

Diakonia as Mission



Jesus Washes the Disciples' Feet,
by Amy Sands
Picture the Bible, River Falls, WI.
www.picturethebible.org
Used by permission.

Introduction to This Issue

The shape of Christian mission in the twenty-first century calls for a new paradigm. This issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* addresses a crucial question: What can the new theology of prophetic diakonia contribute to a postcolonial theology of mission?

We are living at the death of Christendom that is marked by the decentering of Christianity from Europe and North America, while the growth of the churches in Asia and the Global South is accelerating. While there remain fragments of church life in North America that resemble a previous era, postcolonial critiques of Christian mission and postcolonial studies of Christian theology demonstrate that we are at an inflection point in Christian history.¹ How do we reimagine the shape of Christian mission in the wake of Christendom's collapse?

In previous generations, strong claims were made for Christian mission. As succinctly stated by Emil Brunner, "The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission there is no Church; and where there is neither Church nor mission, there is no faith."² Such claims for Christian mission, however, have been called into radical question by postcolonial realities. Whereas discourse about mission in Christendom is often judged as triumphalist, diakonia frames the discussion of mission

Whereas discourse about mission in Christendom is often judged as triumphalist, diakonia frames the discussion of mission with humility. In recent decades a new discourse about the significance of diakonia has emerged across the global church. The retrieval of diakonia by the ecumenical church is one of the most significant developments in contemporary theology.

with humility.³

In recent decades a new discourse about the significance of diakonia has emerged across the global church.⁴ The retrieval of

1. For example, Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021).

2. Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1931), 108.

3. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991) does not reference diakonia in his discussion of "an emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm," although it is implicit in his discussions of "mission as the quest for justice" and "mission as liberation."

4. Godwin Ampony, Martin Büscher, Beate Hofmann, Félicité Ngnintedem, Dennis Solon, and Dietrich Werner, eds. *International Handbook on Ecumenical Diakonia: Contextual Theologies and Practices of Diakonia and Christian Social Services—Resources for Study and*

diakonia by the ecumenical church is one of the most significant developments in contemporary theology. One fruit of this process is *Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diakonia* published by the World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance. “Church cannot be truly the Church of Jesus Christ without giving itself to such diakonia.”⁵ Diaconal studies is an emergent field of Christian theology that is finding resonance globally, including in North America.⁶

One especially promising new formulation is “prophetic diakonia.” Building upon but also moving beyond a servant model of diakonia, the Lutheran World Federation describes how prophetic diakonia “relates to the intrinsic nature of diakonia, affirming that the prophetic task is part of the mandate and authority that God has given the Church and its diakonia.”⁷

To be prophetic means to defend justice. Diaconal action therefore by its very nature includes the task of unmasking especially systemic forms of injustice and of promoting justice—or better: being a pathfinder serving that cause.⁸

“One important starting point for prophetic diakonia is to listen to voices of suffering and marginalized people.”⁹

Called to Transformation joins prophetic diakonia to the pursuit of “just peace”:

The concept of just peace is rooted in the self-understanding of the churches, the hope of spiritual transformation and the call to seek justice and peace for all. It builds on the concept of social justice, which confronts privilege; economic justice, which confronts wealth; ecological justice, which confronts irresponsible consumption; and political justice, which confronts abuse of power.¹⁰

Given the acute needs of our society and world, how can commitment to the repair of creation (*tikkun olam*) transpose the mission of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through the lens of diakonia at the middle of the twenty-first century? “The leading edge of ecumenical theology depicts diakonia as integral to discipleship, focused on service, justice, and advocacy for the marginalized.”¹¹

How can prophetic diakonia be a resource for renewing and transforming an authentic theology of Christian mission to address the imperatives facing the church today? At the end of

Christendom, the needs of the world for healing and repair are acute. A theology of diakonia can shift reflection on Christian mission toward engagement with the experiences of those who suffer and the cries of creation. Prophetic diakonia can serve to turn the church inside out to refocus what it means to be a church in mission.

The authors of this issue write from their own perspective and context about how a lived theology and practice of diakonia can contribute to a new paradigm for Christian mission.

Man Hei Yip unveils how the coloniality of power taking hold in the United States colludes with the Christian faith to reconstruct the knowledge system that reinforces the ideology of nationalist imperialism. The article then explores the concept of *basileia tou theou* (the reign of God) to demonstrate love’s reign, and how love as a unifying force can unsettle the life-denying powers. The article culminates in a call for ecumenical solidarity as a form of diakonia-missiological resistance.

Given the problematic nature of Robert Greenleaf’s servant leadership model, **Darryl W. Stephens and Myka Kennedy Stephens** explore what a better model might look like. From a decolonial perspective, servant leadership is overly focused on serving the needs of others to the neglect of power dynamics and contextual factors. By contrast, leadership informed by the emerging ecumenical consensus on diakonia provides a more holistic model that makes space for empowerment, social justice, and healing. The authors present the contours of a new leadership model oriented toward service to self, community, human, and the divine and understood through multiple facets: sage, emissary, companion, steward, and healer. Diakonia provides the theological foundation for an indigenously Christian paradigm of missional leadership.

Veronica J. Mwakasungura reflects on the ways diakonia has transformed communities, especially at the interface between the emerging field of diaconal studies and a revised theology of mission. Following the ecumenical document, *Called to Transformation*, we discover great value in the concept of diakonia as a guiding theme for imagining and practicing mission in our times, especially as the source of growth for the churches in Africa.

Paul S. Chung examines how the new theology of prophetic diakonia contributes to a postcolonial theology of God’s mission in World Christianity. The author begins by setting public theology (Moltmann and Bonhoeffer) in a postcolonial context before exploring God’s mission beyond Empire (Jonathan Ingleby). The concept of an effective history is employed methodologically as a social critical tool to interpret how those in power shape historical narratives and how marginalized voices might be reconsidered to reimagine God’s mission beyond Empire.

Andrew Stoebig discusses how recent revisions to the ELCA ordination rites have brought a stronger sense of shared ministry between ministers of Word and Sacrament (pastors) and ministers of Word and Service (deacons). Even so, the liturgical expressions of these ministries at times lack clarity and default to the pastoral position as the norm. In reexamining the principle *in persona*

Intercultural Learning (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2021).

5. World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance, *Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diakonia* (Geneva: WCC, 2022), 20.

6. Craig L. Nesson and Darryl W. Stephens, eds., *Diaconal Studies: Lived Theology for the Church in North America* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2024).

7. Lutheran World Federation, *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment* (Geneva: LWF, 2009), 82.

8. LWF, *Diakonia in Context*, 83.

9. LWF, *Diakonia in Context*, 81.

10. WCC and ACT Alliance, *Called to Transformation*, 86.

11. Nesson and Stephens, eds., *Diaconal Studies*, 1.

Christi, the author seeks for an authentically diaconal position, one which calls the worshipping assembly away from itself and outward in mission for the life of the world.

Maria Erling traces how the nineteenth century missionary movement among American denominations played a key role in structuring the churches by enlisting women's involvement in purposeful Christian service. This article explores the important ways that Women's Missionary Societies were instrumental in shaping the outlook and activities of Lutheran church bodies in North America. Christendom of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was both shaped by women in congregations and in networks formed to support missionary work by women for women. This aspect of the missionary impulse taken up by women involved activities that transformed societies where they lived by educating girls and women. Back home, the support structures for mission shaped the growth of American Lutheran denominations.

In a sermon preached at Wartburg Theological Seminary, **Jan Schnell** wrestles with the portrayal of God as conqueror in Deuteronomy 9. Even as the Deuteronomists searched for stories that told of God's faithfulness, we search for such stories ourselves, discovering they all start and end in Jesus. We find courage to tell stories of God's faithfulness in Jesus that land with people we love and serve.

We are pleased to include two *Currents* Focus articles in this issue. **Erik A. Hoeck** points out that almost 40 percent of

seminary graduates plan to use their degree outside of the local church. Moreover, those who serve within the local church will be preaching and teaching online because of shifts in congregational practice. As these students follow their vocational call into the world, the radically innovative Fred Rogers and the "neighborhood" congregation of Mister Rogers provides a model for their work. Rogers' work in children's television was ministry ahead of its time. His work serves as an example of public theology and offers insight for twenty-first century ministry.

John Rollefson provides a meditation on the practice of the Easter Vigil and the surprising power of light in the midst of the world's darkness. The author includes an interpretation to the Joseph saga that communicates how God can turn toward good that which was intended for evil. The article concludes with an original poem, "Felix Culpa," that expresses unanticipated surprise at God's raising of Jesus from the dead.

This issue of **Preaching Helps** takes us from the last Sunday in Lent, through Easter to a few Sundays after Pentecost. Since the inauguration of a new president, millions of dollars have been cut from our meager (1%) budget for USAID. Lutheran agencies that work with refugees have been decimated. How do we preach at a time such as this? Many pastors are struggling with this question. Hopefully the lectionary can be a wise, courageous guide.

Craig L. Nesson, Issue Editor

Picture the Bible Curriculum

A Biblical Pictorial Timeline



See the collage art collection, example curriculum pages and more information online at www.picturethebible.org

Picture the Bible is a creative approach to Bible study that fosters biblical literacy and interpretation.

- 52 original collage art images depict 52 specific Bible stories.
- Corresponding curricula encourage learners to make connections between their own lives and the biblical story.
- Open-ended questions encourage conversation.
- Resources are downloadable and printable.
- Adapt to various congregational settings, connecting worship, education, art and mission.

Several curricula series meet specific needs:

Conversation pages. 52 downloadable, printable student pages explore each Bible story with conversation starters, activities and resources to creatively engage learners.

KidLit lessons weave together a Bible story, related children's literature, and a creative art project to foster conversation at the intersection of faith and life. Designed to require very little preparation or theological training.

And more...!



Visit www.PictureTheBible.org
Stacy Johnson Myers,
ELCA pastor, author and content developer
715-425-2052 • stacy@firstchurchrf.org

2025 Ad Pricing and Specifications

The journal, *Currents in Theology and Mission*, is provided to readers as an online resource at <http://www.currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents>.

Individual articles are provided to readers as a PDF download. We offer advertising opportunities in any of our articles, with premium rates for sections with high readership, including the issue’s Introduction article, the Book Review section and the Preaching Helps section.

As advertisements are viewed online, they are visible to the reader in full color and allow live web-links. However, if a reader elects to print out the PDF, we do not have control over whether it is printed in color or black only.

Publication Dates and Deadlines

The journal, *Currents in Theology and Mission*, is published four times per year: January, April, July, and October. Ad deadlines for each issue are one month prior to publication (December 1, March 1, June 1, September 1). Late submissions may be published in the next issue. Issue-specific themes are available from the co-editors: [Craig Nessian](#) and [Kadi Billman](#).

Print Advertising Specifications

Please provide ads as an email attachment to our designer at kathryn@brewer-com.com.

- 300 dpi JPEG or PDF at full size.
- Color ads should be converted to CMYK.
- Embed all fonts when creating a PDF.

Size and Placement Options

Full page ads are placed at the end of articles. Fractional page ads are placed within articles. (We do not offer a bleed option.) You may specify an author, the Introduction article, or any of our sections: Book Reviews, Preaching Helps, Currents Focus. For specific article or section content per issue, please contact the co-editors: [Craig Nessian](#) and [Kadi Billman](#).

Premium placements are: at the end of the Introduction article, within Book Reviews, within Preaching Helps. These are our most popular sections.

FORMAT	SIZE	PREMIUM PLACEMENT	REGULAR PLACEMENT
• Full Page:	7.125” wide x 10” high	\$ 450	\$ 380
• One Column (vertical):	3.5” wide x 10” high	\$ 250	\$ 200
• Half Column:	3.5” wide x 4.75” high	\$ 135	\$ 115
• Half Page (horizontal):	7.125” wide x 4.75” high	\$ 250	\$ 200

25% discount for 4 consecutive placements from the same advertiser (content may change).

Website Advertising

We do not offer site advertising.

Billing

New advertisers must include payment with order. Checks should be made out to “Currents in Theology and Mission” and sent to: Currents in Theology and Mission, 5416 S. Cornell Avenue, 4th Floor, Chicago, IL 60615. For questions or to pay by credit card, call the editorial offices at 773-256-0705.

Returning Advertisers: Bills are sent after publication.