

Conviviality and Accompaniment: a call to life together

By Viking Dietrich

INTRODUCTION

The concept of “conviviality” has grown out of an increasingly urgent question about how we should relate to each other and to those we are trying to help. This urgency is due to an increasing number of people on the move around the world, often due to terrible circumstances, and simultaneous deconstruction of what used to be considered normal in church mission work. Interaction between people of diverse cultures and traditions is destined to increase as technological innovations in fields such as communication and transportation make the world a smaller and smaller place. These interactions are often a source of joy for us as we encounter others of different cultures from our own; unfortunately, with a growing number of people who are seeking refuge, and because of the uncertainty people face in changing times, these interactions can be a cause of suffering and discomfort. Therefore, it is urgent that we rethink and redefine our understanding of community and our individual role in it. Interdiac proposes the concept of “conviviality,” defined as “the art and practice of living together,” as a conceptual paradigm for not only church diaconal services but all of us as we strive to lift-up the joy of our encounter with diversity God has created in the world. Interdiac has developed and expanded its understanding of conviviality by using a methodology of dialogue with partners and beneficiaries, a fundamental principle of the new paradigm.

I met interdiac this past year as a Regional Representative of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Global Mission Unit, (ELCA) and only recently was exposed to the concept of “conviviality.” In the spirit of conviviality, interdiac asked me, though I am no expert, to become part of the dialogue and to reflect on this new paradigm for building a renewed understanding of community. Coming from the ELCA, I am struck by the similarities between “conviviality” and “accompaniment,” a paradigm the ELCA is using to express our individual and corporate participation in God’s healing mission in the world. This essay intends to look at conviviality through the eyes of accompaniment. Central to the essay is a look at St Andrews Refugee Services, a partner organization of ours in Cairo; because of its exemplary integration of refugees into the planning and implementation of its services, StARS perfectly illustrates what I believe is at the heart of both concepts, that is, walking with people in mutual conversation and discovery. What becomes paramount to my understanding of both conviviality and accompaniment as components of diaconal service is the call to break down existing barriers through living presence and dialogue with the “other.”

BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS

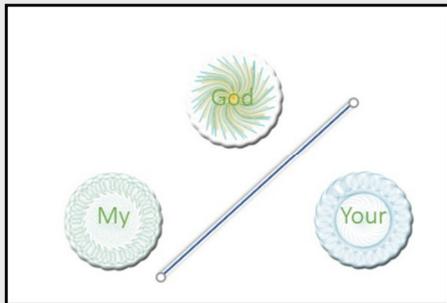
It seems silly to have to argue that the world has become smaller, yet it seems that some are convinced that they could build walls to separate people in order to preserve their own culture and world view. Recently, in a silly demonstration of interconnectedness of the world today, an Edeka supermarket in Hamburg, Germany removed all the products from their store that were not made in Germany. Shoppers were shocked to find the shelves 90% empty. We take advantage of the global economy every day, yet it is this new world economy that has threatened some local economies and shifted political interests. Changing economic structures and a race at the top to control more of the new wealth has caused wars around the globe leading to over 65 million people losing their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. Today, with increased anxieties about how we might be affected by those we help, nationalism has reappeared on the political landscape. Appealing to people’s fear and increasing attempting to define community in terms of us vs. them, some politicians encourage governments and organizations to erect new barriers to the simple commandment to “love one another.” The church must refute these proposals.



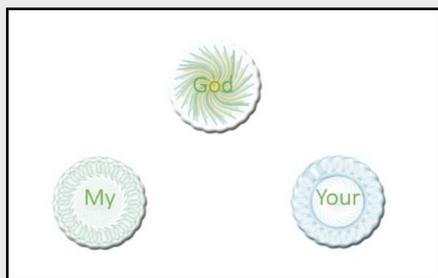
The church has, from its first days been challenged by barriers between people, has sometimes failed that challenge, but at other times has met the challenge with faith, hope and love: faith in God, hope for the future and, consequently, love of neighbor. The book of Acts describes a history of overcoming barriers that threatened the vision of the church. Paul rejects divisions caused by human constructs, writing “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”. (Galatians 3:28) The writer of the Book of Revelations leaves us with this vision of what the Kingdom of God will

look like: "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands". (Revelation 7:9) The Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, Reverend Elizabeth Eaton often says, "We are church together."

When considering those who are different from us, it would be important for us to heed the words of Micah, "He has told you what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?". (Micah 6:8) When considering people who are different from us, Christian understanding of the Trinity should compel us to identify our community as even larger than the Christian community. God the Creator is the Creator of all. People of all races, languages, nations and traditions are children of God in that sense. God the Redeemer, Jesus was sent into the world not to condemn it but to save it. This world includes all of creation. God the Sanctifier operates in the world in ways that we don't always understand, in people who we don't expect, bestowing gifts and talents that when nurtured can become instruments of God's mission.



In our encounter with those who are other, can we see the face of Jesus in the other person? Dr. Charles Amjad Ali at Luther Seminary said we are called as Christians to meet others always with a "presumption of worth." Tony Addy writes, "Diakonia is in itself an expression of faith in God's presence, in the 'other,' the one who is marginalized or 'different' (Addy 2015, 18). In terms of services meant to help those in need, we can recall in Matthew 25 Jesus's take on the least of these. He says, "Whenever you have done these things to the least of these, you have done it to me" (Matthew 25:31-46). This gives us a deeper understanding of the Beatitudes; namely, that to be blessed is to have the promise of God's presence. Seeing in our neighbor, no matter how different, the image of God reshapes our understanding of what it means to be called upon to serve others.



It is only through the full embrace of others that we can establish a true dialogue. Sunitha Mortha, the Director of Global Formation at ELCA Global Mission, asks us to reconsider how we tell our stories of faith. Stories form our cultures informing our understandings, emotions, ideas of good and evil. To change our culture of church mission and diaconal work, we need to change how we tell our stories. If in our faith life, we see "my story," "God's story," and "others' stories," a problem arises when we draw a line with God's story and my story on one side of the line and the story of the other on the other side. Dr. Mortha challenges us to remove any line and to speak instead of "our story" which binds both my story and your story together into God's story. The implication here is that our conversations about mission and service must be conversations that include those being helped. Only through conversation with the beneficiaries, can diaconal services effectively respond to people's needs and become sustainably rooted in the community. In his

resistance to mentalities of colonialism and his proposal for building a better society, Leopold Senghor, first President of Senegal, argued that the table de rencontre must be a rendez-vous du donner et durecevoir. All people at the table have something to give and something to receive.

CASE STUDY: STARS OF CAIRO

Situated in the heart of Cairo, a city of an estimated 24 million people, St Andrew's Refugee Service serves an ever-growing refugee population in the city. Though the UNHCR officially recognizes 240,000, the number of people fleeing neighboring countries that have become unstable who have made their way to Cairo is estimated to be over 1 million. Egypt sits in the middle of 10 countries where war has destroyed the homes and communities of the asylum seekers: Sudan and South Sudan, Libya, Eritrea Ethiopia and Somalia, Palestine, Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

Built in 1909 by Scottish soldiers, the small St Andrew's church sits in the middle of the city near the juncture of Cairo's two subway lines. It's diaconal ministry, StARS, has operated since 1979; however, in the past 4 years, the refugee service has grown exponentially from 60 to 310 staff members and almost 400 volunteers and partners in community-based organizations throughout the city. Instead of a few dozen refugees coming through the door every day, there are now a few hundred. St Andrew's is still home to a small interdenominational English-speaking congregation but is now also home to many language specific congregations, five Sudanese and one Ethiopian, a place of worship and sanctuary for more than a thousand people. Its location, both in Egypt and in the center of Cairo, is one reason, a secondary reason why StARS has grown so much in recent years. The real reason for the growth of this diaconal service is its barrier-free management which recognizes the importance of and invests in the participation of the beneficiaries.

The growth of StARS defies the reality of ever increasing restraints on refugee services. Funding from both Western governments and civil organizations for refugee work has decreased. New laws and orders from government leaders both in the West and in Egypt have reduced the freedom and power of organizations working with refugees. In Egypt, many organizations struggle to overcome the bureaucratic obstacles for registration and approval for project. However, because of its historic charter as a church in Egypt, St Andrew's operates under the auspices of the Protestant Churches of Egypt and is able to provide services to those in need.

StARS provides several services to refugees, working in a holistic manner, responding to the needs of people who are weary with loss, anxious about their current situation and confused about the future. As people appear, they are screened and directed to the services that are most immediately needed: psycho-social, legal, or educational needs; many needs are met through a network of professionals organized by but independent from StARS. The Psycho-social service offers one-to-one counseling and group activities as well as medical and financial assistance. The legal team helps people through the process of registering as asylum seekers and obtaining legal status and documents. The educational team offers both formal and informal opportunities from the preschool level to adult vocational seminars. An outreach team of translators and cultural mediators is increasingly partnering with newly formed community-based organizations in order to inform refugees living in the city.

The growth and effectiveness of StARS is the result of their philosophy of embracing and integrating refugees into the management and leadership of the services. There are no barriers between the management and the beneficiaries. Christopher Eades, the Director of StARS becomes visibly impassioned when talking about this dimension of the services they provide. He says the western NGO model is not sustainable. In these NGO's they operate with a three-tiered salary structure; western workers earning western salaries, then national workers paid according to national pay schedules, and then, sometimes, beneficiaries working with small stipends or on voluntary basis. The argument for this system is two-fold: on one hand, it is believed, that beneficiaries have a conflict of



of interest and will therefore bring corruption; on the other hand, it is believed, that only the western trained workers have the skills necessary for the work. StARS has turned all this around by trusting the skills of the refugees and empowering them to use those skills - gifts from God - for the sake of the community. All employees - western, national or beneficiary - are on the same pay scales. 85% of the 310 staff members are refugees. 75% of the 23 program leaders are refugees; 50% of the eight-member board of directors are refugees. Though a Christian diaconal service, 80% of the staff is Muslim, creating an exemplary model for Christian-Muslim relations. This inclusion of beneficiaries in the story of StARS has made the diaconal service a trusted place and has enable the service to to become more immediate and more effective in the response to the needs of those being served.



The respect, love and embrace offered to refugees has transformed St Andrews into a mini oasis for migrants from many desert lands, a living sanctuary for those who are in need. In Cairo, refugees have precarious lives. They are taken advantage of by landlords, shop owners, and employers with impunity. A landlord can allow a space to be overcrowded, and then at any time evict someone locking the door and confiscating belongings. Shop owners can lie about prices. Employers can take on a refugee for a week of dangerous work and then let them go without paying them. On the streets of Cairo, stones might be thrown at them or they might get arrested and detained for three to four weeks by the police. Any complaint to authorities would only lead to an inquiry about the refugee's status. From 6 am to 10 pm, refugees can find peace inside the walls of St Andrews. For staff at StARS, those who are from the refugee community, after a long day at work in the oasis, they go back out into the chaotic and often threatening reality of living in a strange land. But each day, those arriving at StARS are met with smiles and acceptance. St Andrew's pastor, Kirsten Fryer, says the mutual caring and the feeling of safety among those seated and standing throughout the property transforms the grounds into a Holy space.

Another passion of StARS is their work with unaccompanied children and youth. When evaluated by UNHCR, if they are deemed to be 16 or 17, they are treated as adults; this means they can wait 6 months before they receive any assistance and a valid identity document that would prevent their arrest. Today there are 4,000 unaccompanied children registered with the UN refugee agency who can get a stipend of 30 Euro/month. Of course, this stipend is not enough to live on, so they live sometimes 15 people to a room, or take jobs in houses where they are basically enslaved. 85% of unaccompanied youth and children speak neither Arabic nor English. For these children, StARS has 25 case workers. They offer a bridge program to 400 teenagers leading either toward vocational opportunity or reintegration into higher learning. They offer direct assistance as well, including 800 hygiene boxes for girls every month. 600 children are fed every day. Most recently StARS is developing a foster system where children can be placed in homes. Some of the graduates of the bridging program, at 18 to 20, become youth ambassadors for StARS, helping to interpret its goals and activities to both the refugee community and to donors and supporters.

There is a constant flow of people in and out of the offices of both Chris Eades and Kirsten Fryer. On the wall behind Chris's desk is a

frame with a quote from an aboriginal activists group in Queensland, Australia. It reads, "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together". StARS has broken down the barrier between "giver" and "receiver" and brings everyone into the conversation. There is a real dialogue between all who are involved, creating an empowered and sustainable community of acceptance and embrace. Through this conversation with the beneficiaries of the services, the stories and skills of all the participants become one story, the story of what God is doing in this place at this time. In this way, StARS exemplifies the values of both conviviality and accompaniment.

CONVIVIALITY AND ACCOMPANIMENT

The concept of "conviviality" and that of "accompaniment" have grown out of two different contexts, the European and American, respectively. From the Spanish word *convivencia*, conviviality evokes a memory of when Christians, Muslims and Jews lived peacefully together on the Iberian Peninsula for hundreds of years. The meaning of the word "encompasses living together in solidarity, in sharing resources and in the joint struggle for human dignity and sustainable community life". (Addy 2015, 4) The context in which the concept of "conviviality" has appeared is one of "drastic political and economic changes which have affected millions of families" in Europe over the last 30 years. (Addy 2015, 3) The collapse of the former Communist countries and the challenge to rebuild civil organizations has coincided with the movement of millions of people due to the economic challenges of the new global economy and numerous wars in the Middle East. In the North American context, churches have been influenced for more than 50 years by South American liberation theology that calls for an end to colonial structures and behaviors in relationships between north and south in favor of more mutual relationships. The ELCA is attempting to transform its relationships with partners around the world through the concept of accompaniment, a mutual walking together that allows for a long-term conversation and common vision.

In exhorting diaconal workers toward openness to others, Tony Addy writes that the Christian call to "empathy and compassion should, as far as possible, be unconditional and 'barrier-free' as people are accompanied in their life situation in an open-ended way." (Addy 2015, 17) He goes on to say that diaconal communities should be organized so that "there can be a mutual relationship between helper and helped and of course that at one moment a person may be either or both". (Addy 2015, 17). This corresponds exactly to the ELCA's idea of accompaniment. The 2010 Bratislava Declaration declares, conviviality is, in practice, a strategy of working not only on behalf of but together with people and communities who are excluded. As the StARS story illustrates, this public discussion and barrier free dialogue between helper and helped is founded on a presumption of worth or a faith in God's presence in the 'other.' Those who work in diakonia, according to Addy, "have an important task in: building bridges to the local community in all its diversity; being alongside people in all aspects of life; creating spaces and processes for learning; enabling lay people to have the skills to be community builders; and facilitation reflection on voluntary community based diaconal work". (Addy 2015, 12-13).



This picture of a diaconal worker recalls the biblical story of the Emmaus Road which has often been used to describe the ELCA's accompaniment. In the story, the disciples, confused and dejected, walk together discussing the events of the time and talking about what happened to Jesus. They were people in need. As they walked and talked, Jesus drew alongside them and became a part of the conversation. Not until Jesus broke bread with them, creating a space for discernment and learning, did they recognize who Jesus was. The dinner table has served in many cultures as the table de rencontre. No longer dejected, the disciples were empowered, or enabled, to return and help rebuild the community. Their sharing what happened with their fellow disciples led to more sharing, and together they explored and discovered what this would mean for them in their lives. The elements of the story match exactly the work of diaconal leaders who walk alongside and fully embrace those they are helping.

On the ELCA website one sees this statement about accompaniment, "Walking and working together, we seek to accompany our companions. Accompaniment is defined as walking together in a solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality. The ELCA lives out accompaniment in relationships with global companions, striving to share God's love and participate in God's mission together". (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) Also, on the ELCA website you will see the hope that "Walking together we achieve things on a scale and scope that we could never do otherwise". (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) In some ways, the concept of "conviviality" paints a larger picture of life together in this diverse and ever smaller world. Accompaniment focuses on the relationship between companion churches and organizations with, undoubtedly, implications for our daily life.

The similarities between the two concepts are striking. Both attempt to establish a paradigm for service that allows a vision of the future and life together to be developed through long-term conversation and community discernment. Both hold in common five basic values of mutuality, inclusivity, vulnerability, empowerment and sustainability. Mutuality is founded on the belief that we all have gifts to bring to the table, to be used to build a better community; there is no longer mission to (a "one-way street"), but mission with and among. Inclusivity means that we will seek to build relationships across boundaries, breaking down barriers that exclude and divide. If we are going to have barrier-free conversations and invite beneficiaries of diaconal services into the visioning of a new community, we need to be vulnerable, opening ourselves up to others just as Jesus did. Along the way, we need to seek out, identify and correct imbalances of power, recognizing and letting go of our own in order to empower others. And to ensure services become sustainable, we seek to embed our mission and service in ongoing relationships in the community. This means that beneficiaries and local institutions not only participate in the planning but also become engaged in the execution of services.

What is our understanding of community and our individual role in it? Given the seismic changes to our world today and the fearful tremors created by people seeking a unique identity in an ever more homogenous world economy, political answers to this question that we once assumed are now challenged. On the 80th anniversary of the Night of the Broken Glass, speaking at the main synagogue in Berlin, Angela Merkel said, "We must not allow our societies to be divided into us and them, we and them, we versus others". (Angela Merkel) Through its participation in the God's mission to redeem the world, the church has a vision of a world where all are included, where all are cherished. Diaconal services of churches and other organizations can play a key role in advancing such a vision as they work with people in need of healing, people at precarious places on the road from yesterday to tomorrow. St Andrews Refugee Services in Cairo exemplifies a community that has broken down the barriers between people of different nationalities and religions, between helper and helped. StARS illustrates what a community can look like when the principles of accompaniment and conviviality are put into our hearts and into our practices.

By **Viking Dietrich**

Regional Representative for Europe, the Middle East and North Africa at Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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CONTACT

e-mail: Viking.Dietrich@elca.com

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Address:

Interdiac o.p.s.,
Dukelská 264/5, 737 01 Český Těšín
Czech Republic

Web Site: www.interdiac.eu

Email: office@interdiac.eu

