
A study on Diaconal Youth Work in Europe today

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Introduction

This study was commissioned by Eurodiaconia in the framework of the Erasmus+ project ‘Empower You(th)!', in order to provide an evidence-based manual to accompany the project. The study is based on a literature review and structured interviews with six Eurodiaconia member organisations. The full study will be available at the end of the project (early 2018) as part of an online toolkit, containing information about the organisations and their youth work as well as short texts about challenges for young people in Europe today and a compilation of youth work models and methods in a European context.

The European context and the organisations involved

The aim of the study is to provide information about the diaconal youth work of Eurodiaconia partner organisations in six European countries: Armenia, the Czech Republic, Italy, Kosovo, Norway, and Sweden, and to describe the present state of local youth work in varying contexts, to showcase good and innovative practices in use, and to formulate suggestions for further improvement of youth work approaches in their specific regional contexts. The organisations are:

- WCC Armenia Rountable Foundation (Armenia)
- Slezská Diakonie (Czech Republic)
- Diaconia Valdese (Italy)
- Diakonie Kosova (Kosovo)
- Church City Mission Oslo (Norway)
- Diocese of Vasteras of the Church of Sweden (Sweden)
- Eurodiaconia (Belgium, coordinator)

The six countries included in this research have vastly different cultural and historical backgrounds. Armenia, the Czech Republic and Kosovo are former communist countries where NGOs and diaconal activities were not allowed before the collapse of the totalitarian system. Considering this socio-political background, voluntarism and civil society was not able to flourish as much as in other countries or regions. Moreover, volunteering was compulsory for children and adults alike, and therefore it still has a negative reputation in some post-communist countries. (Voicu & Voicu 2009, Sillo 2016.) Scandinavian countries included in the study, Sweden and Norway, in turn have a history of a Lutheran state church. This close relationship between the Church and the State means that in the field of diaconia, independent NGOs have been slow to develop. The sixth organisation, Diaconia Valdese in Italy, represents an organisation of a small minority church in a catholic region heavily affected by the current European migrant crisis.

According to the information received from these organisations, youth unemployment is among the biggest challenges on the continent and is also one of the key reasons for emigration. Another big challenge is the tension that exists in some cases between nationalities and religions. In Kosovo for example, war remains in people’s minds and causes anxiety and prejudice which hampers young peoples’ ability to interact across religious and national boundaries, despite the young people not having personal memories of the war themselves.

Further, the European migrant crisis in 2015 roused xenophobia and racism in countries that had not previously experienced such phenomenon.

Poverty in its many forms underlies several of the problems encountered by young people. It is often associated with the lack of education and problems with health, hygiene, sexual education, drugs, and alcohol. Adolescents from poor families are easily excluded from both the labour and education spheres. Socio-economic problems, discrimination in the labour market, and domestic violence are often a reality for young women. Therefore, young girls from poor families often have few opportunities for career development and self-improvement. The situation is even worse for excluded ethnic groups like Roma people. The most vulnerable are young girls, who in some cases are even excluded from their own families.

The analyses of the challenges of young people that we have described can also be evidenced in European surveys. According to the Eurobarometer 2016, more than half (57 %) of young people in Europe have the impression that, in their country, young people are marginalized and excluded from economic and social life because of the ongoing European and global crisis. However, there are sweeping international differences and divergences between different parts of Europe. (European Parliament 2016.)

The challenges facing young people are not solely related to the European and global crises. Diversity between individuals also creates a schism. Some people carry special stigma in the eyes of others leading to exclusion. One of these groups is people living with HIV/AIDS. The problem is not limited to the social-economic and psychological challenges they face due to their health condition. There's also the stigma and discrimination brought about by the disease. In many countries, sexual orientation can also be a reason for exclusion. Similarly, adolescents with disabilities are easily marginalised because they are labelled as "not able". This kind of stigmatization causes low self-esteem leading to many kinds of social and personal issues.

Diverse challenges for young people and youth organisations

The focus of the study however lies not only in the challenges of young people in Europe but the actual youth work carried out the six diaconal organisations. Given that the purpose of the study is not only to describe but also analyse their work, an outline of the history and theory of youth diaconia will serve as the theoretical foundation of the study. Suggestions based on the analysis of findings complete the study.

It has been recognized that the immense changes all over Europe have challenged young people in many ways. The study shows how the theory of diaconia helping those in greatest distress particularly during times of great flux becomes reality. It is equally demonstrated that diaconal organisations do a great deal around Europe in order to help and provide opportunities for young people. These organisations cooperate and partner with other agents and organisations in the field leading to results greater than those possible for any individual organisation. Diaconal organisations cooperate a lot with the municipalities, and with both national and international NGO's and churches.

The Church of Sweden, the Church City Mission Oslo, and Slezská Diakonie differ a lot from the other three organisations of this study in the number of paid employees they have.

Scandinavia is one of the richest regions in the world and until recent years most of the church work has been done by a substantial number of paid employees. However, the Armenian Roundtable Foundation (ART), Diaconia Valdese, and Diakonie Kosova operate with only a handful of paid youth workers. Nevertheless, the work models described in the study have proven to be successful in supporting young people in every organisation in spite of their differing structures and resources. The rather low number of paid employers in ART, Diaconia Valdese, and Diakonie Kosova is compensated by the numerous engagement of volunteers who provide high quality youth work.

According to one of the main principles of youth diaconia, it should pay special attention to those in need. But who are these people in current Europe? The study mentions young people who are suffering from post war traumas, who are immigrants, and unemployed or uneducated. In addition, diaconal youth organisations often also work with young people who are victims of human trafficking and also with undocumented migrants.

The organisations in the study offer vast non-formal education opportunities for young people, e.g. courses in foreign languages, web design or sewing, hairdressing, cooking, or computer programming. These courses can support young people in accessing the labour market and offer them professional tools and skills. Such courses are important especially in countries with a high youth unemployment rate. Other learning opportunities are offered through the churches' educational programmes, such as confirmation training in Sweden. This includes activities providing the participants with useful skills like presentation skills supporting in the development of self-esteem. Approaches through art and drama like Forum Theatre in Oslo have been proven to be very successful in helping the young people to deal with challenging situations in their everyday life like bullying, job seeking, multiculturalism, and drugs. It raises awareness among people of the situations and issues they have not sufficiently been aware of before.

The concept of youth diaconia

A part of the report also provides information about the underlying theoretical concept of "youth diaconia". It elaborates four main points: Firstly, Christian youth work in general is a part of the Church's three pillars: witness, service, communion, and diaconia. Secondly, diaconia is a fundamental element of Christian youth work opening the doors "to the outside", and reaching out to the whole world (also non-Christian). Thirdly, youth diaconia becomes visible and is needed especially during significant changes and crises in society. Fourthly, youth diaconia pays special attention to those in the greatest distress and those who cannot find help elsewhere. Volunteering, in addition, has been recognised to have multiple positive effects in all of the dimensions above.

Figure 1 (below) summarises the theory of diaconal youth work outlined above. Spiritual, social and pedagogical dimensions are conceptualised as a triangle showing the diverse relations in which youth diaconia takes place. All of these dimensions can be seen through the history of Christian youth work. These dimensions indicate that youth work has several forms and it can be approached from several angles using different methods, aims and models. It's also a multidisciplinary phenomenon because different angles are closely related to different academic disciplines: theology, educational sciences and social sciences. (Launonen 2007, 86.) The triangle also explains the different concepts in use describing the same phenomenon. For example, youth diaconia, diaconal youth work and special youth work are tackling the same

challenges in youth work, but their specific approach comes from different sides of the triangle. In the study all three angles will be taken into account although it will focus on the diaconal angle, and therefore seeks to analyse the relationship between the spiritual and social dimensions.

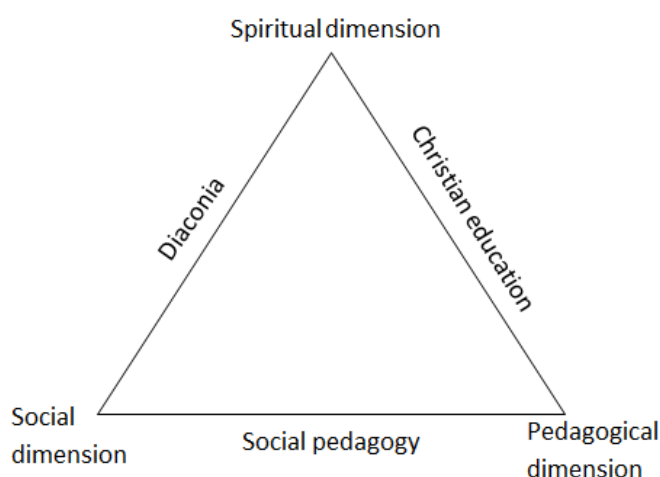


Figure 1: The dimensions of Christian youth work (Launonen 2007, 86).

Successful youth work can be done in diverse ways – diverse contexts and traditions of different organisations shaping their approach. The role of workers can vary greatly between these approaches. It can be understood as an adult or a worker who does something for young people, but also with young people (see Westerhoff 2012, 102–103). This division offers a way of analysing the different models of youth work, which will be described in the study. Each of these models offers valid approaches but awareness of the differences is needed.

Outlook and recommendations of the study

One of the aims of the study is to offer suggestions based on its findings. It is evident that the organisations of this study can learn a lot from each other. Youth work is holistic and contextual. Therefore there is a need for this perspective to be taken into account in the education of youth workers. The holistic orientation should be also included in the training of the volunteers. Both, in training for youth workers and volunteers, there is a growing need to teach religious literacy and a positive understanding of the role of religion in people's well-being. Understanding this aspect is now more important than ever all over the Europe, and needs to be reinforced in traditional curricula.

It is also important to provide both, paid employees and the volunteers, with the tools to understand the phenomenon of volunteer engagement in its different forms. The study points out that youth work and volunteering can be seen as training preparing young people for civil society; and civil society is widely understood as a prerequisite for strong democracies. Therefore volunteering contributes, on an individual level to the young volunteer's personal growth, and on a social level it can be a matter of a strong contribution to civil society. International collaboration like through Eurodiaconia and the Empower You(th)! project are very useful for both, the organisations and the individuals involved. More research is also needed in the field of diaconal youth work. Research and international contacts supplement

one another and they are both needed. As the study shows, brilliant work is being done, and innovative work models have been developed around Europe, but these models are typically not known outside of their local environment. Too much energy has been invested in developing new work models which already exist somewhere outside the local environment. Such international exchange and cooperation are facilitated through the Empower You(th)! project among the project organisations.

International collaboration also offers the potential to study and understand weaknesses and strengths of local models. An outside-in perspective is needed in order to assess preconceptions and routines of an organisation's own model from a different angle. Further, international cooperation can act as support, where one can see others working in the field and feel the sense of community and communal work. Finally, these contacts offer an opportunity to acquire new skills and working models.

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