

WORLD COUNCIL CONSIDERS DIACONAL TRAINING

BY CHRISTINA PARADELA

I attended a World Council of Churches gathering in Sao Leopoldo, Brazil (November 2011). It was a gathering for diaconal ministers and those involved in the training of diaconal ministers from most of Latin America.

It soon became very apparent to me that when they were speaking of “diaconal ministry” they were referring to something that in The United Church of Canada is called Community Outreach Ministry. All those present either worked with oppressed or marginalized people or were professors in learning institutions that facilitated learning for those seeking to work through the church in non-congregational settings throughout Latin America.

An essential aspect of diakonia is the imperative to be prophetic. Ministry must be transformative and the best tool to bring about change is a prophetic vision, supported by a strong critical analysis of society. Pastor Hector Fernández, coordinator of the Stephen Diaconal Ecumenical Institute in El Salvador, noted that, “when talking about diakonia, economy and society, there is a need of being prophetic not only outside the doors of the church, but also inside.”

We had the opportunity to visit some ‘*diaconal projects*’ around the city of Porto Alegre. Our lodgings were actually one such project. We stayed at the Casa Matrix dos Diaconisas at the Escola Superior de Teologia, which also is a home for the aged. We visited a home for young women ages 8-18 who had fled from an abusive living environment or had become pregnant out of marriage. Many had experienced sexual abuse.

On-site and in class, we discussed the challenge of raising funds for the work of diakonia, through the church and often from governmental coffers while simultaneously maintaining the prophetic voice. This is especially difficult when that prophetic voice challenges the very sources of funding.

I found a mutuality of understanding with aspects of diakonia that are essential for me, including the theology of the Sojourning God. The ministry of accompaniment was lifted up at this conference. Another aspect that was upheld is the imperative to respond to articulated needs. However where that

need is *perceived* we must enable that articulation by those with the need. We are not to impose our own agenda, *no matter how clever we think it is*.

In the United Church, some diaconal ministers work in non-congregational settings such as homes for the aged, sexual assault centres, and in urban community outreach ministries. The majority work in congregational settings but from the same ethos of prophetic and transformative ministry. When someone is commissioned to diakonia and is called to a non-congregational type of work, the process of settlement has historically been difficult as most settlements have been congregational. The

new policies regarding settlement will open possibilities but in the United Church there is a different sort of relationship with its diacolate. Unlike many other denominations represented in the World Council event, non-congregational work settings are not seen as the norm in the United Church.

In both congregational and non-congregational contexts, prophetic ministry holds the possibility of transformation toward a more just church and society. As incoming president of Hamilton Conference, I hope to lift up the work of diakonia and invite folks to consider listening to that prophetic voice. It was and is an essential aspect of Christ’s ministry. Indeed, it is on the margins that we can most readily encounter the Christ, and yet we often can fear both getting too near the margins and we can fear encountering the Christ. Such encounters have been known to turn worlds upside down.

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Christina Paradelo at diaconal project Casa Matrix dos Diaconisas. Common interests in making diakonia prophetic emerged at the World Council event.