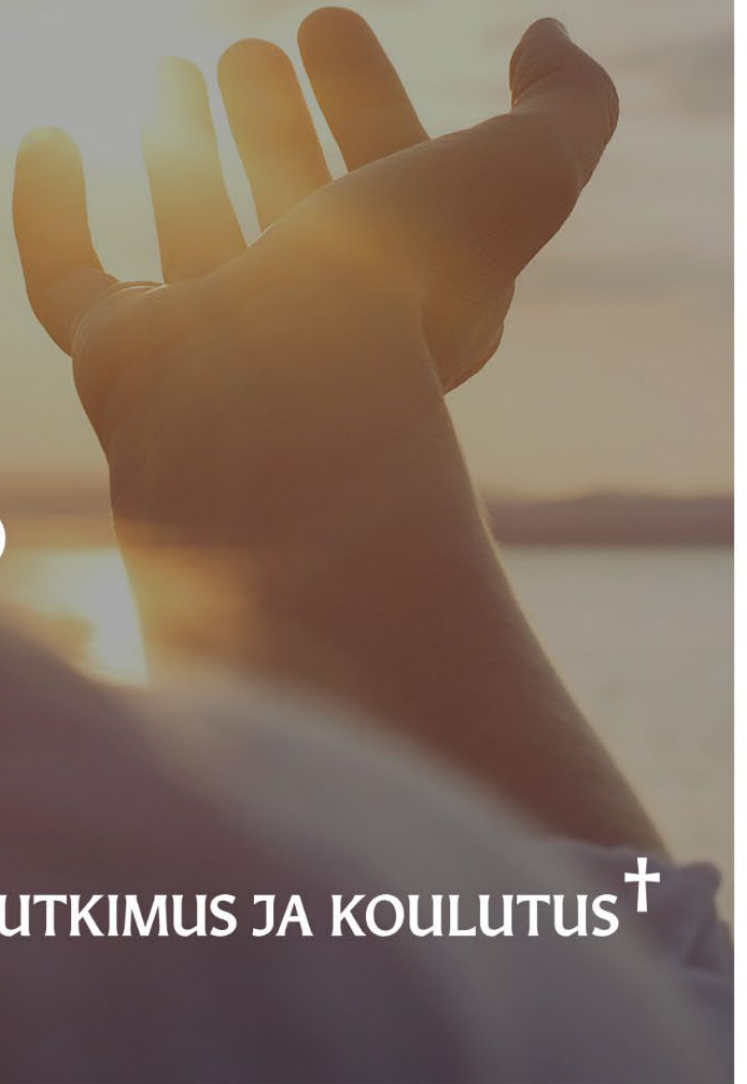


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Diaconia Barometer 2022

Diaconal work adapts and impacts

Titi Gävert (ed.) 6.6.2023



KIRKON TUTKIMUS JA KOULUTUS[†]

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English translation by Oy Maitra Ltd / Maijastiina Salmivaara

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Foreword

Diaconal work is founded on human contact and seeks to influence through partnership networks. This most recent Diaconia Barometer 2022 describes diaconal work in the year when we celebrated the 150th anniversary of the first ordained Finnish deaconess and focuses on diaconal work at a time when social gatherings were strictly regulated. To prevent the spread of COVID-19, many public services had to be closed and our freedom to leave our own homes restricted. With restrictions on the freedom of assembly, all group activities, workshops and other forms of activities which bring people together were on hold, and only limited use of church premises was allowed. Extensive restrictions resulted in an increased need for assistance while the constantly changing rules and recommendations put a strain on the diaconal workers as well. Parishes looked for new ways of reaching out and offering support. Several new ways of working were developed and new channels to encourage participation discovered. When writing this in the spring of 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be petering out, and restrictions are being gradually lifted. What remains to be seen is whether the new ways of working will become permanent in the post-pandemic diaconal work.

The research topics of the Diaconia Barometer 2022 were formulated as a group effort by the researchers and the steering group. Some topics focus on long-term changes in diaconal work, while in others the focus is on current issues. In this Diaconia Barometer 2022, emphasis was on the changes in diaconal work that came with the COVID-19 pandemic, on the role of volunteer work in diaconal ministry, and on the collaborative networks of diaconal work. The results of this Barometer show that the pandemic affected drastic changes in the methods and approaches of diaconal work - new methods and new tools were used to stay in touch with people. In stark contrast shines that which has remained unchanged. Namely, our efforts to promote inclusion, our desire to join forces and help those in need, and our ability to engage with a variety of partners to build a better world. With this Diaconia Barometer 2022, we wish to congratulate diaconal ministry that has remained vibrant and dynamic despite its years, and all those who carry it in their hearts and hands. Diaconia has strong roots and does not falter in the face of change. Therefore, we decided together with our researchers and the steering group to title this Diaconia Barometer 2022 "Diaconal work adapts and impacts".

We are indebted to two groups – our professionals and our researchers. Without their dedication and persistence this Diaconia Barometer 2022 could not exist. Despite the additional burden caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, several professionals found the time to take the survey. Our heartfelt thanks go to each and every one of them. And without our committed researchers who have a profound interest in developing the field, there would be no study results to publish. Sirku, Maija and Meri – thank you for your extensive and important work.

Helsinki and Hollola, 14 June 2022

Tiina Ikonen and Esko Ryökäs

1. Background and implementation

Sirkku Hammarén, Maija Hietaniemi & Meri Kalanti

Research background and conducting the survey

The Diaconia Barometer survey is currently conducted every two years. It maps the experiences of the diaconal workers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF), and their views and opinions on topical themes related to diaconal work.¹ In this Diaconia Barometer 2022 (DBR 2022), special focus was on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on diaconal work, volunteers in diaconal work, the collaborative networks of diaconal work, and on the planned health and social services reform.

Diaconia provides for the most vulnerable; advocates justice, peace, equality and social cohesion; seeks to influence decision-making; and promotes wellbeing as one node of a network of organisations and agencies. In diaconia, help is offered indiscriminately; irrespective of the background and personal beliefs of the recipient. Church is entrusted with the task of loving one's neighbour and calls for all of its members to implement this in their lives. Diaconal work addresses the challenges resulting from changes in the society and the subsequent problems people face in their everyday lives.² The survey was conducted in the beginning of 2022, before the war in Ukraine began. Therefore, the effects of the war are not visible in these results.

The current publication is the 12th Diaconia Barometer. It was undertaken by the Finnish Society for Diaconal Research (DTS), the Units for Research & Training and Diaconia in the Society of the ELCF's Central Administration, the Association of Diaconal Workers (Diakoniatyöntekijöiden Liitto, DTL), and the Diaconia University of Applied Sciences (DIAK). Three postgraduate students at the Diaconia University of Applied Sciences (DIAK) - Sirkku Hammarén, Maija Hietaniemi and Meri Kalanti - conducted the research under the supervision of Tiina Ikonen and Sakari Kainulainen. The steering group also included Titi Gävert (ELCF Central Administration), Esko Ryökäs (the Finnish Society for Diaconal Research, DTS), Marko Pasma (Association of Diaconal Workers), Veli-Matti Salminen (ELCF Central Administration, Research & Training) and Suvi-Maria Saarelainen (University of Eastern Finland, UEF).

Data was collected via a survey questionnaire in the beginning of 2022. The questionnaire was available in Finnish and in Swedish. There were 35 questions, and 15 of the questions mapped the background of each respondent. Results were interpreted against previous Diaconia Barometers, ELCF statistics, and relevant literature and research. Each of the three researchers wrote an article based on the results from a quantitative analysis of the material and qualitative content analysis. Factors affecting bias, reliability and validity were considered in all stages of research from defining the topics to the reporting of results. Questions were formulated in such a way as to ensure unambiguity. Respondents gave their answers and replies to open-ended questions anonymously.

Background data on the respondents

The survey was completed by a total of 355 diaconal workers which is 27% of the total number of diaconal workers employed by the ELCF. The response rate corresponds to the previous Diaconia Barometers. According to the ELCF personnel statistics, the ELCF employed a total of 1,327 diaconal workers in 2022.³ Of

¹ Kiiski 2014, Gävert 2016, Isomäki et al. 2018, Alava et al. 2020.

² Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland: Our policies

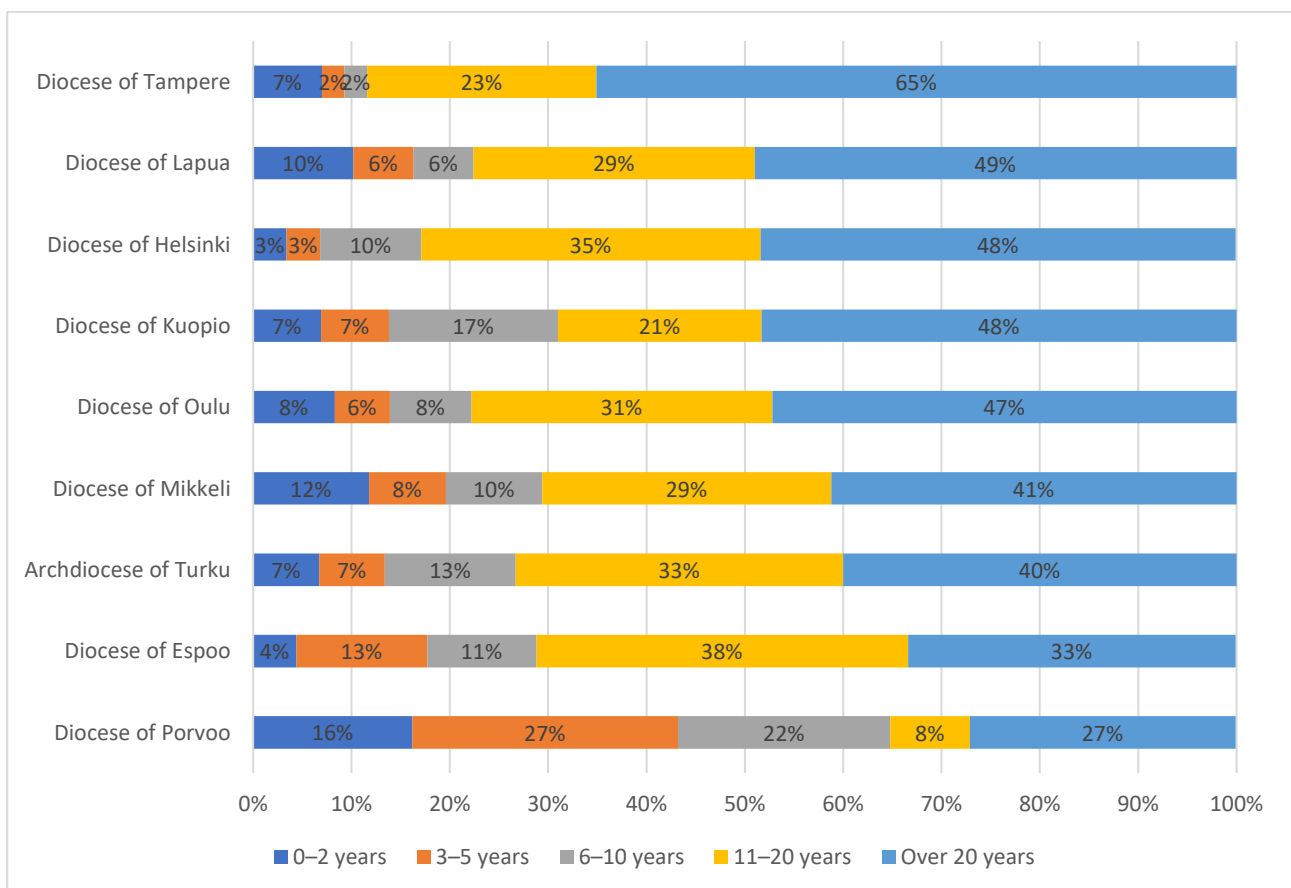
³ Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland: Kirkon henkilöstötilasto 2022 [Personnel Statistics 2022]

the respondents, 93% were women, 6% were men, and 1% did not wish to disclose their gender. The largest age group (42%) were 50- to 59-year-olds. The most active dioceses were Mikkeli and Lapua, with 51 and 49 respondents, respectively. Typically, the diaconal workers who completed the Diaconia Barometer 2022 survey had received their training in social sciences (deacon); a total of 137 respondents (39%). The ELCF requires its appointed diaconal workers to have a degree in either Health Care and Nursing (deaconess) or in Social Services (deacon). One question mapped any other education or training in addition to the formal requirements. The most commonly mentioned additional skills included training as a mental health nurse, community educator, elderly care professional, licensed practical nurse, childcare worker, nurse, parish social worker, public health nurse, or having a R&D specialist vocational qualification or a Master’s degree in Theology.

Typically, respondents who took the survey worked in towns with a population between 10,001 and 50,000 (40%). In the Diocese of Porvoo, more than half (51%) worked in small towns where population is less than 10,000 people, while in the Diocese of Espoo the corresponding figure was only 2%.

All of the respondents were experienced professionals. The largest amount of diaconal workers with over 20 years of experience was in the Diocese of Tampere (65% or nearly two in three diaconal workers). Roughly two thirds (72%) had over 11 years of experience in diaconal work. In the dioceses of Tampere and Helsinki nearly nine in ten and over eight in ten, respectively, had over 11 years of experience in diaconal work.

Figure 1. Years of experience in diaconal work by diocese (%).



In 2021, a moderate amount of applications were received for vacancies. On the national level, there were typically 1 to 5 applications per vacancy. This has raised concerns over whether there will be a sufficient amount of skilled professionals to fill the vacancies. Could the declining number of applicants be explained

by the overlapping requirements as all diaconal workers are trained in social sciences or health also? Demand for skilled professionals exceeds the supply, and the competition for skilled workers between the ELCF and the wellbeing services counties resulting from the health and social services reform will be fierce. As an employer, the assets of ELCF include informal job descriptions, relative independence and calling.

2. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on diaconal work

Meri Kalanti

Diaconal work during the COVID-19 pandemic

Diaconal ministry is tasked with responding to the sometimes rapid changes in the society. Some of the survey questions mapped the diaconal workers' experiences and opinions regarding the effects of the imposed restrictions on their work and on the lives of their clients. The purpose was to describe diaconal work during the pandemic, and to determine whether anything new had been introduced to diaconal work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, routines were modified, digital tools embraced and new ways of working implemented. In addition to organising their everyday work so as to ensure occupational safety and prevent infections, diaconal workers have been extremely concerned for the health and welfare of themselves, their important others and their clients. On the one hand, more than 90% of the respondents strongly agreed with the claim that events and volunteer activities were limited by the restrictions that came with the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, new types of volunteer work emerged during the pandemic.

Nearly all of the respondents agreed with the claim that the imposed restrictions had greatly affected the lives of their clients. However, for half of the respondents, restrictions had not affected their contact with clients, because they discovered safe ways of staying in touch. However, as a result of the imposed restrictions, co-operation with other organisations and agencies, and also with one's colleagues within the parish, was compromised.

"The pandemic impacted every aspect of work: we weren't allowed to come together, we weren't allowed to visit anyone in their homes, we weren't allowed to sing, to talk loudly... On top of that, closing churches is not my idea of what the Church is and what its tasks are. When people worry about themselves and others, the church doors should be open. As buildings, churches are usually very large, and therefore safe. I am an old deaconess, and in my opinion, in this line of work you sometimes find yourself in situations which could affect your own health." Diaconal worker, Archdiocese of Turku

The results of the Diaconia Barometer show that strict restrictions on the freedom of assembly raised concerns among diaconal workers. Many said that their workload had increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some diaconal workers felt that they had been treated unfairly as other church employees had been encouraged to take any accumulated vacation days while at the same time diaconal workers had been asked to postpone their vacations. There were some who said their working day had become a constant struggle. According to many of the respondents, constant changes have contributed to diaconal workers feeling increasingly burdened. Supporting others and spreading hope has been especially taxing when one's own strength has been waning. Regional differences, and differences between parishes, were large. Although most reported an increase in their workload and work becoming increasingly burdening, there were some who reported all work had nearly stopped.

Digital tools

During the COVID-19 pandemic, using digital tools has taken a quantum leap in diaconal work. The Teams application is a perfect example - in 2018, there was no need to include any questions regarding the app, when in 2022, it was used regularly or sometimes by 95% of the respondents. Electronic client records were widely used. What is interesting is that despite the rapid digital transformation, 11% of the respondents were not using an electronic system for client records in 2022. Cross-referencing the size of the town and electronic client records revealed that most of the diaconal workers without an electronic client record system were employed in towns with a population of less than 30,000 people. Hence, not having an electronic system for client records could be explained by insufficient funds as each parish must procure their own electronic client record systems.

Overall, the use of all digital tools increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2018, there has been an increase in pastoral conversations via text messaging and video calls. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 96% of the respondents engaged regularly in pastoral care conversations over the phone. Furthermore, digital tools enabled attending national development work and meetings remotely.

New ways of working

Overall, diaconal work has adapted to the current situation. In a way, the restrictions that came with the COVID-19 pandemic forced diaconal workers to adopt new ways of working when meeting clients face-to-face, for example, was at times completely forbidden. Nearly all respondents adopted new ways of working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For many, the phone became the most important tool to contact clients with while teleworking. Additionally, teleworking sometimes eased the stressfulness of a workday, and offered an opportunity to participate in development work at a national level, for example. However, teleworking also introduced problems in managing working time and separated workers from their workplace community.

With teleworking, virtual meetings have become the norm in everyday diaconal work. Virtual meetings have enabled continued collaboration and networking with various different agencies and other actors, although some diaconal workers feel that the contact remains rather shallow when meeting virtually. Furthermore, not all of the clients in need of the diaconal workers' help know how to use digital tools and online services. Therefore, new ways to meet clients and new forms of outreach work were developed. An example of this was organising afternoon coffee breaks outdoors, where a portable coffee wagon would be parked outside a shopping centre or in the city square, and people were invited to come have coffee and a chat. People were also approached by sending emails and traditional mail to their home address.

"With the pandemic, diaconia has once again demonstrated its agility, adaptability and resilience!" Diaconal worker, Diocese of Mikkeli

Operations were also modified to match the measures imposed to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. When food could no longer be distributed and communal meals organised as before, four in five started distributing food aid and financial aid. According to over half of the respondents, problems arising due to quarantines and self-isolation were addressed by increasing the resources in mental health care. Partly, this was to compensate for the shortage created when other services were closed.

Despite implementing several new ways of working and taking advantage of various digital tools, the essence of diaconal work has remained the same. For some diaconal workers, the COVID-19 pandemic offered an opportunity to develop their work and review the traditional approaches anew.

In December 2021, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health requested that professional diaconal workers trained as nurses and church premises be made available to assist the public healthcare mitigate the spread of the Omicron variant. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland acceded to the request. The ELCF's diaconal ministry employs approximately 600 healthcare professionals.⁴ However, a mere 5% of the respondents had assisted public healthcare in tracking the spread of COVID-19, vaccinations, printing COVID-19 certificates, acting as a point of contact, advising clients, and mapping the need for help in running errands. Although the diaconal workers were eager to assist, public healthcare seldom contacted the nominated ELCF contact persons.

Diaconal workers meet people in a variety of difficult life situations

The pandemic did not introduce any significant changes to the diaconal workers' clientele. The top five reasons to seek help remained the same as in previous barometers, i.e. physical and mental health problems, regular need of social assistance, repeated need for food aid, and long-term unemployment (over 6 months). Nine of ten respondents were in contact with people belonging to these groups at least once a month, and over half at least once a week. Over 80% had monthly meetings with employed people with low-income or those over-indebted. Thus, financial scarcity in the working age population does not affect the long-term unemployed only. One in two met with people struggling with substance abuse at least once a month. Thus, the amount decreased, but only slightly. A significant subgroup of substance abusers are elderly persons.

Those temporarily laid off because of the COVID-19 pandemic are a completely new category of people seeking assistance. Of the respondents, 57% were in contact with them at least once a month. Additionally, 54% of the respondents were in contact with people who postponed their medical care due to the pandemic at least once a month.

As in previous years, people postpone their medical care due to insufficient funds. Apparently, troubles continue to accumulate, as it became more common to meet with people struggling with more than five different types of challenges affecting their lives. One in three met people facing such hardship every week, and 77% once a month.

"Many of the families that were struggling before the pandemic, are now struggling even worse, and I do worry how the parents will cope. If we hadn't helped then, I don't know where they would have received help, and these situations are more and more frequent."
Diaconal worker, Diocese of Tampere

Although difficult to define, disadvantage and deprivation are typically understood to mean a lack of financial, social and health-related resources. Deprivation is scarcity of not only financial but also cultural and social capital. However, disadvantage and deprivation are to some extent a subjective experience, and not everyone with limited means regard themselves as underprivileged.⁵

Accumulated and transgenerational disadvantage and deprivation increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the respondents, 71% came into contact with second or third generation social welfare/diaconal work clients. This is a distinct increase from the 66% in the Diaconia Barometer 2020. With increased use of digital services, there was an increase in the number of meetings with clients who did not know how to use digital services. Of the respondents, 74% met such clients at least once a month.

⁴ News Bulletin: ELCF responds to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health's request for assistance.

⁵ Zitting 2021

Approximately one in three met with victims of violence or abuse at least once a month. Every diaconal worker employed in a small town encountered elderly people suffering from chronic loneliness. Over half of the respondents met with young people suffering from chronic loneliness at least once a month. The amount increased during the pandemic.

According to study results, loneliness is equally hazardous to health as smoking, and loneliness shows in brain scans similarly to physical pain. Loneliness and psychological distress are closely connected, and young people, in particular, suffered from social distancing. People of all ages are now spending more time alone, and being afraid for oneself or for others of contracting the virus has been distressing. Loneliness is connected to substance abuse and mental health problems, wellbeing, physical and mental capability, the ability to learn, and physical health. Loneliness can be the cause of a vicious cycle which prevents the person from seeking help. They may feel that nothing will ever change, or that they don't deserve help or support. Loneliness is a subjective experience, difficult to define or assess from the outside.⁶

During the COVID-19 pandemic, loneliness increased more among people who were subjected to domestic abuse. Because of the pandemic, seeking and receiving help became more difficult, and the measures imposed to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 could be used as an excuse for more controlling behaviour such as additional restrictions and other abuse. Working from home forced people subjected to domestic violence to stay at home with their abuser. The situation of children and immigrants raised concern, in particular. Not all immigrants know how to read, which enables the abuser to exploit the victim's uncertainty and seclusion to their advantage.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the elderly were isolated into their homes. Replies written in the questionnaire showed that the diaconal workers had genuine concerns regarding their clients who were alone, because despite having relatives, they were not allowed to meet them for fear of contracting the virus. During the COVID-19 pandemic, hospitals and nursing homes remained closed for visitors, and at times prison visits were also forbidden. Every diaconal worker employed in a small town with a population of less than 10,000 people, has encountered elderly persons suffering from chronic loneliness. However, loneliness is encountered in every location irrespective of its population.

"One of my clients is over 100 years old and has survived five pandemics. She says COVID-19 is the worst because it has isolated her from other people." Diaconal worker, Archdiocese of Turku

Diaconal workers encounter people struggling with substance abuse often. The most vulnerable substance abusers suffered most from the restrictions that came with the COVID-19 pandemic, as food aid and peer groups typically organised by non-profit third sector organisations were either on hold, or the number of participants was drastically limited. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the deficit in substance abuse services deepened, and not all were able to start using online services. The situation of the homeless has been particularly dire, especially after frequenting public spaces became impossible due to the imposed restrictions.

Of the respondents, 64% met with young adults struggling with substance abuse at least once a month. Correspondingly, 47% of the respondents met with elderly people struggling with substance abuse at least once a month.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the income of small business owners and those in the creative sector have received ample media coverage, but seldom encountered by diaconal workers. Of the respondents, 23% met with small business owners at least once a month, and 17% with people employed in

⁶Lähteenmäki 2022, 71–73, 80.

the creative sector. A larger proportion of the respondents met people who had been laid off permanently or temporarily because of the COVID-19 pandemic, 36% and 57%, respectively.

Prioritising the tasks of diaconal workers

Diaconal work is comprehensive and varied. There are several subcategories of diaconal work, and each diaconal worker's job comprises a varied mix of these different categories. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the main areas of diaconal work included the following: contacting clients by phone (91% selected 'very often' or 'often'), financial assistance (83%), food aid (80%), pastoral care (77%), and alleviating loneliness (76%).

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the different forms of diaconal work - in the Diaconia Barometer 2020, over half of the respondents (56%) organised group activities 'very often' or 'often', whereas in the first year of the pandemic, the corresponding figure was down to 20%. Diaconal events were organised in the church premises by 38% of the respondents in 2020, when in the Diaconia Barometer 2022 the corresponding figure was only 11%.⁷ During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of excursions and camping events decreased drastically, and the same development was seen in the number of meetings with clients in church premises, visits to institutions, visits to clients' homes, and participating in the Common Responsibility Campaign.

Food aid, mental health care and health promotion were areas of diaconal work that have expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic. There was no change in influencing decision-making. Nearly all respondents (95%) agreed that diaconal workers should introduce financial inequality and general ill-being into the public debate. Despite this, very few say they influence decision-making. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 16% of the respondents regularly influenced decision-making; during the pandemic the corresponding figure was 15%. This raises the question whether diaconal workers are consumed by their tasks to such an extent that there is no time left for influencing, or is influencing decision-making seen as a task for the management levels?

Discussion

Diaconal workers encounter people of all ages and various walks of life. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for help increased, and this was reflected in the growing number of clients as well as in the development and implementation of new tools and new ways of working. And although meetings were increasingly held online, the agenda did not change. Going forward, how will diaconia also reach those who cannot be contacted using electronic devices? With restrictions on organising social gatherings indoors, inviting people for afternoon coffee outdoors provided a way to meet clients face-to-face. The workload increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Managers and other decision-makers need to consider re-allocating resources or adding more resources to diaconal work.

Transgenerational deprivation and loneliness remain major challenges in our modern society, and the COVID-19 pandemic did nothing to help in reaching out to those suffering from loneliness the most. During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, four in five diaconal workers encountered clients struggling with several problems simultaneously at least once a month.

The quantum leap in digital transformation was partly forced but is generally seen as a positive development. Interesting topics for future research include the resilience of diaconal workers, recovering from the pandemic, and to what extent the newly found digital tools continue to be used in the future. Will electronic devices and digital tools replace the need for meeting clients in person? Or do we go back to

⁷Alava et al. 2020.

visiting clients in their homes and in institutions, organising group activities, and meeting clients in person? The consequences of the war in Ukraine began to show in the spring of 2022 as inflation deepened and refugees started to arrive. These are interesting topics for future research. Diaconia is agile and adapts readily to rapid changes. Diaconal workers are experienced professional, and their skill is evident by their ability to quickly react and adapt to whatever situation. It will be interesting to see which of these changes will prevail.

3. Volunteers in diaconal work

Maija Hietaniemi

Volunteer activities and inclusion in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland

Church is entrusted with the task of loving one's neighbour, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) calls for all of its members to implement this in their lives. Diaconia is not tasked to diaconal workers alone but to all Christians. Volunteering offers a way for everyone to connect with their community and share their skills for the greater good.⁸ Volunteering is defined as participating in an unpaid activity of one's own accord and during one's free time. In the ELCF, volunteer work is divided into three categories: organised volunteer work, elected officials, and activities organised independently by members of the congregation. Volunteer activities are intertwined with the inalienable task of the Church, and volunteers work side by side with each other and with the ELCF employees. In addition to the Church, volunteer work is connected to the community also. Volunteering in the Church is one way of leading a Christian life, although volunteering in the Church context is not limited to members of the ELCF. Inclusion means belonging to an entity where it is possible to tap into sources of wellbeing and social interactions that add meaning and purpose to one's life. Koinonia is a term used in the Church to describe inclusion, connection and sharing. Its roots are in the early Christian fellowship of service and worship. Koinonia describes our connection with God and our connection with one another and with all of creation. In terms of inclusion, the diaconal ministry of the ELCF is deeply rooted in early Christian fellowship. The Church invites all people to join this community where everyone looks after one another.⁹

Over the past decade, volunteer activities have been a prominent topic in the strategies and projects of the ELCF. In the current Strategy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, "Opening Doors", volunteer activities are highlighted, and its role strengthened. The Strategy of the ELCF promotes a member-driven approach, providing opportunities for volunteer work, training and contributing to social cohesion.¹⁰

The Diaconia Barometer 2022 mapped the various activities for volunteers in diaconal work and the problems related to volunteers and volunteer work. The questions included the following: "What is volunteering in diaconal work?", "How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect volunteer activities?" and "What types of support is required for the development of volunteer activities?"

Volunteers contribute to a variety of tasks

The survey mapped volunteer work in the context of diaconia. Respondents were asked to estimate how many volunteers had participated in the listed tasks in their respective parishes over the past few years.

Five in six respondents listed one or more diaconal tasks in their parish where volunteers could participate. According to the respondents, the largest number of volunteers worked in hands-on aid work distributing

⁸ Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Voluntary work.

⁹ Kuusimäki.

¹⁰ Opening Doors.

food to the low-income clients and organising communal meals, in particular. Nearly half of the respondents estimated that many volunteers participate in these tasks in their respective parishes, and 80% estimated that at least some volunteers took part in the distribution of food and in communal meals. Volunteers participated also in international work and the Common Responsibility Campaign, donated financial and other forms of aid, and assisted in worship services. Tasks such as the befriending services and assisting in running errands in homes and institutions were also popular among volunteers. Volunteers organised events, assisted in worship services, organised open doors events, and worked as camp counsellors. One in three respondents reported that volunteers were involved in communication and influencing decision-making at least to some extent.

Volunteers assisted in several other tasks also, but to a smaller extent. Some tasks, such as volunteering in terminal care, or working as a grief group counsellor or an expert by experience, typically tempt only those volunteers who are specifically dedicated to the tasks in question. During the COVID-19 pandemic, new types of volunteer work emerged, including streaming and digital befriending services. Volunteering is important for the volunteers and for diaconal work as a whole. According to the results, all skills are useful.

Interestingly, volunteering is shaped very differently in the various dioceses. Everywhere in Finland, volunteers work in food aid distribution and communal meals. This type of volunteer work is well established in the context of diaconal work, providing a practical alternative to loving thy neighbour. Differences were identified in other respects. Compared to the other dioceses, volunteer work was more varied in the dioceses of Espoo, Helsinki and Lapua. Open doors and low threshold events, financial counselling, and assisting in worship services were the most common forms of volunteer work in Helsinki. In Espoo, volunteers were in charge of open doors and low threshold events and acted as group leaders more than elsewhere in Finland. Befriending services were prominent in the Diocese of Kuopio, while volunteering in online help and help line services was typical in the Diocese of Oulu. Based on the above, it can be concluded that volunteer work is shaped by local needs and opportunities.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on volunteer work

Of the respondents, 93% agreed or strongly agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic had affected volunteer work in their respective parishes. This was one of the areas where diaconal workers collaborated closely with other actors. Annually, more than two in three had coordinated volunteer activities together with some other actor, and one in three once a month or more often. When the crisis hit, the local actors quickly found each other and joined resources to respond to the increased need for help.

“We collaborated closely with others during the pandemic, and also participated in development work. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we’ve held joint meetings with the municipality, the services for the elderly, associations and volunteers - as often as every week, in the beginning - to coordinate who will focus on what.” Diaconal worker, Diocese of Espoo

Inclusive activities bringing people together and promoting social cohesion were repeatedly on hold during the COVID-19 pandemic. This affected those activities which were organised independently of the employers, because in many places the Church premises were closed.

“Elderly volunteers have vanished.” Diaconal worker, Diocese of Espoo

“The Café was closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, we had 40 to 60 people coming in every week, and it also provided work for several volunteers.” Diaconal worker, Diocese of Tampere

Diaconal workers encounter different kinds of people and invite them to join and become part of an interactive network. Although volunteer activities faced major challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic,

they didn't come to a complete standstill. Instead, volunteer work continued and adapted to the restrictions. Of the respondents, 87% had coordinated volunteer work in 2021, and over 50% had coordinated volunteer work at least once a month. 83% had provided opportunities for the underprivileged to play a meaningful role in the congregation at least once a year.

The restrictions that came with the COVID-19 pandemic had little impact on the different ways in which members of the congregation helped one another. Approximately four in five had promoted activities that strengthened the fellowship among the underprivileged at least once a year, and nearly one in two had done this at least once a month. In creating networks that promote inclusion, in inviting people to join diaconal activities, and in providing opportunities for having meaningful experiences that connect even the most vulnerable to the congregation, diaconal workers are fulfilling the mission of the Church and operating at the very heart of diaconia.

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to describe any new types of volunteer work that had emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The question was answered by 128 people. The answers were classified using material-based content analysis, and nine categories were identified as follows:

- 1) Volunteering in food aid
- 2) Assistance in running errands and grocery shopping
- 3) Volunteering to alleviate loneliness
- 4) Assisting with digital tools
- 5) Volunteer work related to social cohesion/connecting with the congregation
- 6) Donating financial aid/financial counselling
- 7) Volunteer work related to health care and nursing
- 8) Peer support and mentoring
- 9) Other volunteer work

During a crisis, our impulse to help others tends to increase. Volunteers worked alongside diaconal workers and responded to the acute need for help by distributing food, running errands, and alleviating loneliness, in particular. During the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteer activities were based on the already existing structures and local collaborative networks. For example, in most places a framework for food distribution existed and needed only to be modified to meet the new safety requirements. The need for help increased significantly at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic when entire age groups were quarantined. Volunteers alleviated loneliness by making phone calls to the elderly people who had been quarantined, and by reaching out to other people who were alone. At the start of the pandemic, volunteers delivered food aid, went grocery shopping, and picked up pharmaceuticals to people placed in quarantine, for example.

“Distributing food created new tasks at the beginning of the pandemic. We needed drivers to deliver the food parcels and people to pack the food. Once communal meals were put on hold, we needed people to serve meals in the church yard.” Diaconal worker, Diocese of Helsinki

“When the COVID-19 pandemic began, we decided to contact by phone all of our members who were over 80 years old to ask how they're coping and to give advice on free groceries/pharmaceuticals delivery services, for example. There were a total of 4,000 people to call, and we recruited volunteers to accomplish this.” Diaconal worker, Diocese of Tampere

Digital and online tasks for volunteers included streaming worship services and other events, online devotionals and musical programmes, filming and editing, updating social media, leading online groups, and digital/online befriending services. Furthermore, volunteers had taught people to use computers and smart devices.

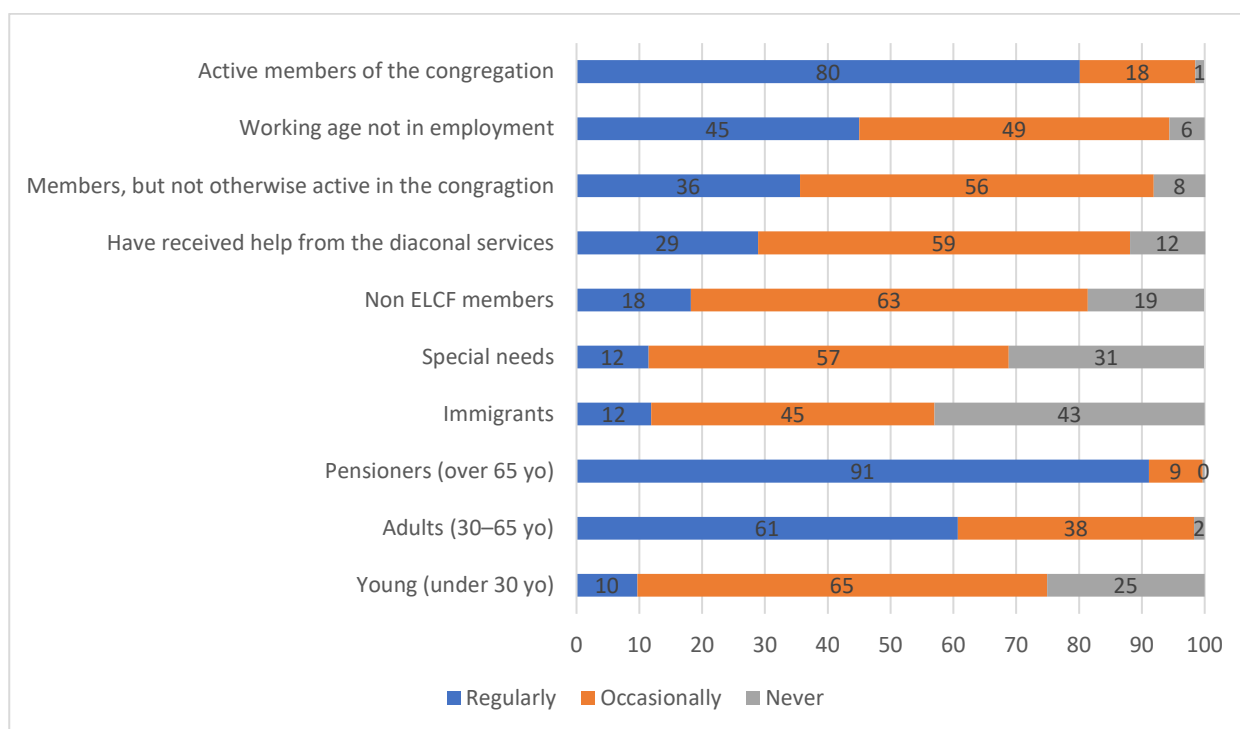
Towards the end of 2020, the Ministry of Education and Culture granted the diaconal work of ELCF a discretionary subsidy to support its operations. The parishes used this subsidy on pandemic-specific activities, including help lines, outreach work and financial aid in the form of delivering groceries, running errands and gift cards, in particular. According to the results of the barometer, volunteers played an important role in distributing the subsidy to those in need alongside the diaconal workers.¹¹

Outreach work with a low threshold

The Diaconia Barometer mapped the age groups and background data of the volunteers. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to estimate how often volunteers with specific backgrounds did volunteer work in their respective parishes.

Pensioners shoulder most of the volunteer work in parishes. Over 90% of the respondents reported that they have pensioners volunteering on a regular basis in their respective parishes. Over 60% had working age adults volunteering regularly, and nearly all reported working age adults volunteering at least occasionally. The volunteer profiles in diaconal work became more varied when those who volunteer only occasionally were also considered. Over 70% reported under 30-year-olds volunteering in diaconal work at least occasionally. This is a noteworthy result given that there are an abundance of hobbies and other pastime activities competing for young people’s leisure time.

Figure 2. Volunteer profiles in diaconal work (%) (n = 339–348).



Interacting with others strengthens agency and gives purpose which in turn promote inclusion and enhance personal resources. Volunteering instills a sense of belonging, and volunteer work can offer the means of finding one’s place in the community. A large amount of people who are not otherwise active in the

¹¹Gävert 2021.

congregation volunteer in diaconal work. People belonging to this group participated at least occasionally in nearly every respondent's parish, and regularly in the parishes of over 33%. Nearly all of the respondents reported that working age people not in employment volunteered at least occasionally, and 90% reported that they had volunteers who themselves received help from the diaconal services. One in five of the respondents' parishes had volunteers who were not members of the ELCF.

Working together with others gives life purpose and provides fertile ground for trust and hope to flourish. In their networks, diaconal workers could clarify the ways in which they promote the inclusion of those occupying the most vulnerable positions in the society, in particular. This would have a ripple effect on the society. The results showed that volunteer activities in diaconal work reached a wide array of people with different backgrounds and from different age groups. Diaconal workers enable inclusion. By providing opportunities for volunteering, diaconal work implements the ELCF's Strategy of "Opening Doors" which states that the Church's mission is to call people to be in fellowship with God and encourage them to care for their neighbours and all of God's creation.

On the level of dioceses, pensioners volunteered in diaconal work everywhere in Finland, while the largest share of regularly volunteering young people (under 30-year-olds) was found in the dioceses of Tampere, Espoo and Lapua and the Archdiocese of Turku. One in two respondents from the dioceses of Helsinki and Tampere and one in three from the Diocese of Espoo reported having volunteers who themselves received help from the diaconal services. The lowest levels of Church membership were found in the dioceses of Helsinki and Espoo. For the majority, the reason for resigning their Church membership is that the Church institution is not meaningful to them on a personal level. On the other hand, the reasons for joining the Church increasingly include a desire to commit to Christian fellowship. Outreach work targeting the everyday lives of people can promote fellowship and create ties to the Church. Compared to the other dioceses, there was greater variety in the volunteers' backgrounds in the dioceses of Helsinki and Espoo. Although the ties to the Church have been severed in the metropolitan area more than elsewhere in the country, the importance of volunteering in diaconal work appears to be greater. The threshold to volunteering in diaconal work seems to be lower than the threshold to Church membership. Apparently, the desire to help others in concrete ways and volunteering for a good cause are what make the Church attractive to people.

Teamwork, time and a change in attitudes needed to improve volunteer activities

The Church's volunteer work guidelines state that the development of volunteer activities requires that parish employees together with elected officials and volunteers draw up and commit to a plan and agreed goals. In the guidelines, emphasis is on appointing employees to coordinate volunteer work, allocating them sufficient hours to carry out this task, drawing up an itemised job description and allocating funds for volunteer activities. The Diaconia Barometer 2022 included a question where respondents were asked to share their opinions on how the role of volunteer activities could be strengthened in the diaconal work of their respective parishes. The respondents were asked to select from a list of options the three options which in their opinion were the most important.

Table 1. Measures that would strengthen the role of volunteer activities according to the diaconal workers (%) (n = 344).

| In your opinion, what would you need more in order to strengthen the role of volunteering activities in the diaconal work of your parish? Please select three options from the list. | % |
|--|----|
| Team work across professional fields | 66 |
| Working hours allocated to co-ordinating volunteering activities | 62 |
| Improved attitudes towards volunteer work within the workplace | 47 |
| Training on how to co-ordinate volunteer work | 38 |
| Budget funds to develop volunteering activities | 29 |
| Support from the management | 24 |
| Premises | 9 |

Diaconal work is characterised by Christian fellowship, which was apparent in the ways the respondents would develop volunteer activities. Although one in four did prefer additional funds, for the majority funding was not the main problem. According to the diaconal workers, the best ways to revive volunteer activities included developing teamwork within the parishes and allocating working hours for the coordination of volunteer work. These options were selected by two thirds of the respondents. These same suggestions were first presented in the Diaconia Barometer 2011. What was discovered in Diaconia Barometer 2022 was that including the coordination of volunteer work in the job description provided a frame of reference which ensured that working hours were spent on these tasks. Additionally, it was the opinion of approximately half of the respondents that attitudes towards volunteer activities need to undergo a positive change in the workplace. It appears that volunteer activities could easily be expanded with relatively small financial investment provided that, in the workplace, focus is re-directed on development work. More than one third required training in coordinating volunteer work, more than one fourth a larger budget to develop the activities, and roughly one in four support from the management. Of the given options, additional premises received the least votes. The top three options are all in some way connected to the structural framework of the parish and factors related to shared work. Support from the management didn't make the top three, although it is a prerequisite for any of the proposed actions to move forward.

Survey questions mapping the respondents' background included a question on their role in relation to volunteer work. Coordinating volunteer work or organising training and providing guidance to the volunteer workers were included in the job description of 38% of the respondents. However, for 51% their work includes coordinating volunteer work although it is not included in their job description. For 11%, work did not include any volunteer activities. According to the study results, the number of working hours diaconal workers devoted to coordinating volunteering activities depended on whether it was included in the job description. If it was included in the job description, diaconal workers devoted more hours to coordinating volunteer work, working across professional fields, planning volunteer work with members of the congregation, recruiting people, and finding ways to use the variety of available skills in diaconal work.

Discussion

According to the survey results, the volunteer activities carried out in the context of ELCF's diaconal work can be described as extensive, adaptable and inclusive outreach work with a low threshold. Coordinating volunteer work and inviting people to join are both very basic tasks in diaconal work. Although focusing on

volunteer activities are highlighted in diaconal work and on the level of the Church, the barriers to developing volunteer activities appear to be structural.

According to the diaconal workers, volunteer work was hit hard by the COVID-19 safety restrictions. Although many of the more traditional types of volunteer work were put on hold, volunteer work was adapted in order to be able to address the increased need for help during the COVID-19 pandemic while promoting inclusion and giving a sense of purpose to the volunteers. Volunteer work will play a major role in recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. By developing their volunteer activities, parishes heed the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for future crises.

Strengthening the role of volunteer activities appeared not to depend on funds or even the availability of premises, although indirectly the financial situation of the Church will become an issue, if more working hours are to be allocated to coordinating volunteer activities. Funds will be needed to secure sufficient personnel in diaconal work also in the future. Furthermore, it is necessary that the coordinators of volunteer activities are professional diaconal workers because the coordinating volunteer activities involves encounters likely to demand professional skills. Measures that strengthen volunteer activities and can be implemented without additional funding include teamwork across professional fields and improving the attitudes towards volunteer activities.

According to the survey results, volunteering in diaconal work is a low-threshold activity that also reaches non-members of the ELCF and members who are not otherwise active in the congregation. In terms of Church membership, the importance of volunteer work should not be underestimated - finding purpose and a community to belong to may well encourage people to make a commitment. Furthermore, volunteering in diaconal work is highly inclusive which is demonstrated by the fact that volunteers include people who themselves receive help from the diaconal services.

Throughout its history, diaconal work has gone through different phases with emphasis shifting from caritative and catechetical diaconia to liturgical, social, societal, missionary, pastoral and ecological diaconia. All of these areas can be detected in modern day diaconal work as well. Should inclusion be explicitly stated as a focus area and direction of future diaconal work? In promoting inclusion diaconal work draws from its roots while being tapped into the problems and challenges of the modern-day society. With its focus on inclusion, diaconal work loses nothing of its essence, but instead identifies its connection and the purpose it serves to the koinonia of early Christianity.

4. Collaborative networks centred around the client

Sirkku Hammarén & Sakari Kainulainen

Diaconia takes place among people and in networks. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced changes to the ways in which we work with people and within networks. Simultaneously, the effects of the health and social services reform on diaconal work remain unclear. Inspired by these changes, we intend to first identify the collaborative networks of diaconal work and then determine how, according to the diaconal workers, the health and social services reform will affect the services diaconal clients are entitled to. In connection to this, we will explore the ways in which diaconal workers have participated in the preparation of co-operation to promote the social and health services and overall health and wellbeing. In the final section of this chapter, we analyse the diaconal workers' thoughts on the changes affecting their work.

Diaconal work and networking

To promote the wellbeing and inclusion of their clients diaconal workers are part of extensive co-operative networks spanning multiple professional fields. Networking and partnerships have been an essential part of diaconal work long before the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent crisis. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the value of those existing networks multiplied.

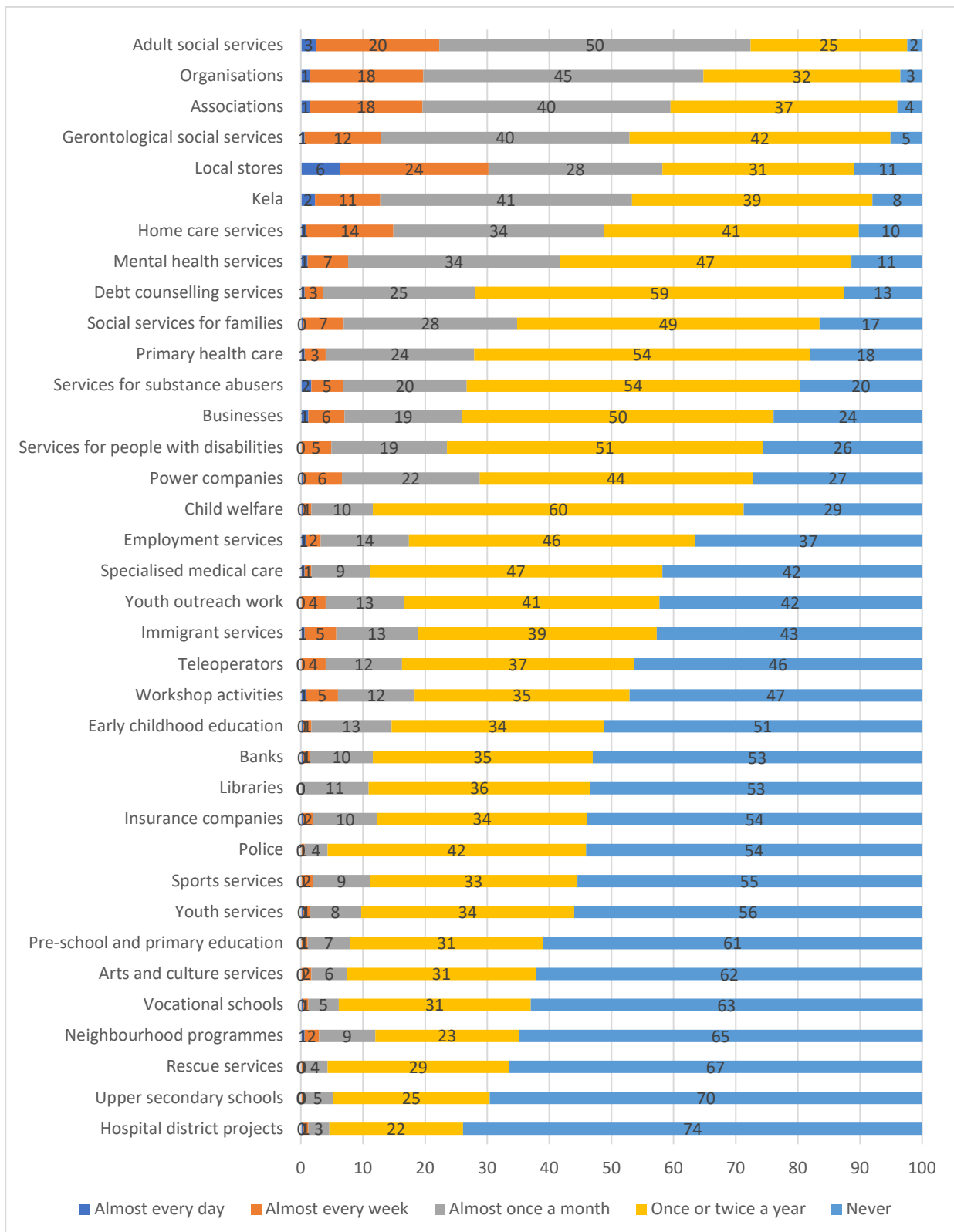
According to the survey results, diaconal workers co-operate with a wide range of partners. Additionally, the extensive network is proof of the large variety of people and problems diaconal workers encounter. According to the Diaconia Barometer 2022, nearly all of the respondents co-operated on a regular basis with adult and gerontological social services, the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela) and organisations and associations. Three in four are in contact with the above mentioned actors at least once a month, and 90% of the respondents co-operate regularly with local stores, mental health services and home care services. Other partners typically include debt counselling services, social services for families, primary health care, services for substance abusers, services for people with disabilities, child welfare, businesses and power companies (a total of 80% of the respondents).

Seven in ten respondents were in contact with adult social services at least once a month. This is explained by the fact that most clients of diaconal work need help with social assistance or haven't paid their bills and need assistance to determine whether they are entitled to preventive social assistance, for example.

“Services aren't as easily accessible for our clients as they were before. In adult social services, for example, there was a 3-month queue for a long time before new clients were contacted. This has put a lot of pressure on diaconal workers. As such, our collaboration with social services goes smoothly. However, there have been major cutbacks in social and health services, and the employee turnover is really high.” Diaconal worker, Diocese of Espoo

More than one in every two respondents was in contact with gerontological social services at least once every month. In many municipalities and communities of municipalities, gerontological social services are tasked to specialist social workers who specialise in working with older, typically over 65-year-old clients. Diaconal workers have an opportunity to identify the needs of elderly people when they come into contact with them either in group activities or other events or when visiting elderly people in their homes. Thus, co-operating with the municipal gerontological social services is a natural extension of everyday diaconal work. Less than half of the respondents co-operated with home care and mental health services also. In many cases, these are linked to gerontological social services. Nowadays elderly people live at home longer and require assistance and support to manage on their own.

Figure 3. Diaconal workers' partnerships with various actors (%) (n = 347–351).



Diaconal workers co-operated with other actors albeit to a lesser extent including schools, projects in the hospital districts, the police and the rescue services. The diaconal workers listed also other actors including lawyers, the prison and probation service, other parishes and other municipal services.

“We co-operate more with our partners. For example, Kela started to take part in distributing food, and we operate much more closely with social workers. We need each other in times of a crisis. Our collaboration has been fruitful, and we intend to continue to co-operate even after the pandemic.” Diaconal worker, Diocese of Tampere

Diaconal workers co-operate closely with several partners which demonstrates the large variety of people and problems diaconal workers encounter. Each collaborative partnership is valuable irrespective of how many diaconal workers co-operate with the same partners or how closely. Collaborative networks function well when the partnership is mutually beneficial, and the actions of the different partners complement each other in achieving a shared goal. In this case, the wellbeing of the client.

Diaconal workers and the health and social services reform

The Finnish Parliament adopted the act on the reform of the organisation of healthcare, social welfare and rescue services on 23 June 2021. The change in legislation entered into force on 1 January 2023. With the reform, 21 new wellbeing service counties were established in addition to the Hospital District of Helsinki and Uusimaa.

The Diaconia Barometer set out to investigate the following questions:

1. How do diaconal workers expect the health and social services reform to affect the services of diaconal clients?
2. How have diaconal workers participated in the preparation of co-operation to promote the social and health services and overall health and wellbeing?

The Diaconia Barometer mapped the diaconal workers' opinions on the health and social services reform. The diaconal workers are concerned about the effects the reform will have on their clients. More than four in five believed that the health and social services reform will increase the need for case management and client guidance. According to the respondents, this will manifest in the amount of assistance required to fill out application forms. More than one in two believes that the accessibility of regional services will be compromised. There is concern that the effects of the reform will, in particular, impact those whose situation in life is already difficult. One in two reckoned that although diaconal work will remain an important partner to social and health services, collaboration is unlikely to continue smoothly as of 2023.

Opinions on the effects of the reform differed depending on the size of the respondent's place of work. The diaconal workers employed in larger cities tended to believe that the social and health services were likely to improve locally or regionally, whereas three in four diaconal workers employed in smaller towns believed that services will degrade. Hence, the success of the reform may be interpreted quite differently when comparing the national to local estimates. The general concern appears to be that as a consequence of the reform, services will be transferred to larger cities thus increasing the distance to services. Inequality is expected to increase.

“I work in a rural town where access to social and health services is already poor. I doubt the situation will improve any time soon, if ever. There's only one physician, and geographically the region is very large. One mental health nurse is trying to cope with all of those needing help in the area. Luckily there are associations and organisations which can provide some support.” Diaconal worker, Diocese of Kuopio

The Diaconia Barometer survey included questions mapping the diaconal workers' thoughts and opinions on the health and social services reform, and how they have contributed to the preparation of co-operation in the field of health and social services. A total of 196 respondents answered the questions. This is over 50% of the respondents.

The replies were grouped into the following eight categories:

1. Participated in the preparation of the health and social services and health and wellbeing reform on a regional or local level
2. Participated within one's parish
3. Concerned about the role of the Church and continuance of co-operation
4. Concern for the clients
5. Following the development of the health and social services reform and eager to influence
6. Accessibility of services and increased distances
7. Positive and negative impacts of the reform
8. Summarized selection of fears, beliefs and hopes regarding the health and social services reform

At the time of the survey (end of January 2022), 52 of the respondents had participated in the preparation of the health and social services reform. Typically, this was in the context of continued collaboration on the level of communities of municipalities. The most common areas of co-operation in the preparatory stages included family centres, crisis groups, child and family services, the elderly citizens council and the advisory board for the rights of persons with disabilities. Diaconal workers participated on the local and regional levels, officially and in less formal settings in e.g. projects, as members of steering groups and as individuals. According to the diaconal workers, it felt natural to participate in the development of a client-based system for a single point of contact. However, there is still a long way to go before clients are able to get all the help they need via seamless co-operation between various services, and concerns for those in need of a variety of services were raised, in particular. In terms of co-operation, the asset of the parishes is that parishes are present and promoting wellbeing in every municipality.

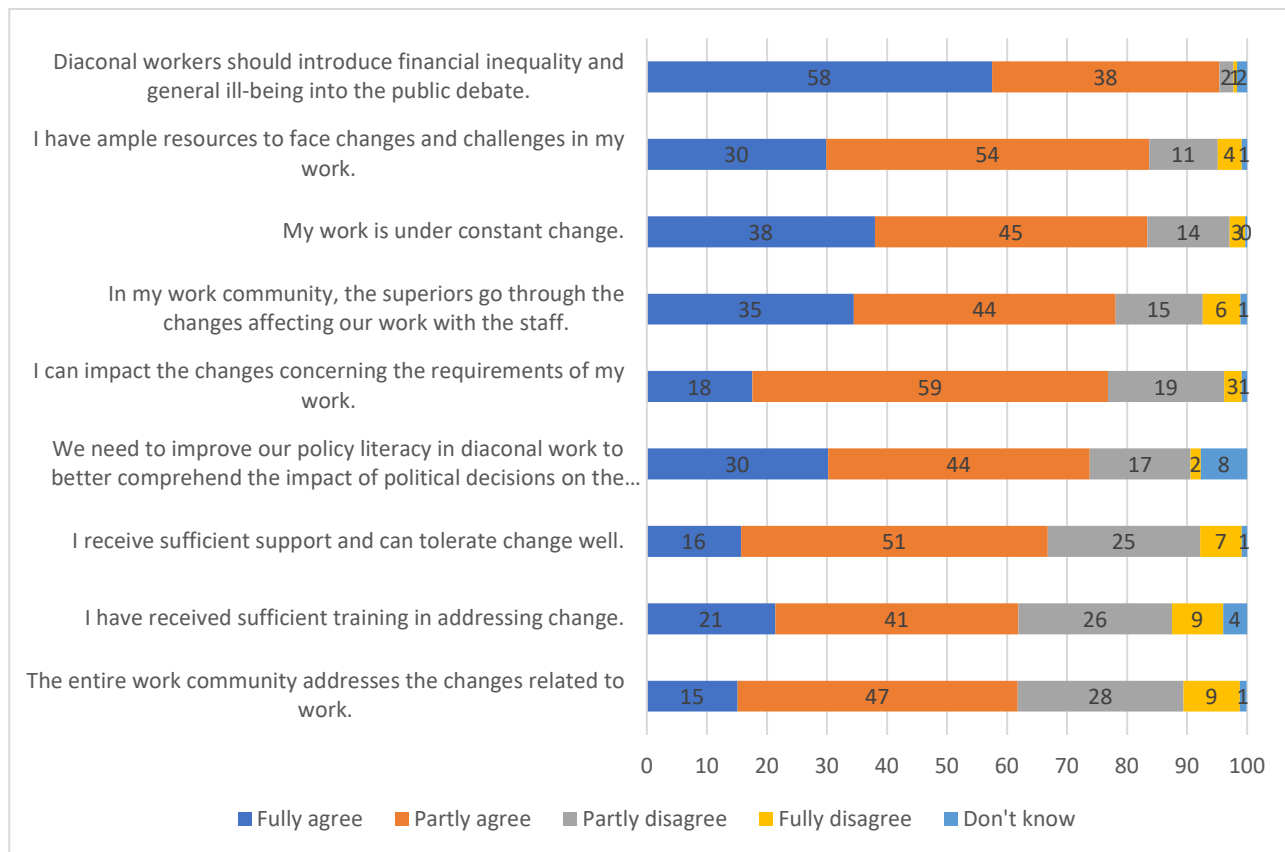
The respondents agreed almost unanimously that diaconal workers should introduce financial inequality and general ill-being into the public debate. However, three in four felt they needed to improve their policy literacy. Diaconal workers encounter people in distress often and in large amounts but lack the ability to adequately draw public attention to it, according to the respondents. Partly, this might be due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent depletion of resources.

Furthermore, the respondents voiced their concerns about the role of diaconal work, the parishes and the Church during the health and social services reform and after its implementation. The issues raised by the respondents included the fear that the health and social services might consider the role of the Church and its diaconal work irrelevant, or that in the eyes of the public services, the Church and its diaconal work are a secluded, unfamiliar unit. In their respective networks, the diaconal workers have attempted to clarify the role of diaconal work and its impacts on the society. In their replies to the survey questions, diaconal workers wished to encourage others to actively take a stand and promote taking the most vulnerable people into consideration when structuring the services framework.

Diaconal workers surrounded by constant change

To reach those most in need of help, diaconal work is characteristically well informed about the trends affecting the society. As a result, diaconal work is constantly changing, or if not changing, probing the general atmosphere to detect oncoming change.

Figure 4. Changes in diaconal work (%) (n = 346–351).



The vast majority of the diaconal workers felt that they had sufficient resources for facing changes and tackling new challenges in their work. However, one in three estimated that they do not receive sufficient support and are unable to bear the changes sufficiently well. One in six diaconal workers (15%) felt their resources for facing changes and tackling new challenges in their work had been completely depleted. Compared to the results from the Diaconia Barometer 2018 when only 6% of the respondents were in this group, the situation has deteriorated alarmingly by nearly 10%. Workplaces, teams, and work communities should focus on finding solutions to stop this development, and to support the coping mechanisms of the employees and improve their wellbeing. This not merely for the employee’s sake but improving the employees’ wellbeing will ensure that they have sufficient resources to introduce financial inequality and general ill-being into the public debate.

5. Diaconal work adapts and impacts

Esko Ryökäs, Titi Gävert, Tiina Ikonen, Sakari Kainulainen, Suvi-Maria Saarelainen and Veli-Matti Salminen

The Diaconia Barometer survey is currently conducted every two years. It maps the views and opinions of the diaconal workers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) on topical themes related to diaconal work. Diaconia provides for the most vulnerable; advocates justice, peace, equality and social cohesion; seeks to influence decision-making; and promotes wellbeing as one node of a network of organisations and agencies. In this Diaconia Barometer 2022 (DBR 2022), special focus was on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on diaconal work, on volunteers in diaconal work, and on the collaborative networks of diaconal work.

Diaconal ministry is tasked with responding to the sometimes rapid changes in the society. During the COVID-19 pandemic, routines were modified, digital tools embraced, and new ways of working implemented. In addition to organising their everyday work so as to ensure occupational safety and prevent infections, diaconal workers have been extremely concerned for the health and welfare of themselves and of others. The constantly changing restrictions contributed to diaconal workers feeling increasingly burdened.

Joining forces to work together is characteristic of diaconal work. However, resources have depleted over the years of the COVID-19 pandemic and the future challenges seem overwhelming. The desire to help is in itself not enough without sufficient resources and adequate tools to redesign the structures causing disadvantage and deprivation. The results of this Diaconia Barometer 2022 highlight new research data on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on diaconal work. The survey results confirm the results from studies focusing on the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Namely, that parish work was found to have meaning in a time of crisis. On the one hand, discovering new ways to take part in the everyday lives of people and offering support in these trying times was considered important. On the other hand, sudden changes have been an additional burden on the employees. Afterall, a change is always something different and as such likely to cause stress.¹²

The fundamental change in the way work is carried out in parishes has shaped the everyday lives of the clients of diaconal work as well. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, people who had never envisioned themselves as being dependent on charity were lining up to receive food aid provided by the parishes. Indebtedness, unemployment, and sudden changes in everyday lives increased the food aid clientele. With the restrictions that came with the pandemic, there was a significant structural change in the distribution of food aid - instead of interaction, parcels of food were given to the queueing clients. According to researchers, food aid itself was temporarily in a crisis.¹³

In terms of finding life meaningful, the most vulnerable groups during the pandemic were youth and people with a low level of education, in particular. These findings predict that recovering from the pandemic will take several years.¹⁴ Expertise in diaconal work, pastoral care and human encounters will be in demand as we as individuals and as a society strive to shed the psychological burden resulting from the pandemic.

It will be interesting to see which of the pandemic-influenced changes will prevail. In diaconal work, the changes that came with the pandemic impacted the ways of working, but not the clientele nor collaboration. The routines changed, but the essence remained the same.

Based on the results of the survey, volunteer activities in diaconal work could be described as extensive and adaptable, low-threshold outreach work promoting inclusion and social cohesion. According to the diaconal workers, volunteer work was hit hard by the COVID-19 safety restrictions. Although many of the more traditional types of volunteer work were put on hold, volunteer work was adapted in order to be able to address the acute need for help. Networks were strengthened and expanded, parishes promoted opportunities for the disadvantaged and deprived to feel included and find purpose, and people were invited to join in the diaconal ministry of the parishes. However, volunteer work was always organised following the restrictions and without compromising safety. Existing frameworks and local collaboration were exploited to enable volunteer work during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to addressing the need for help, volunteer work also provided the volunteers with an opportunity to feel included and find purpose.

¹² Saarelainen, Inkilä & Palmi 2021.

¹³ Salonen & Alppivuori 2021.

¹⁴ Saarelainen et.al 2021.

In their work, diaconal workers come into contact with people whose position is vulnerable and promote agency by inviting people to participate. Volunteering is important for the volunteers and for diaconal work as a whole. Based on the survey results, volunteering in diaconal work is a low-threshold activity that also reaches non-members of the ELCF and members who are not otherwise active in the congregation. In terms of Church membership, the importance of volunteering in diaconal work should not be underestimated - finding purpose and a community to belong to may well encourage people to make a commitment.

Membership in the Church has declined for a long time. On a more general level, this affects the resources of the Church and its diaconal work and impacts the society as a whole. Transferring health, social and rescue services to the newly established wellbeing services counties serves as a good example. As a result of decreased financial resources available in public services, and challenges in attracting skilled work force, services will be transferred into larger municipalities. However, this will also drive the development of digital and mobile services for people living in rural areas.

One of the key issues that needs to be solved is how the Church will position itself in the future - does the Church intend to secure its presence even in places from where other public services are being transferred away? If due to lack of available funds the Church cannot be present full-time in sparsely populated areas, will diaconal work change in ways that will enable it to somehow maintain contact with the parishioners living in these areas? Will this mean that we will see a similar change that is currently ongoing in the development of the wellbeing services counties? In which case diaconal workers shall continue to take advantage of digital tools to provide online services and will organise mobile services.

The results of the Diaconia Barometer seem to imply that diaconal work acting on the societal level has the power to shape the society as well as the Church. The activities of the Church and its parishes promoting inclusiveness and agency alone, are meaningful on the level of the whole society. As the spiritual environment changes and becomes more varied, it is important that diaconal work can operate using a language understood by other actors in the society as well. Our communication regarding diaconal work needs to be precise and determined for the value of diaconal work within the society to be recognised and acknowledged.

Diaconia shapes the Church, but let's not forget that diaconia is also the Church's mission. From this point of view, diaconia is not merely a professional field among others, but an essential task of the Church, and when implemented, it will strengthen agency, promote equality and impact the society by challenging also other actors to join and promote interaction among people. The Church is tasked with implementing this vision. How well the Church lives up to its values is determined by, among other things, how well it implements the idea of a diaconal church.

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