Summary in English

Empowering Diakonia: A Model for Service and Transformation in the Ecumenical Movement and Local Congregations

The ecumenical movement in general and the World Council of Churches (WCC) in particular, as well as the local projects studied, have tackled the issues of empowerment and diakonia in various events, documents and in the daily implementation of the work. Nevertheless, the problem that is being addressed in this thesis is that there is no conceptual framework, i.e. a basic structure underlying a theoretical unit that merges both concepts together. In other words, what is being missed is a coherent reflection or a comprehensive way of thinking that binds together both empowerment and diakonia in a system that can provide a fresh and relevant vision for the diaconal endeavor.

We think that this is a critical issue in order to address creatively the need for the churches to become self-sustainable for diaconal engagement. The solution that is being suggested and the way of addressing resourcefully this requirement consists of designing, constructing and proposing the practical implementation of the Empowering Diakonia model. This model synthesizes, combines and binds both concepts together, namely, a new method, using the steps and tools that are described in the thesis. Arguments are made that this model can become an effective way for diaconal engagement today, since it is being built on a concept and practice of diakonia that are both empowered and empowering.

The main conceptual platform and methodology of the thesis is built focusing on the book A Fundamental Practical Theology. Descriptive and Strategic Proposals, written by Don S. Browning. The author argues profusely in this volume in favor of what he calls “the five dimensions of practical reason”, as foundational elements that conform his understanding of practical theology. These elements have been the starting point to design the Five Dimensions of Empowering Diakonia, which I am calling the visional, normative, need-oriented, contextual and transformative.

These Five Dimensions are an essential tool not only to interrelate both the theory and practice, but also as a helpful diagnosis instrument for analysis, description and interpretation. In other words, they have proven to be a useful mechanism for
articulating an understanding, of both diakonia and empowerment, moving from practice to theory and back to practice, in order to ultimately design the *Empowering Diakonia* model.

The thesis consists of six chapters and is guided by four main research questions that are stated in the first chapter, i.e. the general introduction. The first question is how has the WCC contributed to the development of the concepts of diakonia and empowerment throughout its history? The second one is what can we learn from local experiences and practices with regard to diakonia and empowerment? And the two final questions are how to respond to the need of bridging gaps between theory and practice, in relation to diakonia and empowerment, by designing the *Empowering Diakonia* model? And how to implement this model in the ecumenical movement, and more intentionally in the local congregations? This general introduction also explores the theoretical point of departure and the explanation of the *Five Dimensions of Empowering Diakonia* mentioned above, as well as a general description of the steps and procedures of the thesis.

Chapter II offers on the one hand, a brief impression of the theory of diakonia, citing a selected number of biblical texts; and on the other, a more extensive overview of the theory of empowerment, exploring its origin, meaning and development of the term, as well as the ways in which it was and can be grounded biblical and theologically.

In chapter III, analyzing the biblical-theological foundation and evaluating the identity of diakonia and empowerment in the ecumenical movement, I am addressing the first research question. This question again, concentrates on the ways the WCC has contributed to the development of both notions throughout its history, observing to what extent have both served as a meaningful hermeneutical key, a theoretical point of reference and a strategic task for diaconal engagement of the WCC’s member churches.

These *Five Dimensions* are analyzed and interpreted more in depth, dealing with the empirical data collected both in chapter III and in chapter IV. Doing the research among local churches and other related diaconal projects, in this fourth chapter, I am tackling the research question number two. This question seeks to further learn from local experiences and practices with regard to diakonia and empowerment in the current world’s situation of increasing asymmetry and impoverishment. This investigation,
moving from practice to theory is not representative, but rather exploratory, more in terms of getting indications and useful data, which will be the other main source of material to design the *Empowering Diakonia* model.

This data discovered as a result of the research, both at the global stage and the local level has been synthesized as *building blocks* and organized according to the *Five Dimensions*, and these *blocks* are the main raw material to build the *Empowering Diakonia* model.

Chapter V is the core section of the thesis. Its main purpose is to design the *Empowering Diakonia* model, as a new pragmatic and operational method for service and transformation in the ecumenical movement. Hence, it tries to address the dissertation’s third set of research questions, namely, what should a model look like that tries to bridge the gaps between theory and practice, in relation to diakonia and empowerment. Also how could that model contribute to facilitate the implementation of diaconal projects in local congregations.

This fifth chapter covers mainly two areas: firstly, an analysis and a synthesis of the *building blocks* of the two previous chapters, in order to define both empowerment and diakonia, leading to design the *Empowering Diakonia* model. In this analysis also *stumbling blocks* and dilemmas have been critically taken into consideration as well, e.g. financial dependency from abroad for diaconal work, the need for institutional capacity building for social engagement, or the tendency of some churches to work by themselves.

The *Empowering Diakonia* model emerges with a dual function. It is noted that diakonia is empowering (adjective) for those serving and who are being served, for the latter to be transforming subjects, rather than objects of plain charity. At the same time the model points to the forces or actions, which actually help to empower (verb) diakonia, e.g. through the Holy Spirit and the Eucharist, among others, acting in strengthening capacity. Consequently, diakonia both empowers and is being empowered, in an ongoing process of cross-fertilization and mutual enhancement, seeking transformation towards the values of God’s Kingdom.
In short the *Empowering Diakonia* model is defined as the driving force that leads, particularly local congregations, towards self-fulfillment as social actors, renouncing any power over people, rather by sharing power to serve with the people. This dynamic of power-service is *breath of life* that comes from the *Divine Community* as revealed by God as the source of power, by Jesus as the presence of God’s power in the world and by the Spirit as the outreaching of God’s power, in order to serve through acts of effective love, for individual, social and ecological transformation towards *koinonia*.

The second and final portion of chapter V includes some practical proposals for the application of the model at the local congregations, based mainly on a selection of recommendations made at the WCC global gatherings, analyzed in chapter III. This segment seeks to *unlock* the inherent empowering ability of the churches, discovering and activating their own human assets to answer God’s call towards defending abundant life for all, in a more effective and self-sufficient manner.

And finally, chapter VI brings several concluding remarks, where very briefly some final answers to the research questions are shared and various reflections with regards to the assumptions made initially are being addressed. This offers an opportunity to contextualize this dissertation, forward looking.