

ReDi Conference 2025
KEYNOTE INFORMATION AND ABSTRACTS

Keynote 1: **Marina Ngursangzeli Behera**

Biographic information

Dr. Marina Ngursangzeli Behera, originally from Mizoram, India, is responsible for PhD stage research at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Oxford, UK. She served as faculty at the United Theological College, Bangalore, India (2005–2012) and as a professor holding the chair of Ecumenical Missiology at the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, Switzerland, a programme of the World Council of Churches, and attached to the University of Geneva (2012–2016).



Marina is the editor of the peer-reviewed academic journal *Transformation*, one of the series editors of the *International Missionary Council Centenary Series*, and a member of the editorial team of *Regnum Books International*. She has edited a number of books and published papers focusing on theological education, ecumenics, mission, and intercultural theology, with an emphasis on the history of her indigenous community. Her latest publications include the co-written book *Hope in Times of Crisis: Reimagining Ecumenical Mission*, in print with Cascade Books; “Confessing the One Faith in Many Tongues: A Decolonial Reading of the Nicene Creed,” in *International Review of Mission* 113(2), 2024, 341-354; and “Chapter 8: As in Heaven, so on Earth? A Response to a Dominant Religious Ideology from a Mizo Christian Tribal Perspective,” in: Singh, David E., (ed.) *Christianity and Transforming States: Mapping Varied Christian Experiences and Responses*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024, 159-176.

Paper Topic

Diaconia in an Indigenous Church: Rethinking Service through a Holistic and Rights-Based Engagement

Abstract

The Presbyterian Church in Mizoram, Northeast India, is an Indigenous church. Numerous practices such as social welfare, charity, preaching, and teaching are not seen as distinct categories but are unified under the broader umbrella of *rawngbawlna* (services/ministry). Rooted in an indigenous community-centered model, *rawngbawlna* continues traditional Mizo values and practices in the life of the church. It avoids strict categorization, allowing all members of the church to participate in multiple areas based on their calling and capacities.

The Mizo concept of *rawngbawlna* demonstrates a culturally embedded model of diaconia that integrates social, spiritual, and educational services under the mission of the church. These services embody the Mizo church’s mission as a response to local needs. The church has created a diaconal identity that reflects the mission of God through both word and deed to its members.

While the church's services have aligned with community needs, this paper will argue that revisiting these traditional values in the perspective of diaconia will emphasize a clearer rights-based framework for outreach to the wider community in the current situation. Articulating these efforts through a rights-based perspective could enhance advocacy and empower Mizo communities, particularly as a marginalized or scheduled tribe in the Indian context. For instance, framing *Hmangaih rawngbawlna* (service of love) as a rights-based effort in supporting the vulnerable would emphasize that all have a right to compassionate care and social support, not only the members.

Encouraging the Mizo church to frame its social services within a rights-based context as diaconia, avoiding the contested term "mission," could reinforce its commitment to marginalized communities. This development would align with a broader understanding of the *missio Dei*, showcasing how traditional service can evolve to address contemporary social challenges and empower communities in a changing world. This paper will thus contribute to the discussion on diaconia as the churches' service in different types of societies—more individually oriented vs. communal-oriented societies.

Keynote 2: **Kenneth Mtata**

Biographic information

Rev Dr Kenneth Mtata is the Programmes Director for Public Witness and Diakonia at the World Council of Churches. Prior to his current role, he was the General Secretary of the Zimbabwean Council of Churches from 2016 to 2022. He was the Executive Study Secretary for Lutheran Theology and Practice at the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva between 2010 and 2016 after a period as Post-doctoral Fellow in South Africa (UKZN) and Germany at the Fachhochschule für Interkulturelle Theologie in Hermannsburg (FIT) (2009-2010). Dr Mtata



holds a doctorate in Theology from the University of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa and an MA in Public Policy Management from the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin, Germany. Dr Kenneth Mtata works mainly on the interface of religion, public policy and social development. He is ordained as a Lutheran pastor and was born in Mberengwa, Zimbabwe, on 17 November 1971.

Paper Topic

Prophetic Diakonia in a Vulnerable World

Abstract

Prophetic Diakonia in a Vulnerable World In a world marked by deepening vulnerabilities—climate crises, economic injustices, migration, political instability, and technological disruptions—Christian diakonia must reclaim its prophetic edge. This address will first revisit the theological

foundations of diakonia, emphasizing its biblical roots as a calling to serve, advocate, and transform. It will then examine contemporary causes of vulnerability, particularly systemic inequalities and emerging global challenges. Finally, it will present prophetic diakonia as the church's response: a courageous, justice-seeking praxis that moves beyond charity to challenge structures of oppression and foster hope in action. Through concrete examples, this presentation will argue that prophetic diakonia is essential for churches to remain faithful to their mission in an increasingly fragile world.

Keynote 3: **Marichen van der Westhuizen**

Biographical information

Marichen van der Westhuizen is a professor of social work at the University of the Western Cape, and the Head of the Department of Social Work. This Department hosts both the disciplines of social work and community development. She has a particular interest in community development and work focusing on social inclusion, intercultural work through artistic engagements, and community empowerment to address poverty, violence, gangsterism and xenophobia.



Topic

Conviviality and sustainable development: Towards a diaconal practice framework

Abstract

Globally, pandemics, climate change-related disasters and wars clearly points to a world where we can no longer think about what it means to care for the marginalised and the oppressed and how to respond to human needs. We have to become proactive in terms of using what we know (research) and converting this into actions.

This discussion unpacks the terms 'conviviality' and 'sustainable development', exploring the links between these terms. Conviviality is viewed as a way of living, emphasising the interrelatedness between people and their environments; including their relationship and engagement with the Church. It has to do with the quality of being a caring and supporting community that encourages collective wellbeing through principles of participation and empowerment. Community development is based on participatory and empowering actions that ensures relief, addresses societal challenges, and supports growth and progress.

Next, key focus areas and principles that support human dignity and that guide sustainable developmental practices aimed at conviviality are explored. This will serve as a background to explore diakonia in the context of serving communities. Emphasis is placed on ensuring an awareness of the experiences, challenges, needs and potential of marginalised and oppressed communities that results in partnerships with these communities as well as other key stakeholders

to contribute to sustainable change to promote hope for a better future through experienced change.

The discussion will be concluded with a proposed framework to support diaconal practices that empowers (education), provides relief (livelihood and economy), and promotes a community of care, support and change.
