in Atlanta shows: “Diakonia – Crossroads of Grace. Revive and Reconcile”. In the meantime the World Federation has grown up to an international network that associates 64 diaconal organizations and communities in 33 countries. Diakonia provides space for an exchange of its members, encourages them to explore and to live a vocation of their own, and together with them it speaks out in the churches and in ecumenical cooperation – in favour of a diaconal proclamation and a ministry to the world.

...to be a guest in Atlanta

The World Assembly of 350 people – women are definitely in the majority such as men are in the majority at conferences of the International Diaconate Centre – takes place at the campus of Georgia Institute of Technology, with extensive and well-kept grounds. The subtropical sun is sensed as very strong by the widely travelled, whereas the natives perceive the actual weather conditions as exceptionally cool and untypically for ‘Hotlanta’.

The assembly presents a mixture of lectures in the plenary sessions, that are reflected and continued in smaller subgroups, a large, musical, cultural and spiritual general programme as well as a comprehensive offering of workshops with numerous issues: for example formation, theology and spirituality of diacony, social justice and integrity of creation, global disaster aid, stigmatization of natives, especially of American Indian tribes, human trafficking, violence against women, regional developments, mission and music.

“... the power to be Jesus“

One of the lecturers is *Sara Miles*, author and director of ministry of the St Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. She was not socialised in a Christian way and describes herself as convertite. “Take this Bread” is one of her book titles where she adumbrates that the Eucharist has given her biographically a change and therewith an approach to a life in faith. “Take this Bread” could be a motto of the food pantry that she founded and that enables week after week about 800 families to get the aliments that they need for their living. Together with 50 volunteers she seeks hereby to continue that life that is committed and breathed into us – in the spirit of Jesus Christ who continues to live if we satisfy hunger of people notably in need, contribute to their healing and thereto that they can experience resurrection. Her proclamation gets to the heart: “Jesus gives us the power to be Jesus – and to continue his work in the world.”



Sara Miles

“... the only book that reads us“

Glory E. Dharmaraj guides as a lecturer several bible works. She is from India, lives in the USA and after her doctorate at Loyola University of Chicago and further research activity at Harvard University she has been working for the Women’s Division of The United Methodist Church, a community that is represented strongly at this assembly. The lecturer starts with Luke 13, 10 – 17, a healing scene where Jesus sets free a bent woman from her illness that troubled her for about 18 years. She confronts this biblical constellation with bents that harm women, but also children and men. Her reading of biblical texts becomes apparent in the examination of experiences that the participants of the Assembly contribute from their cultures. In diffidence to all books we are reading, she understands “the Bible as the only book that reads us“ – in this case that bent people can stand up straight again. As wounded healers it is our mission, so she points out, to cast one eye at the biblically testified Shalom of God (Zechariah 8, 1 – 8) and the other eye at the neediness of our fellow beings, at their bents, so that they can find their being up straight.



Glory E. Dharmaraj

Deacony “on the basis of grace”

Since 2002 *Walter Altmann* has been the President of The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brazil. He was born there and returns there after his doctorate in Hamburg. In his presentation he emphasizes that his church knows the ordination of deaconesses and deacons – besides the ordination of (male and female) pastors, catechists and missionaries. He marks deacony as essential of Christian life with an interpersonal and parochial, social and political, ecumenical and global claim, especially in the face of a north-south-divide with churches getting stronger and poverty that proceeds to grow on the one hemisphere and with flagging churches and comparatively strong economy on the other one. Deacony is asked for its prophetic and transforming power, for its responsibility also for creation and for being church of the poor – for them and with them.

Because it is about the intertwining of charity and the love of God, about a horizontal and vertical orientation, deacony and spirituality are connected. Deacony is rooted in the mission of all Christian communities even though not practised sufficiently every time or reflected theologically or in terms of mission and social science. Deacony lives in and because of the love of God, it lives on the “basis of grace”.



Walter Altmann

Cooperation with the International Diaconate Centre

The heads of diaconal associations and diaconal communities meet for the first time during the World Assembly for an international staffed consultation that I also participate in. Therefore the relation of management and ministry, of power and powerlessness plays a prominent role. With this initiative a process can be started to that I contribute particularly the request for coming into a confessional cooperative exchange concerning questions of theology of deacony and the diaconate as well as to a diaconal spirituality. The positive resonance that I find there is a joy for me. Because a trustful cooperation stands out in this round of about 35 people, we agree on continuing this consultation process.

A reason for my joy is also the large interest for my presentation that I as a “special guest” and as the only Roman Catholic amongst hundreds of participants can contribute to the conference – about origin and future of the permanent diaconate as a self-contained ministry in the Roman Catholic Church. When it is about confessional cooperation I would like to name specifically two persons because they play important parts in the Diakonia World Federation as well as in



Terttu Pohjolainen



Peter Geene

the International Diaconate Centre: *Terttu Pohjolainen* from Finland und *Peter Geene* from the Netherlands.

As the new president *Doris Amalie Horn* from Germany, a diaconal Sister, was elected; she has worked in the board of Diakonia since 1996 and belongs to The Evangelical Methodist Church. During the conference I was informed about a decision of the board that the World Federation would like to have a regular exchange with the International Diaconate Centre in the future and a two-way participation at appropriate meetings. Thus learning processes become possible, that surely not just I do appreciate – also in dealing with a variety of spiritual traditions that come alive during this conference in word and picture, music and dance. Some of this is strange to me, and some will stay strange to me. To term the plurality that is assembled in Atlanta as ecumenical, how it is done very often in these days, seems to me as legitimate, in particular when I think of the Coptic Sisters who belong to the World Federation; but ecumenical Christianity stays an open and not yet redeemed option as long as it limits extensively to the non-Catholic world. Crossroads of grace are still outstanding here.

Crossroads of Grace

In my sense, the title of this World Assembly was not picked up on explicitly in one of the central components of the assembly, but for me it gains in its importance thanks to many encounters: because of getting to know many people, who were unknown up to now, and the reunion with some women and men that I have already been familiar with for a long time; their ways cross here with mine – for the first time or again. In the prayer there are also present those who are being held in their home place or those whose entry was foiled.

In the country of Obama I often have to think of how one of my sons has commented my election of being President of the International Diaconate Centre a few months ago: “Daddy, fortunately you are not President Obama, because his daughters need to go to school with bodyguards and this is a cool thing just once. Daddy, fortunately you are not the President of the United States of America, but the President of the united deacons of the whole world!”

May the blessing that was bestowed upon me by these words also be on those that I meet in Atlanta and on those that they represent and that belong to them.

Postscript: Microsoft

As postscript I add that I heard, that – when I was on my return flight and met again the ‘microsofties’ – at the same time as the Diakonia World Assembly the Microsoft Global Exchange with about 13,000 (!) employees took place also in Atlanta; with the words of an insider: “A little of professional things, much sight-seeing, and even more animation”. If I hadn’t liked to change places with him, asked me my friendly neighbour in the airplane. Certainly not, I thought and told him, and gave him my “mission statement”. After all, deacony and mission are connected closely.



Doris Amalie Horn