



## **Ruling Relations of the Church's Social Work in the Lutheran Church in Finland.**

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### **1 Introduction**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church's social work –we can call it diaconia work as well- has no official role in the Finnish welfare state model. It has been seen rather as a Christian based, local and casual actor (Grönlund & Hiilamo 2006, 134). This is remarkable, since diaconia work and public social work have common historical roots. Besides, they have similarities in their ethical basis and action models. (Iivari & Karjalainen 1999, 19) Although the church is a public actor with its right to collect taxes and perform ceremonies, there are a lot of features of the third sector in its action, which especially come out in diaconia work (Grönlund & Hiilamo 2006, 134). Karjalainen (2000, 268-269) argues that although diaconia work is unofficial, it is in the same time very large social work: if we sum paid church' social workers and voluntary workers together, the number of them comes very near to the quantity of municipal grass-root level social workers.

The Church Order ( KJ 4 § 3) says that diaconia work helps those who are most in need and are not helped by others. There are two dimensions in diaconia. Firstly, it is paid work of certain workers in local parishes. According to the Church Order there has to be a diaconia worker in every Lutheran parish in Finland. This makes Finnish diaconia work unique in the world. Only in Sweden and in Norway there is a similar system. Secondly, diaconia should also be a Christian attitude and lifestyle of every parish member.

According to recent studies (e.g. Juntunen 2006), it seems that diaconia work is playing an increasingly significant role in the social sector. It has been referred to as a "last resort" where people often turn to when no other help is available. It is important to understand how and why the role of diaconia work has recently changed. Although the number of diaconia research has increased during the last years, there are still only a few studies about diaconia work from the client's point of view in Finland. It is difficult to investigate the client's perspective, since clients often come to the diaconia worker in immensely difficult and delicate life situations and are maybe not willing to share experiences of their daily struggles. However, that is the reason why it is important to collect knowledge about the experiences of clients of diaconia work.

### **2 The research questions**

There has been little research on the meaning of diaconia work as experienced in the clients' life and hence further studies are needed. Thus, my main research question concern:

What is the meaning of diaconia work for everyday life of the clients?

I am investigating the research question with two sub-questions:

- a) How diaconia's work among clients takes shape
- b) What kind of ruling relations exist in diaconia work

In my research these questions are approached from the point of daily practices of diaconia work and especially the perspective of client is in the focus. I reveal the helping process in the client work of diaconia visible and investigate it especially by mirroring clients' experiences and locate the present diaconia work in the Finnish welfare system.

### **3 Methodological commitments**

An institutional ethnography created by Dorothy E. Smith (1988, 2005, 2006) offers an interesting method –and theoretical framework- to approach people's experience. Its roots are in feminism, Marxism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism. It is a sociological method starting from the standpoint of a subject and his or her experiences of everyday world. It offers an understanding on how the everyday worlds of subjects are organized and determined in certain place and time by immanent social relations and even extending beyond them. According to the method I am not collecting any sample or trying to generalize results to larger population but I am investigating how the institutional practices of the institution of diaconia penetrate and organize the experience of an individual (Smith 1988, 105-106).

The everyday practices of diaconia should be seen as “problematic” and it is the organisation of everyday life that has to be explored. Interesting is how clients and diaconia workers relate to the world where they act and live and how “the ruling apparatus” functions. By the ruling apparatus Smith means for instance the complexity of administration and profession, which coordinate and penetrate everyday life. Thus, social relations are investigated by looking at people's different experiences of what they find as “problematic”.

### **4 Collection of the data and methods of the research**

By using a questionnaire I asked diaconia workers in a certain area how a client process goes; for what kind of problems clients come to the diaconia office and what kind of help they receive. The questionnaire included mostly open questions, and by using them in a qualitative way, it was possible to formulate background picture of diaconia work. According to diaconia workers, clients are living in complicated and messy life situations. Generally speaking they are coming to a diaconia office because of financial problems or a life crisis. However, most clients have multiple issues, including family problems. Most clients are poor and somehow marginalized, but there are also clients who have difficulties, for instance, only with family relationships. However, diaconia workers are not able to work only with clients, but they have to share their time with other parish duties as well, like keeping devotions in a local hospital.

The second phase was approximately a six-week period of field research in a local parish, where I used ethnographic methods, such as observation, debt-interviews of clients and workers and documents. This period provided me with an additional data about the process of client work in diaconia. This data contained a lot of so called “other knowledge” (Hänninen et. al. 2006), which is hard to examine otherwise, but which is very important to be made visible. Experiences of clients evidenced the social relations which become true through clients' experience. At the third phase I made my second ethnographic data collection, this time from my transcribed data. I searched there those social relations which were embedded in clients' told and lived experience.

## 5 About analysis and results

First, I identified some experiences of clients. Second, I identified some of the institutional processes that were shaping those experiences. Third I examined those processes analytically in order to see how they organized clients' experience. (Look e.g. DeVault & McCoy 2001, 755) Analysing happened by going on action concerting what clients and workers were actually doing in diaconia work process; what was before an action and what followed it. By using this phase to phase procedure it was possible to move from the particular experience to the investigation of relations and the understanding how this experience was organized and embedded in the clients' everyday life.

The clients came to diaconia office in order to get help for their life situation. They were helped by a diaconia worker in ways she / he is able to, such as by supplying food or money, paying bills, giving economical guidance, guiding to a better assistance source, contacting authorities, helping with filling out forms, discussing client's problems and giving pastoral counselling. Behind these concrete processes there were institutional processes which organized those concrete work processes.

Ultimately, I will present one of those institutional processes beyond client's experience. One part of my analysis was to look at diaconia work in a relation to the welfare state. It seems that diaconia work is continuing ruling relations of the Finnish welfare system. Working models and practices of diaconia work follow practices of the social sector. However, diaconia workers have more time to be present in clients' everyday life than municipal social workers seem to have according to clients' experience. Diaconia work is filling gaps of welfare state by giving financial support in cases when social workers are sending their clients to diaconia offices and so diaconia work is enabling cuts in social sector. With enabling cuts of welfare state diaconia is a part of ruling apparatus and its work is organized by the politics of New Public Management. This fact is proved also elsewhere (e.g. Grönlund & Hiilamo 2006; Grönlund & Pessi 2011; Yeung 2006). In a relation to an individual client diaconia work is able to help him or her and promote his or her case also with social officers very successfully. However, diaconia workers have not much time or even interest to pressure the local policy of welfare.

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