

DEVELOPING INNOVATIVE PRACTICE FOR DIVERSE COMMUNITIES. Participants' reflections on the New Learning Programme of interdiac

Introduction

This edition of Talking Points brings some of the outcomes from the recently completed 'new learning programme' of interdiac. We share some of the reflections of participants in the programme, which aimed at enabling effective engagement with marginalised or uprooted people in the diversity of local contexts. The programme highlighted the fact that diversity, if not handled properly, creates visible and invisible borders which support processes of exclusion and therefore prevent inclusion. Local level processes are needed as well as policy changes otherwise diversity may lead not only to oppression but also to physical violence, detention and even torture.

It has become clear that the negative consequences of not handling diversity effectively poses an ongoing threat which continues to be an important challenge to human dignity, social justice and therefore to the practice of Diaconia. Diaconia is rooted in congregational life and congregational life is community life! With the background of these developments, interdiac has chosen to focus on 'conviviality' as a key focus for learning and development. 'Conviviality' implies the search for ways in which diverse people can live together and also for policies that do not undermine but rather promote 'life together'.¹ During the 'new learning programme' participants were challenged to seek within themselves, their vocation and in their working model, the ideas and visions for convivial life in

diversity. At the end of the programme, the participants reflected on the idea of conviviality and plans for developing it into their living and working context. We are pleased to share three reflections on what was discovered within their engagement in the 'new learning programme' and related action plans for the future.



Sârbu Lórinca Andrea

I live in a diverse community, many nationalities, confessions, age groups live together, and we work with elderly people, who are 30-40 years older than me. In my assignments about conviviality I analysed mostly my context in the light of the new things I have learned about theological, social and economic viewpoints. Seeing the actual situation, I feel it is even more important than ever to change how society works

today, to use the positive effects of globalisation and capitalism but stop the negative ones, to build up sustainable and convivial communities. It is possible to 'sense in the air' the desire and willingness of people to change, because the actual situation is comfortable just for the few wealthy; and very insecure and unstable for the majority. Now we have the opportunity to introduce the convivial mentality using the energy of the existing tension.

Plan for action

We have to be very creative in offering social services to be able to respond to all the regulations and to provide help in a professional, but most importantly human and Christian manner. In finding ways to realize this, it was a great help to study and write assignments about the given subjects through this training.

Here are some basic ideas I will bring with me into my new way of practice:

- Theoretical knowledge is the basis of practice, it is useful to reflect about what we see and to learn not just accept it as a 'fact'. It is also useful to think in context, in a holistic way. I can gain more courage and confidence, also willingness to act after learning and applying what is learnt.
- New methods for practice, such as grass root level work, community development work, asset-based approach, advocacy all open new doors in my vision in working for the elderly people.
- I could find again my faith-based motivation and closer relationship with God using the Bible more often in my personal life and in my service and see connections, applying the teachings in my context.
- Understanding how important it would be to reconnect the church with diaconal service, to form a diaconal church and to strengthen ecumenical values.
- Understanding conviviality better, as being the art and practice of living together, how vocation, justice, dignity interrelate and give foundation to our work values.
- Acceptance, respect and less judgement are a basic step in working with people.
- Practical knowledge about social policies, marginalisation, and ways to reduce social exclusion gives new ideas for future projects and advocacy activity.

My main goal was not necessarily to change the world, just to bring something new, lovely and constructive in the environment where I live. This training helped me to find new ways to reach this goal. I learned how to reflect and analyse the

context, use theory in practice, be more respectful and accepting towards diversity, to promote conviviality as a new way of everyday living not just as a professional approach to social work. I have more tools, connections, support than before, that I can use to develop our service and fulfil God's diaconal mission in this community where He placed me.

Ilona Elaine Veres

In the context of today's Europe with the growth of nationalism and discontentment with political institutions as well as growing tension with approaches to migration, there is a need for a concept in Christian social practice to tackle modern day issues of diversity and pluralism. Conviviality is a core concept which can address marginalisation and exclusion by providing a model for Christian social work. Conviviality can provide a future vision for diaconal ministries through a framework which includes a view of marginalised and excluded as created and valued by God, with talents, gifts and abilities which can be utilised in the transformation of their communities.

Plan for action

Convivial partnerships should be a priority with others working in the village of Roma, Romanian and Hungarian culture (Teachers, Pastors, NGO's). There is a need for greater partnerships, bringing the challenge of conviviality to others working in the village. A plan should be made to offer activities and projects which are inclusive. (e.g. an open day for the whole village, Children's Bible week and Football camp open to all the children in the village). There is a need for regular integrated communication, forums, discussions, reviews, celebrations. Advocacy work could be implemented to help teens (a growing number of teenage mothers) with further education. There needs to be a continuance of literacy work and job-readiness skills, and a search for more partners to work together.

As a result of studying conviviality and sustainability in the interdiac course, I would like to implement the following aspects in my ongoing personal and professional development, and towards tackling exclusion and marginalisation in the placement location.

I aim for better Integration of research by the practice of keeping a learning diary in order to integrate the reflective practice to our ongoing ministry. This should involve regular

assessment of the ministry by the beneficiaries and be discussed by the local newly formed committee (made up of staff and beneficiaries).

✓ My understanding has grown in the need for deeper examination of the power keepers in the situation, in order to facilitate empowerment and promote interdependency through joint responsibility of tasks.

✓ I aim for better communication and cooperation to bridge the gap between the local church and the diaconia. This includes discussions on how the local church sees the diaconia and how we can motivate local volunteers, using the assets of the church members.

✓ I aim to adjust the presence of the diaconia in the location in the light of the changing situation, with 80% of the families we work with now commuting to the city for work and leisure. Diaconia must take in to consideration the changing rhythm and life of the community.

✓ I have been challenged to keep in focus community assets. It is important to support self-worth, value each culture and identity, recognising their needs and their view of their own needs. The role of the diaconia should be to facilitate the marginalised in the discovery of their desired outcomes and the potential to solve their own problems.

✓ I have implemented a focus on a framework for safeguarding, where guidelines on access to social media and technology were lacking. I have produced guidelines for use of technology and social media recommendations for the organisation.

✓ I aim for stronger partnership with other foundations committed to ending segregated housing in the village.

✓ I recognise that there is a challenge to the Foundation (who are now main employers in the location where I work) is instrumental, on adopting a policy on a living wage.

The 'conviviality and sustainability course' has been instrumental in bringing challenges relating to personal life and the local and wider contexts.

Irina Trofimova

One of the most significant experiences during the course was a practical visit the churches that implement diaconal activity in their communities. I am sincerely grateful for the opportunity to visit so many churches with wonderful diaconal experience.

I noticed that the church is actively involved in social engagement if the pastor/church leader personally shares this vision, I witnessed this in various countries that I visited during the course, for instant Danish Lutheran Church "Maria Church" in Copenhagen or Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tallinn and many others. During my job-shadowing, I was able to meet various organisations that are actively socially involved in my community, I was able to build good communication and even transfer some contacts to local churches in Kyrgyzstan.

In my work with the churches, I try to convey to the church its role in the development of a community, based on the idea of a diaconal church. We help churches to mobilise their own resources and start diaconal practice and social programmes. We talk a lot about the importance of community participation in social transformation, the importance of mobilising community resources and jointly identifying not only key problems in the community, but also finding joint solutions where all people (for example, in villages) play a key role, and the church acts as a mobiliser for social change and transformation.

When the church is persecuted (and in our context this happens in the regions) we try to train the church in conviviality; train how to live with other people in such a way that they are accepted as part of their community regardless of religion, the importance of respecting other people, be friendly, respecting their understanding of life and worldview, even if they are very different from ours.

During this course I've heard the word 'conviviality' for the first time in my life despite the fact that I have been doing diaconal work for the last 18 years and I like this idea of conviviality very much!

'Conviviality is the "art and practice of living together, emphasizes the importance of the community'.

Conviviality emphasizes the building of creative relationships between people which recognises interdependency, and which promotes companionship.²

We live in a very interesting and challenging time when people are showing less tolerance and respect for each other, especially when the 'others' are different - and Church should play

its key role in society by bringing reconciliation, tolerance, and respect to every single person, building its mission based on conviviality.

We know that: *'Conviviality is a relational concept with three main components: Vocation, Justice and Dignity'*.³

In our professional practice we should be driven by concepts:

- ✓ every person is made in the image of God and we are different.
- ✓ people become 'who they are' through their relationships with other people/ their unique environment.
- ✓ each person has their own 'biography' own resources, strengths and weaknesses and act out of it.
- ✓ only by uniting we can bring change to our community.

This means:

- we focus on building everyday relationships; building trust, respect, dignity and justice.
- we encourage the full participation of each person in the decision-making process.
- we lead by the principle of development; based on the experience of local people, we empower them through training and seminars increasing the potential of each person.
- we learn together!

Conviviality is about the process that starts with small scale initiatives, like face-to-face meetings, where I talk less but listen more, hearing peoples' hearts. I think we should review our approach in our professional practice and use an approach that starts from the local people having resources and skills (not focusing on their problems), building knowledge and competence that are rooted in their reality of everyday life. Maybe then those changes that we keen to bring to our community through our programs will actually be stable and will bring many good fruits to glorify our Heavenly Father (John 15:8)

Conclusion

As a result of the programme, a new interdiac publication, 'New Directions for Diaconia – developing innovative practice for diverse communities' has just been published.⁴It draws on the work of the participants in the *'new learning programme'* We invite you to read this new publication and visit the interdiac web site to view the video of participants' experience.

Most of all, interdiac invites your reflections and feedback on the issues raised, sharing how conviviality can be found through your context, what threats to conviviality are created and the actions that you are taking or could take. This will be a real contribution to our interdiac 'Learning Community'!

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Resources

¹ Addy, Tony 2017, 'Seeking Conviviality – A New Core Concept for Diaconia', Český Těšín, interdiac
<https://www.interdiac.eu/resources/seeking-conviviality>

² Addy, Tony (ed.), 2014, 'Seeking Conviviality. Reforming Community Diaconia in Europe', Geneva, Lutheran World Federation.
<https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-seeking-conviviality>

³ Addy, Tony (ed.), 2017, 'Towards a Convivial Economy', Geneva, Lutheran World Federation.
<https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-towards-convivial-economy>

⁴ interdiac, 2019, 'New Directions for Diaconia – developing innovative practice for diverse communities',
<https://www.interdiac.eu/resources/new-directions-for-diaconia>

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